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BATTLETECH™

ARTIST: STEVE VENTERS
PUBLICATION: MECHWARRIOR: THE BATTLETECH ROLE PLAYING GAME
YEAR: 1986

BATTLETECH
25 YEARS
OF ART & FICTION

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Matt's Thanks

Alicia, thanks for putting up with my obsession with 'that hex game' and with all those 3 a.m. work nights. And yes, I did lose to you that one time…

Dedication

Thanks to all of the *BattleTech* fans, past, present and future. You've made this twenty-five-year ride possible and we hope you'll join us for another exciting and fun filled fifteen years!

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For a story that spans centuries, a quarter of one shouldn't feel so long, but it sure does.

So much has happened in the past 25 years, in the *BattleTech* universe and our own. And it is interesting how some things have overlapped between the two universes, such as the fall of the Soviet Empire, or the invention of myomer technology for limb replacement. I only hope more similarities don't develop, because while the BattleTech universe is a fun place to visit, I wouldn't want my kids to live there.

It has been an amazing ride that I never anticipated. Well, that's not completely true. I think any time you write a story, you hope it will be appreciated for many years to come, but you never really expect that to happen, and so I remain blown away by how dynamic the *BattleTech* universe continues to be.

The reason for that relevance and freshness is simple. While I had the honor to start this ball rolling, the creative powers of the thousands who came after me keep it rolling and gaining speed. When I reflect back on the who's who of artists and writers that have contributed to the *BattleTech* universe, it takes my breath away. Some of the best times of my creative life were the brainstorming sessions and story development meetings, working with the ever-changing but always talented collection of writers that continue to bring this universe to life, and the sketching sessions with fantastic concept artists and illustrators visualizing how this universe looks and feels, or figuring out the implied logic of how a new 'Mech or vehicle would work.

But the real strength of the *BattleTech* universe comes from you: the readers, fans and players. The fan fiction and art plays a huge part in keeping us all involved in a universe we share and love. I remember being at a convention soon after the publication of the first version (then called *BattleDroids*) and having players tell me the stories of their units and battles. Thankfully, 25 years later, they are still telling them.

Jordan Weisman • May 2009

ARTIST: ALLEN GUITERREZ
PUBLICATION: BATTLEDROIDS
YEAR: 1984

INTRODUCTION

It all began in 1984. As the anime craze began to make its way to the American market, FASA Corporation published *BattleDroids* (which would become *BattleTech* in 1985); a stand alone box set game that immersed players into a brand new, epic science fiction universe, with a fun game to back it up. The visceral feel of metal titans storming across alien worlds, combined with the in-depth crafting of the universe and the dynamic, realistic characters created an instant success that has gone on to become one of the best selling and most recognized names in the adventure gaming industry. It has also reached far beyond that core market, spawning over a hundred novels, over a dozen computer game and computer game expansions, numerous virtual world centers, toys, comic books, a cartoon series and more.

25 Years of Art and Fiction is a retrospective of the best art that *BattleTech* has generated over the years, wedded to all new fiction to showcase the universe's vibrancy; strong and still growing. Paired with the words and images are sections detailing the publication history of the game—printed books and computer games—as well as a first-ever-published comprehensive universe timeline.

STORY FICTION VS. SOURCEBOOK FICTION

BattleTech uses two different types of fiction to convey its story. "Story fiction" includes novels, novellas, short stories and so on; fiction that puts the reader inside the heads of the characters that populate the universe. The 19 short stories in this book are examples of "story fiction." "Sourcebook fiction"—which appears in the various Handbooks, Historicals, Technical Readouts, scenario packs and so on (see *Bibliography*, p. 280)—presents story elements as though the reader were a character transplanted into the game universe, reading military documents, historical texts, secret security briefs, intercepted personal communications, local newspapers and so on. These two methods work hand-in-hand to bring the *BattleTech* universe to life.

For those who have never heard or experienced *BattleTech* before, the following are a series of "sourcebook fiction" pieces that will provide an overview of the most important aspects of the universe. Armed with this information you'll be able to follow the short stories in this book with more ease, allowing for greater enjoyment.

There are various *BattleTech* Eras; distinct timeframes that mark different setting styles and the fiction and game play that occurs (see *BattleTech Eras*, p. 16, for more in-depth information). The following excerpts cover up to the start of the Jihad, the current universe-shaking story-line unfolding in *BattleTech* sourcebooks and fiction. Information on *MechWarrior Dark Age*, the era after the Jihad is found starting on p. 238.

A TIME OF WAR

— Excerpt from *Humanity's Destiny* (first year geopolitical curriculum text, condensed by Misha Auburn from *Manifest Destiny: Humanity's Star Empires*, by Misha Auburn, Commonwealth Press, 3067/3054)

For almost a thousand years, humans have journeyed into the far reaches of space, colonizing thousands of worlds and forming starspanning nations. From these grew the five vast star empires that make up the Inner Sphere.

But the Inner Sphere was divided. Its ruling dynasties warred constantly over colony worlds with valuable resources. These titanic struggles led to the development of BattleMechs: gigantic, humanoid battle machines bristling with lethal weapons. From the twenty-fifth century onward, these walking tanks ruled the battlefields. BattleMechs and their skilled pilots changed combat forever.

As the price of conflict grew, the Inner Sphere tired of war. In 2571, the five ruling Houses joined together with the Terran Hegemony in the Star League, a federation led by a Hegemony First Lord and served by its own army: the Star League Defense Force. For nearly two hundred years, the Star League brought the Inner Sphere peace and prosperity.

In 2751, the sudden death of its First Lord left the Star League in the care of a child. Young Richard Cameron ruled in name, but the real power lay with the five Council Lords, each a sovereign of the original five Great Houses. Ambitious and distrustful, they plotted against one another, while a Machiavellian prince from the Periphery named Stefan Amaris wormed his way into Richard's trusting heart. In 2766, Amaris assassinated the young First Lord and took control of the Star League in a bloody coup d'etat.

The Star League Defense Force, commanded by the brilliant General Aleksandr Kerensky, refused to accept Amaris' rule. For thirteen years, they fought him in a bitter civil war that was the largest conflict yet fought by humanity. Kerensky's forces won, but at a terrible price. In the chaos that followed, the Council Lords were each determined to step in as First Lord. Despite Kerensky's efforts to hold the failing Star League together, it dissolved amid mutual hostility in 2781.

Unable to halt the impending conflict between the five Great Houses, Kerensky appealed to his soldiers to join him in leaving the Inner Sphere. Nearly eighty percent of the Star League army heeded Kerensky's call to build a new Star League far beyond the explored universe. In 2784, Kerensky and his followers abandoned their homes and headed into uncharted space, presumably never to return.

War followed war in the wake of Kerensky's dramatic departure. For nearly three centuries, the Houses of the Inner Sphere fought in vain for the right to rule over all humanity. These Succession Wars brought ever-shifting alliances and cost the Inner Sphere precious, irreplaceable technology. Constantly maneuvering for position—including the grand alliance of Houses Davion and Steiner signed in 3022 that would eventually lead to the formation of the fearsome Federated Commonwealth—the House Lords assumed that the most dangerous enemy they would ever face was each other.

They were wrong.

Even as the Inner Sphere was blowing back its technological and industrial base almost a thousand years, Kerensky's followers built a new society in the harsh environs beyond known space. They developed a rigid caste system, designed to produce the ultimate warriors. For nearly three centuries, the separate castes of Kerensky's Clans were unified by one burning ideal: that when the time was right, they would return home and conquer the Inner Sphere. They would become the saviors of humanity, rebuilding the Star League in their own image.

A TIME OF WAR

In 3048, the warlord Khans of the Clans decided the time had come to launch their invasion. With their powerful 'Mechs and MechWarriors, they drove straight toward Terra, the birth world of humanity.

Faced with a common enemy, the empires of the Inner Sphere united against the threat, establishing a new Star League. Finally victorious in 3060, the Star League halted the Clan invasion. A new era of peace beckoned, but it was not to be. Before long, war once again swept through every House and Clan, with the most vicious fighting centered around the FedCom Civil War between Houses Davion and Steiner.

Following the FedCom Civil War, the leaders of the Great Houses met, declared their Star League a sham and disbanded. The pseudoreligious Word of Blake—a splinter group of ComStar, the protectors and controllers of interstellar communication—had been on the verge of joining the Star League in fulfillment of their ancient prophecies. Cheated of their dream, they took swift vengeance and launched the Jihad: an interstellar war that would ultimately pit every faction against each other and even against themselves.

THOSE WHO MAKE WAR

GREAT HOUSES

The Great Houses have dominated most of the Inner Sphere's two thousand star systems for centuries. Each House is ruled by a single individual who wields immense power, shaping the futures of trillions of people. These dictatorships, benign or otherwise, sprang up in direct response to humankind's expansion to the stars. After the collapse of the central government that supported humanity's first wave of expansion, regional power brokers arose. They wrought the empires that exist today, binding nearby planets together with various forms of feudalism.

The vast distances between planets made interstellar travel a rarity. Until humans developed the HPG system in 2630, interstellar communication was extremely difficult and unreliable. This meant that each world enjoyed considerable autonomy. The warlords who ruled the planets rarely faced the risk of overthrow by an invading military force. Variations on this feudal system remain in place today, resulting in a patchwork of mostly independent local governments overseen by a neo-feudal lord.

In keeping with their feudal origins, all the Inner Sphere nations include a noble class. Many noble titles are common to several nations. Terran nobility originated with the feudal system of government most prevalent in the European Middle Ages, when a sovereign delegated responsibility and authority over an area to select subjects in exchange for a personal oath of fealty. These subordinate leaders received a patent of nobility allowing them to use a title commensurate with their importance.

Nobility in the thirty-first century is largely hereditary, with the designated heirs of nobles inheriting their parents' rights, estates and responsibilities. Though most sovereigns can grant titles to their subjects, this practice is relatively rare—even for MechWarriors, the modern equivalent of knights.

THE CLANS

While most of the peoples and social groups in the Inner Sphere are culturally descended from ancient forebears that originated on Terra and brought their cultures with them (along with attendant ideologies, passions, bigotry and more) during the colonization of space over the past thousand years, the Clans are culturally unique. Made up of descendants from the original Star League Defense Force, the warriors of the Clans excel in battle and all things military.

The Clans came into being when the Star League Defense Force fled the Inner sphere almost 300 years ago, following the fall of the Star League. Under the direction of General Aleksandr Kerensky and his son Nicholas, the army left and formed its own society on what we now call the Clan homeworlds, located approximately one thousand light-years from the edge of the Inner Sphere. Clan society resembles that of ancient Sparta, focusing on the warrior ethic and dedicated to advancing the technology of war, specifically the BattleMech.

Each of the different Clans has its own flavor—all bound to honor, some more, some less. In general, the Clans divide into two camps: the Crusaders, who believe it their destiny to conquer the Inner Sphere and Terra, and the Wardens, who believe their role is to protect the Inner Sphere against an as yet unrealized threat. While most of the Clans are secular, a few are given to mysticism. The common spoken tongue among the Clans is based on Star League English, but they have enhanced it with a rich collection of unique words. Clansmen also rarely use contractions, considering such shortened speech vulgar and lazy.

The most powerful Crusader Clans returned to the Inner Sphere in the year 3050, in hopes of conquering it and reestablishing the Star League. The combined armies of the Great Houses stopped them, and they have since gradually become permanent inhabitants of many Inner Sphere worlds. Other Clans, not wanting to be kept from the planets they see as paradise, have contrived to return to the Inner Sphere as well.

Though these Inner Sphere Clans strive to retain their unique ways, various elements of Clan life have begun to erode through continued contact with the Inner Sphere.

PERIPHERY STATES

Beyond the boundaries of the Inner Sphere lie the endless reaches of the Periphery, traditionally home to independent-minded souls who sought escape from the often repressive regimes of the Great Houses. The Periphery is the Inner Sphere's frontier, keeping the spirit of exploration and discovery alive and well. The less savory aspects of frontier living are equally abundant; numerous pirate bands and petty bandit kingdoms thrive in this almost lawless region of space. Largely unexplored and sparsely populated compared with the Inner Sphere, the Periphery has nonetheless played a pivotal role in several major interstellar events, including the fall of the Star League.

The Periphery's reputation as backward and technologically inferior is only partly true. Though many areas in it are underdeveloped industrially and well behind the technology curve compared with the

THOSE WHO MAKE WAR

Inner Sphere, it includes scattered regions that boast cultural and technological advancement. The Taurian Concordat is well known for its excellent educational system and high literacy rate, while the Magistracy of Canopus exemplifies some of the most progressive views on human rights in known space.

Pirates

Throughout humankind's history, rogue elements have always lived outside the confines of civilization, willing to do whatever it takes to survive. In practice, that usually means taking what they need from someone else.

Though pirates are generally associated with the Periphery, interested readers can dig into the history of any Great House and find small-time, planet-bound pirates, or pirates that made a name for themselves in a few close star systems. Some pirates have become legends, feared and reviled (and sometimes romanticized) across known space: Lady Death, the Band of the Damned and the New Belt Pirates are a few examples.

MERCENARIES

In a universe at war, some will always be willing to sell out to the highest bidder and fight someone else's battles. From the legendary (Wolf's Dragoons, the Kell Hounds, the Eridani Light Horse, the Northwind Highlanders) to the unknown (the Medusans, the Stone Ponies), from mere ad-hoc lances to multi-regiment commands, mercenaries are a staple of the Inner Sphere. Though not technically a power unto themselves, they—perhaps more than any private army—have raised and toppled empires.

ARTIST: LIAM CURTNER
PUBLICATION: A TIME OF WAR: THE BATTLETECH RPG
YEAR: 2009

HPG COMMUNICATIONS

— From the *Abridged Encyclopedia Galactica*, Universal Press, 3067/3062

Based on the same principles that allow a JumpShip to travel between the stars, the hyperpulse generator, or HPG, can instantly transmit a signal across a distance of up to fifty light-years. Following its first public demonstration in 2630, the HPG radically altered life in humanoccupied space. Before the advent of the HPG, people relied on a "pony express" system of JumpShips to transport important orders, news and mail between inhabited systems, which often took months or even years. HPG transmissions could reliably reach the remotest regions of known space in a fraction of that time, enabling governments to carry out operations efficiently and ordinary people to communicate with friends and relatives on far-distant worlds. Immediately after the first successful test of the technology, the Star League began to build HPG stations on planets across known space.

ComStar still operates most of the functioning HPGs, almost all of which trace their origins to Star League times. ComStar inherited the HPG network following the fall of the Star League; it held a monopoly on interstellar communications for almost two and a half centuries, until the events of recent years sundered the organization. The Word of Blake, ComStar's rival splinter group, currently controls a sizable portion of the HPG network.

The HPG network consists of transmit/receive stations on most inhabited worlds. Stations receive "A" or "B" status, based mainly upon the size of a world's population. Class A stations are the network's main hubs, while Class B stations form the nodes. Each station transmits all the messages it has been paid to send to all other stations within its range. Those stations then add their own messages to the batch and pass them on to the next stations in line, and so on, until the messages reach their final destination. Though sending hundreds and thousands of copies of the same message around the galaxy may appear inefficient, it ensures that messages reach their destinations as swiftly as possible. To avoid confusion, each station automatically deletes messages that have already passed through its system.

Each station normally transmits on a set schedule. Messages are processed serially and placed in a queue until they can be transmitted. Class A stations transmit the most often, usually once every six hours. Class B stations transmit far less frequently. During Star League times, they transmitted once every twelve hours; today most B stations average transmissions only once every few days. The actual schedule depends mainly on the number of waiting messages and how many other stations are within range.

Sometimes, transmissions can be agonizingly slow. A message from Tharkad takes an average of six days to reach Terra; the same message might take months to reach the most distant Periphery world. Priority transmissions can be sent more quickly, but at a significantly higher cost because the stations that pass the message must be aligned correctly.

MECHWARRIORS: MODERN KNIGHTS

—Excerpts from a promotional pamphlet originally distributed by Skobel MechWorks of Terra, 3057; expanded and republished 3067.

As soon as the first BattleMechs dominated the battlefields of the twenty-fifth century, the humans that piloted these awesome machines gained a power and influence well beyond other soldiers on the field. An

entire social class soon formed around those who piloted these increasingly important war machines. These so-called MechWarriors, the modern incarnation of knights, were given the monumental task of defending their homelands and their rulers. As with the middle ages of Europe on ancient Terra, these MechWarriors were made knights and given honors. Some were even bestowed royal titles, conveying authority over entire worlds and more. This romantic image of the MechWarrior-knight has eroded somewhat over the past few decades, but it remains strong in the hearts of the Inner Sphere's people.

During the Succession Wars, many MechWarriors owned their 'Mechs and passed them down through generations. That custom has changed radically during the past half-century. Nowadays, only the Great Houses can afford the massive amounts of new construction that followed the rediscovery of so much lostech. Consequently, House militaries now own most 'Mechs in service in the Inner Sphere. Among the Clans, all property belongs to the Clan—a Clansman MechWarrior never owns his 'Mech.

PILOTING A 'MECH

A MechWarrior controls a BattleMech through a series of several complex systems that allow a single human to manipulate such a large, complicated war machine.

Cockpit: Sitting in the cramped cockpit of a 'Mech—usually located in the "head" of the 'Mech—a MechWarrior is strapped into a command couch that allows him access to all of his 'Mech's systems. Foot pedals are used to steer the 'Mechs ground motion as well as to ignite a 'Mech's jump jet system (provided the 'Mech has that capability). Twin joysticks located on the command couch's arms allow for torso movement, manipulation of a 'Mech's arms and full targeting capabilities of the 'Mech's entire arsenal of weapons. A battery of screens brings a plethora of information before the MechWarrior: standard visual, infrared, MagScan, seismic, tactical maps, satellite feeds and so on, while the 'Mech's heads-up display projects all of the relevant targeting information right in front of the MechWarrior.

Neurohelmet: All of those systems would be much more limited without the neural impulse helmet, which interfaces the human mind's comprehension of the battlefield to the powerful computers governing the BattleMech. Commonly called neurohelmets, these bulky items normally cover a MechWarrior's entire head, attaching firmly to the shoulders of his cooling vest. Electrodes passively scan the MechWarrior's neural activity for key signals. The primary role of the neurohelmet is to aid the BattleMech with its balance, which is rarely so simple on a battlefield as "stay upright and balanced at all times," something a machine could handle. More advanced neurohelmets allow MechWarriors to communicate fine shades of intent on the actions they are attempting with hand and foot controls, while allowing limited, ghostly input from the BattleMech directly into the MechWarrior's mind.

BATTLEMECHS: NUTS, BOLTS AND TACTICS

The modern BattleMech is the end result of more than three thousand years of battlefield technology development. Combining awesome destructive power and unparalleled maneuverability, the BattleMech is perhaps the most complex machine ever produced. The undisputed master of thirty-first century warfare, the BattleMech seems destined to reign supreme centuries into the future.

Every 'Mech contains thousands of different components, grouped into four primary systems: chassis, locomotion/movement, armor and weapons and power systems.

Chassis

Every BattleMech contains a chassis that consists of several dozen "bones." Each "bone" is a honeycombed, foamed aluminum core wrapped with stressed silicon carbide monofilament and protected by a rigid, titanium- steel shell. Each of these artificial "bones" has attachment points for their myomer "muscles" that drive the BattleMech. This skeletal construction helps make BattleMechs less vulnerable and easier to repair than vehicles supported by stressed-skin shells.

Locomotion/Movement Systems

Two different systems are used to drive BattleMechs and control their movements. Small, electrically driven actuators move a 'Mech's light weapons and sensor arrays. Bundles of polyacetylene _ bers called myomers control a 'Mech's limbs and main weapons. Myomers contract when exposed to electrical current, much like human muscles. If a BattleMech's myomers are damaged in battle, technicians can replace the fiber bundles with new ones or "transplant" myomers from other parts of the 'Mech's skeleton. Transplanted myomer bundles cannot restore full function to a damaged limb, but they do provide limited mobility and strength.

Armor And Weapons

Two separate layers of armor provide modern BattleMechs with protection against energy and projectile weapons. Aligned crystal steel is usually used for the outer layer of 'Mech armor. The aligned-crystal steel has excellent heat conducting properties, and so it provides excellent protection against lasers and particle beam weapons. An inner layer of boron nitride impregnated with diamond monofilament stops high explosive armor piercing (HEAP) rounds and fast neutrons. This second layer of armor also prevents any armor fragments from damaging a BattleMech's internal systems.

Because energy weapons can be powered indefinitely by a 'Mech's onboard fusion reactor and do not require ammunition reloads, BattleMechs usually carry charged particle beam weapons or lasers as their primary armaments. Additionally, many BattleMechs carry launching racks for short- or long-range missiles. Still other 'Mechs mount rapid-fire autocannons or machine guns for use against infantry, aircraft and other BattleMechs.

Power Systems

BattleMechs require a large, constant power supply for movement and combat. The fusion reactor, which produces enormous amounts of electricity from ordinary hydrogen, is the most efficient system for providing this power. Because the fusion reaction created by a BattleMech's power plant releases neutrons, the power plant is thickly clad in radiation shielding, which doubles as additional protection for the reactor.

MECHWARRIORS: MODERN KNIGHTS

The fusion plant produces electricity by a process known as magnetohydrodynamics. In this process, magnetic fields are used to channel plasma from the fusion reaction into a loop. This plasma is electrically conductive, and so the loop functions as a powerful generating coil, producing both electricity and waste heat. Every BattleMech carries a system of heat pumps and radiators called heat sinks to help dissipate this waste heat. Heat sinks are especially important because excessively high internal temperatures can disrupt the magnetic containment fields around a BattleMech's reactor. If a power plant's magnetic "jar" is disrupted, an uncontrolled fusion reaction may occur, releasing neutrons and exposing the BattleMech's internal systems and its MechWarrior to lethal radiation.

Defining Characteristics

The hundreds of BattleMech models in existence display a myriad of design features, but all 'Mechs share two defining characteristics. First all BattleMechs possess movement capabilities unmatched by any other type of modern war machine. Second, all BattleMechs possess heat-dissipation systems to reduce the internal heat levels generated by their power and weapons systems.

Movement Capabilities

BattleMechs can attain walking or running speeds ranging from thirty to two hundred kilometers per hour in open terrain. Dense forests, swamps and steep slopes will slow a 'Mech, but very few terrain features can stop one. In addition, many 'Mechs can jump over obstacles by superheating air with their fusion reactors and releasing it through so-called jump jets. (Jump-capable BattleMechs operating on worlds without atmospheres often carry their own reaction mass for their jets.) All BattleMechs can also move underwater when crossing rivers or small lakes.

Spaceborne BattleMechs can make assault landings from low orbit. Special reaction jets allow them to soft-land from altitudes of up to 320 kilometers. During reentry, breakaway ablative shields protect the entire 'Mech.

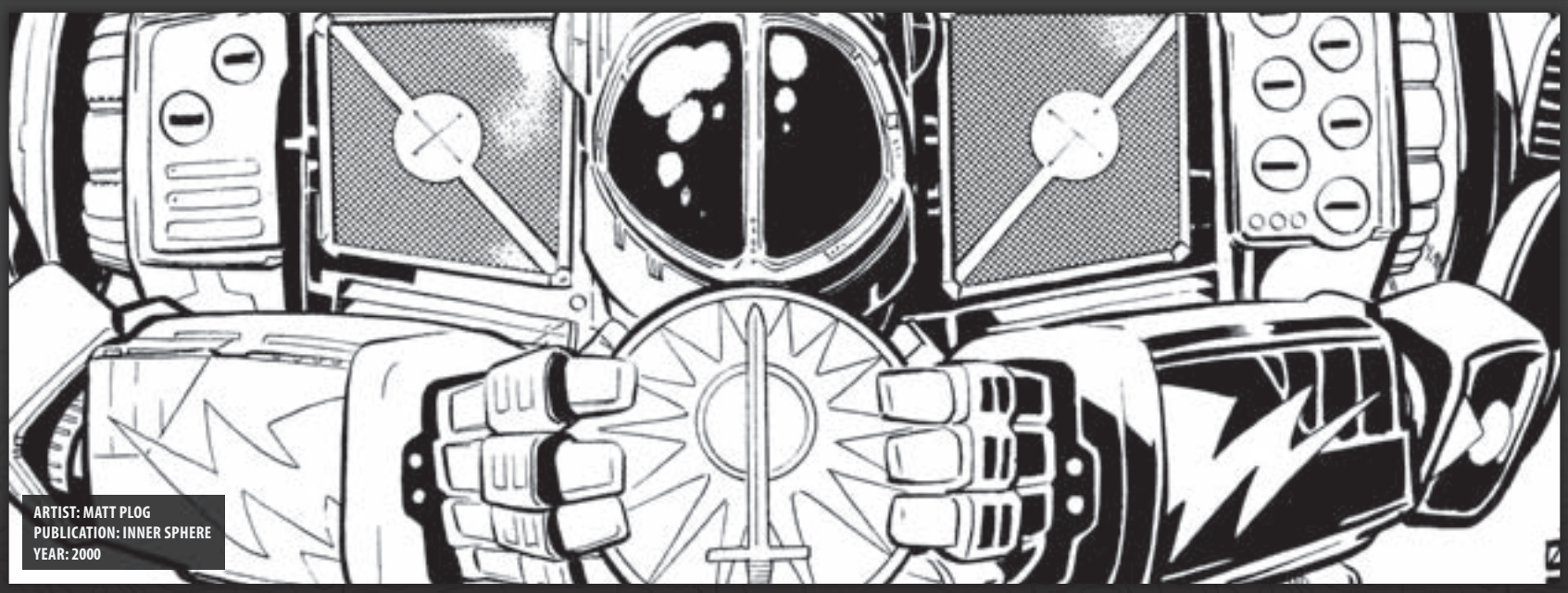
Heat Dissipation Systems and Strategies

Because a BattleMech's systems are pushed to their limits during combat, 'Mechs engaged in combat rapidly generate large amounts of waste heat—heat that can disrupt a fusion reactor's magnetic containment shields and impair or permanently damage a 'Mech's electronics and computer systems, thereby slowing the BattleMech's movement and reducing the accuracy of its weapons. Heat sinks are one way of controlling the heat build-up in a 'Mech. The heat pouring out of these radiators can produce strong infrared (IR) signatures, however, which can make a 'Mech easy to target.

To sidestep this problem, MechWarriors have found other ways to control heat build-up. MechWarriors often place their machines in shallow lakes or rivers. (Through the processes of conduction and convection, moving water helps dissipate a 'Mech's internal heat.) On temperate or cold worlds, the atmosphere itself can help dissipate waste heat. On the other hand, the high outside temperatures of a desert or jungle environment can exacerbate a BattleMech's heating problems.

The most common methods by which MechWarriors control heat build-up are manually regulating the movement and firing rates of their 'Mechs or reprogramming the machine's movement control computer and its secondary systems. These computers can be used to limit the 'Mech's rate of activity and the resulting heat build-up. For example, when a 'Mech is sent to a high-temperature world, its activity rate setting may be lowered. The 'Mech will move more slowly and fire less often than it would on a temperate planet. When a 'Mech is sent to fight in an arctic climate, the setting is raised, allowing faster movement and a higher rate of fire. Reprogramming is usually carried out while a BattleMech force is en route to its assignment aboard DropShips. The process takes approximately two weeks.

Because BattleMechs are always adjusted for the expected external temperature of their combat environments, sudden increases in outside temperature can have a devastating impact on a 'Mech's ability to dissipate waste heat. Tacticians have developed a whole series of battle tactics to take advantage of this 'Mech characteristic. For example, commanders regularly set forests on fire while enemy BattleMechs are advancing through them. The superheated air roaring around the 'Mech can overload the machines' cooling systems or drastically reduce their efficiency, thus hampering the BattleMechs' combat capabilities.



ARTIST: MATT PLOG
PUBLICATION: INNER SPHERE
YEAR: 2000

THE MECHANICS OF ASSAULT

—From *Modern Warfare: A Manuel of Tactics and Strategy, 2nd Edition*, by permission of the College of Military Arts, New Avalon Institute of Science

The nature of interstellar transport in the thirty-first century creates a specific pattern for planetary assault determined by the JumpShips and DropShips.

JumpShips

JumpShip is a key vehicle in launching a planetary assault. These large interstellar transport vessels contain a Kearny-Fuchida hyperspace jump drive (K-F drive) that allows instantaneous transportation across distances of up to 30 light-years. The K-F drive is expensive, delicate, and large, taking up roughly 95 percent of the ship's mass. It leaves little room for armor, weapons or cargo, and certainly cannot support an interplanetary drive to propel the ship from its arrival point in the planetary system to the target planet. For this job, a JumpShip carries one or more DropShips.

JumpShips are never considered military targets. Ever since the brutal Second Succession War, an unspoken ban on attacking JumpShips has preserved humankind's ability to travel across interstellar space; this ban has not completely halted assaults on JumpShips, but it has made them very rare.

Jump Points

To make a hyperspace jump, the K-F drive creates an energy bubble around the ship that "punches a hole" through space. Because this bubble cannot form properly in the presence of a strong gravitational field, a JumpShip most often enters a planetary system through one of the system's two closest points of gravitational stability. These points are the zenith and the nadir of a system's gravity well, along the line that passes through the system's gravitational center and that is perpendicular to the plane of the star system (see diagram).

Pirate Points: The zenith and nadir are the most commonly used jump points, especially for civilian traffic, but are not the only options. Alternate jump points exist in a sphere around the system's star, as well as at other points of gravitational stability in the system (some of them being Lagrange points). Unlike the zenith and nadir points, these non-standard points do not have fixed locations. The complex gravitational interaction of the system's stars, planets, and other astronomical bodies means that non-standard points are constantly moving, appearing, and disappearing at irregular intervals. This characteristic makes calculating such points extremely difficult. Additionally, vessels using non-standard points stand a far lower chance of being rescued in the event of a malfunction than those using standard points. For this reason, non-standard points are generally used in emergencies or by JumpShip crews seeking to conceal their arrivals in star systems, such as pirate vessels—a fact that earned nonstandard jump points the nickname of pirate points.

Detection: An emerging JumpShip creates a powerful electromagnetic (EM) pulse, detectable within hours of the jump. Though it is possible for an enemy JumpShip to avoid detection by the planet it intends to target, the means of accomplishing this feat are difficult. By learning the enemy's shipping patterns, for example, an attacking force might devise a way to knock out or delay an enemy JumpShip and send one of their own to take its place. The arriving ship, however, would need to broadcast appropriate identification codes to maintain the charade. The sheer logistical difficulty of managing all this makes such deceptions a rare tactic. Therefore, in practice, the enemy almost always detects an arriving JumpShip and is ready to meet the invasion force head-on.

DropShips

Carried by JumpShips, DropShips transport troops and equipment from the system's jump points to the target planet. DropShips are equipped with fusion-powered interplanetary drives that propel them through space. Most DropShips are transport vessels, with their mass divided between engines and cargo. Many are also equipped with armor and weapons to defend themselves and their passengers if necessary. A large military DropShip often boasts more firepower than a company of BattleMechs. Some DropShips, known as assault ships, have little or no space for transporting troops or cargo, but are bristling with weapons intended to hunt down enemy DropShips.

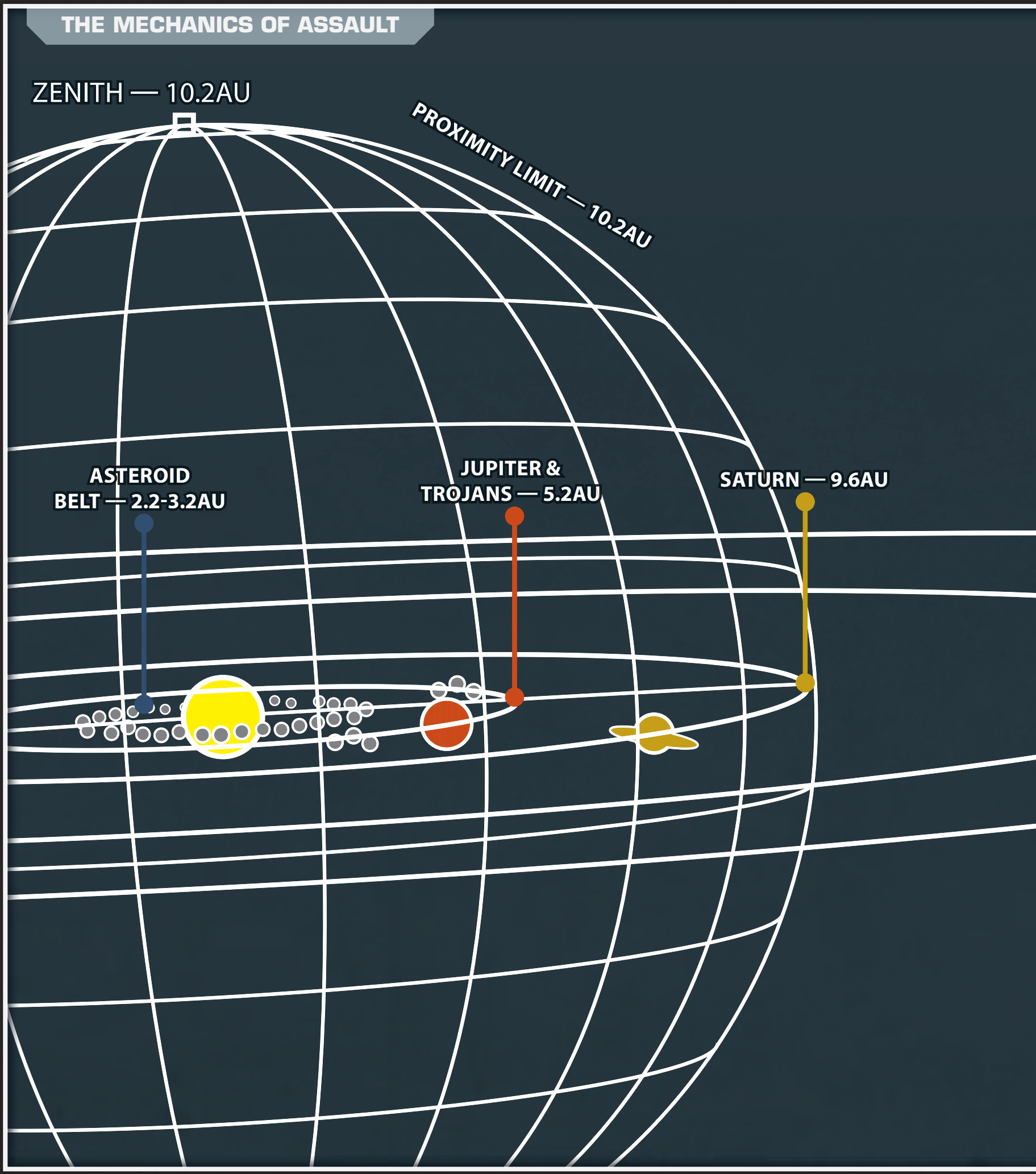
After a JumpShip arrives at a jump point, the DropShips it is carrying detach from their docking collars and begin the long trip in-system. Depending on the size of the star and other factors, the trip can take hours, days, or even weeks in the case of very large stars. A typical system transit takes a week to ten days.

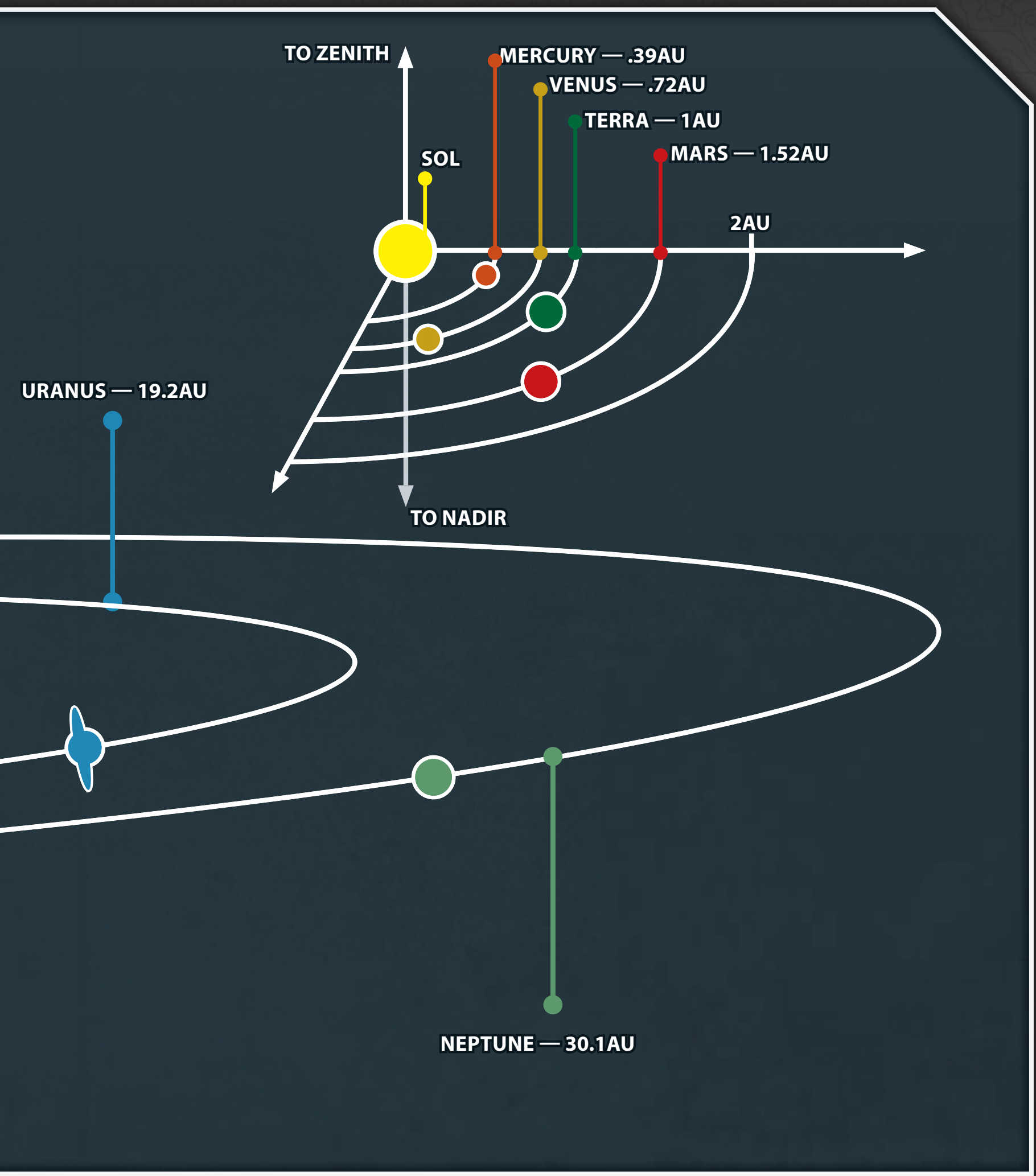
Upon arrival in orbit around the target planet, the DropShip lands and unloads its cargo—usually well behind friendly lines, as DropShips are expensive and can play a vital role in the event of a tactical withdrawal.

Combat Drops: Sometimes battlefield conditions call for landing troops closer to the enemy than a DropShip can feasibly manage. In these cases, a commander can call for a combat drop, a risky deployment technique made possible by the unique construction of BattleMechs. In a combat drop, rather than the DropShip landing on the planet's surface, the troops jump out of it at low altitude and fall to the surface. This tactic avoids the necessity of risking the DropShip by landing it in hazardous terrain or in the middle of enemy lines, while allowing rapid troop deployment directly to such areas. The dropped forces land safely by using jump jets or disposable jump packs to slow and guide their descent—though even with this equipment, combat drops remain extremely hazardous.

Even well-trained pilots can damage their 'Mechs if they make a minor altitude miscalculation or a slightly off-balance landing. For these reasons, combat drops are performed only when absolutely necessary. Combat drops can be made from very high or orbital altitudes if the dropped forces are encased in ablative cocoons that burn away during atmospheric entry.

THE MECHANICS OF ASSAULT




TO ZENITH
MERCURY — .39AU
VENUS — .72AU
TERRA — 1AU
MARS — 1.52AU
SOL
2AU
URANUS — 19.2AU
TO NADIR
NEPTUNE — 30.1AU

ARTIST: FRANZ VOHWINKEL
PUBLICATION: CLASSIC BATTLETECH: A GAME OF ARMORED COMBAT
YEAR: 2002

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PUBLICATION: CLASSIC BATTLETECH: A GAME OF ARMORED COMBAT
YEAR: 2002

BATTLETECH TIMELINE

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.

However, the same dynamic energy that makes *BattleTech* so compelling can also make it confusing, with so many sourcebooks published over the years. As people encounter *BattleTech*, get hooked and start to obtain sourcebooks, they need to know where a particular sourcebook is best used along the *BattleTech* timeline.

To help quickly and easily convey the timeline of the *BattleTech* universe—and to allow a player to easily "plug in" a given sourcebook—we've divided *BattleTech* into six major eras. (For those that own the *BattleTech Introductory Box Set*, the year dates in parentheses following each era's title correspond to the maps found in the Inner Sphere at a Glance sourcebook.)

Note that if a Catalyst Game Labs *BattleTech* product does not contain an era logo, then it is considered a core rulebook or supplement to be used across all eras, such as the *Introductory Box Set*, *Total Warfare* and so on.

STAR LEAGUE (2570)

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.

SUCCESSION WARS (3025, 3030, 3040)

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 (3052, 3057)

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, CURRENT)

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 will ultimately pit 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 likewise unleashed.

DARK AGE (3132+)

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 almost immediately erupt and the factions begin rebuilding their armies.

ARTIST: JIM HOLLOWAY
PUBLICATION: SUCCESSION WARS BOARD GAME
YEAR: 1987

PRE-STAR LEAGUE ERA

2005
- Crippen Station put into orbit

2007
- Crippen Station fitted with construction platforms

2011
- Tikonov Accords signed
- Second Soviet Civil War begins

2014
- Second Soviet Civil War ends
- Western Alliance formed

2015
- Alliance World Parliament formed

2016
- Western Alliance Space Command formed

2017
- AS Altair launched

2018
- Kearny and Fuchida begin publishing theories

2020
- First self-sustaining fusion reaction developed

2021
- First commercially available fusion power plant developed

2022
- Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere formed

2024
- Osaka Agreement announced

2026
- First working fusion drive developed

2027
- AS Columbia voyages to Mars

2028
- Magellan Project initiated

2030
- Magellan One launched

2086
- Terran Alliance formed

2102
- Kearny-Fuchida drive proven feasible

ARTIST: BRENT EVANS
PUBLICATION: HANDBOOK: HOUSE DAVION
YEAR: 2007

2103
- Deimos Project authorized

2107
- First hyperspatial jump made

2108
- Raymond Bache becomes first human to experience hyperspatial jump
- TAS Pathfinder makes jump to Tau Ceti IV (New Earth)

2110
- First scientific outpost outside Sol system established

2112
- Research outpost established on New Earth

2116
- TAS Ark launched
- First interstellar colony established on New Earth

2120
- Terran Space Navy created

2122
- TAS Charger launched

2128
- TAS Liberator misjumps
- Colonization Procedure Referendum passed

2168
- First Alliance Grand Survey initiated

2172
- First Alliance Grand Survey completed, 108 worlds colonized in a 60 light-year radius

2177
- Ryan Cartel formed

2193
- Chesterton Trade League founded

2195
- Second Alliance Grand Survey completed, 204 worlds colonized in a 85 light-year radius

2219
- Third Alliance Grand Survey completed, 316 worlds colonized in a 120 light-year radius

2225
- Korvin Doctrine established

2235
- Tamar Pact formed
- Fourth Alliance Grand Survey of Inhabited Planets completed, 628 worlds in a 250 light-year radius

TERRAN HEGEMONY ERA

2236
- Denebola and Freedom declare themselves independent
- Outer Reaches Rebellion begins

2237
- Alliance Liberal Party comes to power
- New Avalon Grain Rebellion

2238
- Marik declares independence
- Charles Marik forms Republic of Marik
- Outer Reaches Rebellion ends

2239
- Covenant of New Avalon ratified

2241
- Marik Constitution passed at Constitutional Convention of Republic of Marik
- Federation of Oriente founded

2242
- Terran Alliance makes Demarcation Declaration
- Exodus begins

2243
- Tikonov Grand Union founded

2245
- St. Ives Mercantile Association founded

2250
- Sian Supremacy founded
- Rim Worlds Republic formed
- Calderon Flotilla leaves Aix-La-Chappelle

2255
- Second Covenant of New Avalon ratified

2270
- Capellan Hegemony founded
- Capellan Renaissance begins

2271
- Republic of Marik, Federation of Oriente, and Principality of Regulus sign Document of Incorporation, forming Free Worlds League
- Treaty of Marik passed

2293
- Stewart War takes place
- First New Avalon-built freighter dedicated

2295
- Stewart Commonality annexed by FWL
- James McKenna takes command of Terran Alliance Navy

2299
- Federation of Skye formed

2300
- TAS Dreadnought, the first true combat warship, launched

2302
- Alliance of Galedon formed

2305
- Capellan-Supremacy War begins

2306
- Ryerson Accords signed
- FWL allies with Capellan Hegemony

2308
- Arboris secedes from Capellan Hegemony
- FWL withdraws alliance with Capellan Hegemony

2309
- Capellan-Supremacy War ends

2310
- Capellan Commonality formed

2311
- Council of One summit meeting

2314
- Terran Alliance dissolved

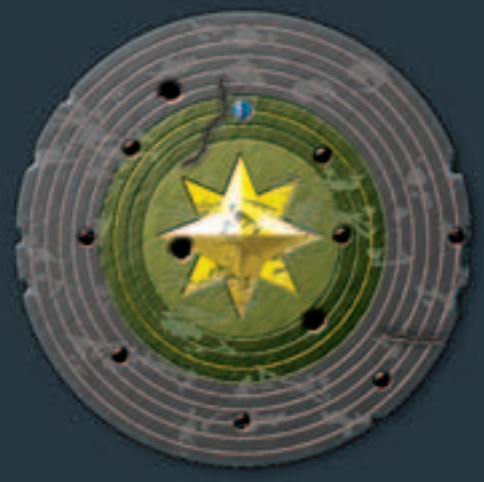
2315
- Terran Hegemony formed
- Duchy of Liao formed
- Terran Hegemony Charter issued

2316
- Juliano Marik signs Treaty of Terra
- James McKenna elected TH Director-General
- TH invasion of Quentin, Errai, and Helen

2317
- Crucis Pact signed, forming Federated Suns

2319
- Draconis Combine founded

2320
- TH invasion of Terra Firma, Capella and Nanking



2335
- Taurian Concordat formed

2338
- TH invasion of Syrma

2340
- TH Hegemony Research Alliance Department created

2341
- Lyran Commonwealth founded

2343
- TH Hegemony Business Information Exchange formed

2345
- Federated Suns and Capellan Commonality sign Acala Pact

2346
- Federated Suns and Capellan Commonality sign Almach Accord

2350
- TH Operation Musclebound takes place

2351
- TH Peers List created

2365
- Aris Crisis begins in Capellan Commonality

2366
- Capellan Confederation founded
- FWL begins occupation of Capellan Confederation border worlds

TERRAN HEGEMONY ERA

2367
- Aris Crisis ends
- FS occupies Capella Prime, Franco Liao orders orbital bombardment of Capella Prime
- CC capital moved to Sian
- TH Military Recruitment and Preparedness Bill passed

2368
- CC Prefectorate established

2373
- FS Board of Magistrates formed

2376
- Lyran Commonwealth Articles of Acceptance signed

2389
- TH Grand Survey taken

2391
- TH construction of Castles Brian begins

2392
- TH Succession Bill passed

2398
- First Andurien War begins
- Age of War begins

2399
- Novaya Zemlya Incident

2404
- First Andurien War ends
- Duchy of Graham-Marik formed in FWL

2407
- Draconis Combine invasion of Tamar Pact
- Tharkad named Lyran capital

2408
- LC makes Vega Strike

2412
- Tintavel Massacre
- Ares Conventions adopted

2413
- Lyran Commonwealth Scout Corps formed

2415
- Outworlds Alliance formed

2416
- War between LC and FWL begins

2417
- FS November Conspiracy begins
- FS Principalities formed
- Outworlds Alliance Charter ratified

2418
- Armistice between LC and FWL concluded
- Rim War begins

2420
- War between LC and FWL renewed

2422
- Rim War ends

2427
- War between LC and FWL renewed
- FWL War Powers Act and Parliamentary Committee disbanded

2431
- TH seizes Kentares system

2432
- TH Nomination laws revised

ARTIST: GERHARD MOSZI
PUBLICATION: HANDBOOK: HOUSE MARIK
YEAR: 2005

2439
- TH invents BattleMech

2443
- First use of BattleMechs in combat

2451
- Time of Tribulation begins in Capellan Confederation

2455
- Capellan limit on military rank instituted
- LC gains BattleMech technology

2457
- FS gains BattleMech technology

2461
- DC gains BattleMech technology

2462
- FWL gains BattleMech technology
- Capellan Confederation's Xanthe operation takes place

2463
- LC Long March Campaign launched

2470
- First general strike in TH history

2473
- FS Act of Succession passed

2475
- FWL Invasion of TH stalled by coup
- First full-scale BattleMech vs. BattleMech battle

2478
- FWL Treaty with TH signed

2480
- CC Decree of Prime Extension issued

2488
- Loki Incident
- RWR becomes hereditary Amaris holding

2496
- First DropShip used

2505
- Order of Lorix formed

2510
- Rasalhague and DC unite

2511
- TC and FS sign Omsol Accords

2512
- Decree of Retention issued in Capellan Confederation

2518
- FS Treason Trials begin

STAR LEAGUE ERA

2520
- FS Treason Trials end

2521
- CC Court of Philosophical Inquiry established

2523
- Decimation of Capellan House of Scions

2524
- House of Scions closed
- Davion Civil War begins

2527
- FWL Ambassador expelled from CC

2528
- Second Andurien War begins
- TC and CC fight Ariana's War

2530
- Kossandra Centrella founds the Magistracy of Canopus

2531
- Second Andurien War ends
- Constitution of Magistracy Free States established

2537
- Davion Civil War ends
- FS Principalities disbanded

2543
- Supreme Court of Lyran Commonwealth created

2546
- FS and CC sign Bell Accord

2549
- TH September Revolt

2550
- Sarna Mandate developed

2551
- Third Andurien War begins

2556
- Third Andurien War ends
- CC joins Terran League
- Age of War ends
- TH, CC and FWL sign Treaty of Geneva

2558
- Tharkan Accords signed
- LC agrees to join the Star League

2566
- FWL instigates economic crisis in FS

2567
- New Avalon Accords signed
- FS agrees to join the Star League

2569
- Treaty of Vega signed
- DC agrees to join the Star League

2571
- Star League Accords signed
- Star League formed
- Shandra Noruff-Cameron appointed Commander-in-Chief of Star League Defense Force
- Ian Cameron named First Lord of the Star League

2572
- Star League Directive 21 instituted
- Santiago Massacre
- United Triumph Military Exercises take place
- Border Guards Agreement passed
- Executive Order 4 issued

2573
- Malagrotta Affair
- RWR Universal Act of Loyalty passed
- Bureau of Star League Affairs created

2574
- Harsh Periphery trade laws and taxes passed

2575
- LC Tax Reform Debate of 2575
- Pollux Proclamation issued
- RWR Manchester Directive issued
- Reunification War begins
- Taurian Campaign begins

2576
- Case Amber adopted

2577
- Canopian Campaign begins

2578
- Star League officially declares war

2579
- Star League renounces tenets of Ares Conventions

2581
- LC Operation Mailed Fist launched
- Star League forces orbitally bombard Robsart
- OA Consadine Mission launched
- Outworlds Campaign begins
- Rim Worlds Campaign begins

2582
- Shippers License Act passed

2583
- TC Case Black enacted

2584
- FWL captures Canopus IV
- Freebooters War begins

ARTIST: CHRIS LEWIS
PUBLICATION: HANDBOOK: MAJOR PERIPHERY STATES
YEAR: 2009

STAR LEAGUE ERA

2585
- OA Peace of Cerberus negotiated
- Outworlds Campaign ends

2588
- FWL gains control of Magistracy of Canopus
- Freebooters War ends
- Canopian Campaign ends

2592
- LC Estates-General disbanded

2596
- TC surrenders
- Rim Provisional Government surrenders
- Taurian Campaign ends
- Rim Worlds Campaign ends

2597
- Reunification War ends
- TC, MC, RWR and OA become Territorial States of the Star League

2598
- Capellan Decree of Succession issued

2600
- Good Years begin

2604
- Civil government on Canopus restored
- Kerensky family named "Defenders of the First Lord"

2605
- Last Star League forces leave TC

2606
- Executive Order 34 issued

2607
- Last Star League forces leave OA
- Territorial States given Associate-Member status

2611
- LC Estates-General reconvened

2617
- DC capital moved to Luthien

2623
- Star League system of currency adopted
- LC Businessman's Strike of 2623

2630
- First HPG message transmitted

2640
- First Martial Olympiad

2650
- Good Years end

2651
- Star League levies new taxes against territorial states

2652
- DC industrial development program initiated

2660
- LC rescinds foreign tariffs

2667
- Scourge of Death makes first appearance in FWL

2676
- House units allowed to compete in Martial Olympiads

ARTIST: DAN SMITH
PUBLICATION: BLOODRIGHT
YEAR: 1992

2678
- Marik estate bombed by Scourge of Death
- TC passes Education Reform Act

2681
- Rim Commonality separates from Principality of Regulus
- First duel involving SLDF MechWarrior fought

2688
- First Land-Air 'Mech produced

2700
- Aleksandr Kerensky born

2703
- Purge of FWL begins

2711
- Capellan Decree of Expulsion issued

2728
- War of Davion Succession begins

2729
- FWL Parliament dissolved and arrested
- War of Davion Succession ends

2734
- FWL Treaty of Verona signed
- FWL Parliament reconvened
-

2735
- FWL Intelligence Act passed
- FS Preparedness Act passed

2736
- Last Martial Olympiad

2738
- Simon Cameron named First Lord of the Star League
- Aleksandr Kerensky named Commander-in-Chief of SLDF

2750
- Simon Cameron begins tour of Star League

2751
- Simon Cameron killed
- Richard Cameron named First Lord of the Star League
- Aleksandr Kerensky named Star League Regent

SUCCESSION WARS ERA

ARTIST: CHRIS LEWIS
PUBLICATION: HANDBOOK: MAJOR PERIPHERY STATES
YEAR: 2009

2752
- Laws imposing heavy taxes on Periphery passed

2755
- Birthday Proclamations passed

2760
- FS invades CC in Border War

2762
- Border War ends
- Richard Cameron comes of age
- Executive Order 156 issued and retracted

2763
- Taxation Edict passed, but rejected by the Periphery nations

2765
- 18 Periphery worlds secede from Star League

2766
- Stefan Amaris kills all known Camerons, seizes 95 TH worlds, and gains control of 70 percent of TH HPGs

2767
- Amaris-Kerensky Civil War begins
- RWR invaded
- Stefan Amaris declares himself First Lord of the Star League

2769
- RWR destroyed

2772
- SLDF TH Campaign begins

2777
- Operation Liberation launched

2779
- Terra liberated
- Stefan Amaris executed

2780
- Jerome Blake appointed Minister of Communications
- Aleksandr Kerensky stripped of title of Protector

2781
- Star League disbanded

2782
- Each Lord of the High Council individually gives Jerome Blake responsibility for the reconstruction of Terra

2783
- Court of the Star League sealed

2784
- FWL Resolution 288 passed
- FWL Rule of 75 repealed
- 80 percent of SLDF undertakes Operation Exodus, the remainder pledging assistance to the Terran reconstruction effort
- Department of Communications First Circuit reestablished
- Prinz Eugen Incident
- General Order 137 issued

2785
- Conrad Toyama appointed Chief Administrator of Dieron HPG
- ComStar Letter of Credit instituted
- Federated Suns suffers Towne Debacle

2786
- First Succession War begins
- Department of Communications changes its name to ComStar
- ComStar's Operation Silver Shield approved and begun
- Minoru Kurita proclaims himself First Lord of the Star League
- Magistracy of Canopus issues Declaration of Independence
- Pentagon Worlds settled

2787
- Kenyon Marik declares himself First Lord of the Star League
- Neutrality of ComStar outlined by Communications Protocol of 2787
- Federated Suns War Zone Actions become law

2788
- Operation Silver Shield amended to include Terra only
- All HPGs shut down
- Military portion of Operation Silver Shield takes place
- ComStar takes Terra

2789
- New Delos Massacre
- ComStar Mercenary Review Board formed

2791
- ComStar Archives Branch formed

2796
- Kentares IV Massacre

2798
- First FS offensive against DC
- FS Reformation begins

2801
- FS Reformation ends
- DeChavilier Massacre
- Aleksandr Kerensky dies
- Nicholas Kerensky leads second Exodus
- Exodus Civil Wars begin

2802
- ComStar makes its first true profit

2808
- Ilsa Liao renounces claim to First Lordship
- Second FS offensive against DC

2811
- ComStar ROM formed
- Third FS offensive against DC

2812
- LC Estates-General disbanded

2813
- Taurian-Canopian War begins

2814
- Taurian-Canopian War ends

SUCCESSION WARS ERA

2815
- Nicholas Kerensky proclaims himself first ilKhan of the Clans

2818
- Capellan Science Foundation founded

2819
- Jerome Blake dies
- Conrad Toyama named Prime Administrator of CS
- ROM purge initiated
- ComStar Order formed

2820
- Conrad Toyama visits House leaders and raises HPG rates

2821
- First Succession War ends
- LC and FWL sign Peace Accords of Bella I
- Clans return to Pentagon Worlds

2822
- Exodus Civil Wars end
- DC institutes new mercenary payment plan
- LC Estates-General reconvened

2823
- LC taxes ComStar and is Interdicted
- ComStar logo created
- Clan Wolverine annihilation begins

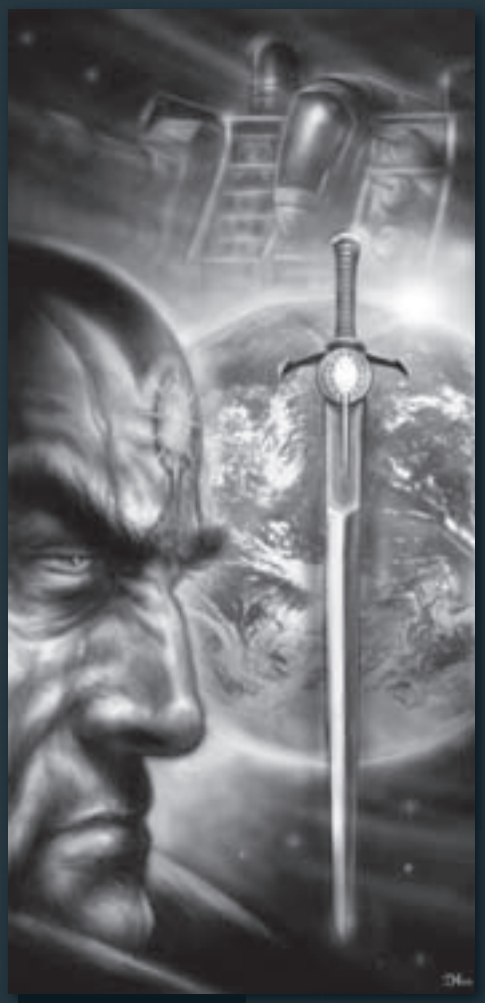
2824
- LC taxes and ComStar Interdiction lifted
- Conrad Toyama begins recruitment trip in Periphery
- Clan Wolverine annihilated

2825
- Minnesota Tribe attacks Svelvik, Jarrett, Richmond and Trondheim

2826
- ComStar News Bureau formed

2830
- Second Succession War begins

2834
- Nicholas Kerensky killed
- Clan Wolf absorbs Clan Widowmaker



ARTIST: DES HANLEY
PUBLICATION: INNER SPHERE
YEAR: 2000

2837
- Oriente HPG destroyed
- FWL Interdicted
- ComStar War begins
- Conrad Toyama dies and is named a saint

2838
- FWL Interdiction lifted
- ComStar War ends
- Organizational Edict 3056 expands ROM
- ComStar's Operation Holy Shroud begins
- ISF attached to Draconis Combine Mustered Soldiery

2840
- Chesterton Decree issued by Capellan Confederation
- DC launches first offensive against LC

2841
- Oriente HPG rebuilt
- FS launches major offensive against DC

2842
- FWL Parliament votes to resume all military funding

2843
- Operation Holy Shroud ends

2845
- LC Estates-General disbanded

2849
- LC Estates- General reconvened
- LC Triumvirate formed

2853
- LCS Invincible, last known operational WarShip in the Inner Sphere, misjumps and is lost

2854
- DC launches second offensive against LC
- FS Marathon Offensive begins
- Clan Coyote invents the OmniMech

2860
- TC undergoes Constitutional Crisis of 2860

2861
- ComStar's Doctrinal Edict of 2861 formalizes process of naming Primus
- Federated Suns St. Ives Raid takes place

2864
- Successor States meet in failed peace talks
- Second Succession War ends
- DC Shadow War begins

2866
- Third Succession War begins
- DC Shadow War ends

2868
- Clans first use Elementals
- Clan Smoke Jaguar absorbs Clan Mongoose

2870
- FS Cutthroat Fiasco

2877
- ComStar ROM stages Black December incident

2888
- Sian University founded

SUCCESSION WARS ERA

2901
- Andrea Marteen dies
- Dwight Kurstin named Primus of CS
- First Circuit revolts and leaves Terra
- ComStar "Witch-Hunt" transmission sent
- Terra Interdicted
- Court of the Star League unsealed
- ComStar's Operation Winged Crusader begins

2902
- ComStar Civil War covered up by ROM
- Court of the Star League resealed

2905
- FS and CC sign Armistice of Van Diemen IV

2906
- FWL Home Defense Act passed

2908
- LC Military Services Acts modified

2911
- DC Gray Dragons formed

2912
- Clan Smoke Jaguar puts down the Londerholm Revolt

2913
- LC Operation Freedom begins

2920
- ComStar Periphery Communications Link begun
- Johann O'Reilly forms Marian Hegemony

2921
- DC Davarapala Accords signed

2933
- ComStar Guards and Militia formed

2952
- Federated Suns Great Lee Turkey Shoot
- Federated Suns Warrior's Cabal formed

2955
- Some MC Elector positions become hereditary

2959
- Adrienne Sims begins having nightmares about an invasion from beyond the Periphery
- ComStar Explorer Corps formed

2961
- First Explorer Corps ships enter the Periphery

2964
- CC Decree of Martial Unity issued

2966
- FWL Concord of Danais signed

2979
- ComStar Tripitz affair
- Operation Holy Shroud II begins

2985
- Clan Sea Fox becomes Clan Diamond Shark

2987
- LC Deep Raid of 2987

2988
- Capellan Death Commandos formed
- First Circuit reorganized to include Tharkad, Atreus, Sian and New Avalon

2989
- FWL Special Resolution 512 passed
- DC Strike of 2989

2996
- FWL Accountability Edict issued
- FWL Logistics Act passed

3000
- ComStar begins extensive recruitment in the Periphery
- Wolf's Dragoons Compromise

3001
- ComStar begins supplying Bandit Kings

3002
- LC Operation Concentrated Weakness begins

3004
- ComStar Jolly Roger Affair takes place
- Wolf's Dragoons leave for the Inner Sphere

3005
- Capellan Ministry of Development reorganized
- Wolf's Dragoons appear in FS

3009
- Wolf's Dragoons return to Clan Wolf for refitting

3010
- ComStar instigates Marik Civil War

3014
- Anton Marik begins Marik Civil War

3015
- Marik Civil War ends
- New Avalon Institute of Science created

3019
- Wolf's Dragoons return to Clan Wolf again for refitting

3020
- OA Educational Exchange Program begins

3022
- Concord of Kapteyn signed
- McCarron's War begins
- Federated-Commonwealth Alliance Document signed

3024
- Concord of Kapteyn ratified by all members

3025
- Third Succession War ends
- McCarron's War ends
- Capellan Confederation's Operation Doppelganger takes place

3026
- Federated Suns' Operation Galahad 3026 takes place

SUCCESSION WARS ERA

3027
- Operation Galahad 3027 takes place
- Lyran Commonwealth Operation Thor 3027 takes place

3028
- Fourth Succession War begins
- Northwind Agreement takes effect
- Capellan Confederation's Operation Riposte takes place
- Gray Death Legion discovers Helm Library Core
- Federated Commonwealth unofficially formed
- Greater Valkyrate formed

3029
- St. Ives Compact formed
- Tikonov Free Republic formed
- Capellan Confederation's Operation Intruders Communion takes place
- FS framed for destruction of Sarna HPG and Interdicted
- ComStar covertly attacks NAIS
- ComStar 'Mechs stationed at FS HPGs
- FS Interdiction lifted
- DC and Wolf's Dragoons battle on Crossing

3030
- Fourth Succession War ends
- Duchy of Andurien secedes from FWL
- FWL Internal Emergency Act passed
- ComStar Operation Rosebud initiated
- Federated Suns' Sarna March created
- Andurien/MC invasion of CC begins
- ComStar gives Star League BattleMechs to DC

3031
- CC attacked by Andurien/Canopus alliance
- FS absorbs Tikonov Free Republic

3034
- Free Rasalhague Republic formed
- Operation Rosebud ends
- ComStar Operation Flush begins
- DC Ronin War takes place
- FS and LC undergo Skye Crisis
- Circinus Federation begins invasion of Illyrian Palatinate

3035
- ComStar Readjustment Act of 3035 passed
- MH invades Astrokaszy

3036
- St. Ives Compact founded

ARTIST: KEVIN MCCANN
PUBLICATION: HISTORICAL: WAR OF 3039
YEAR: 2004

3037
- FWL Addendum to the Incorporation passed
- Andurien regained by FWL

3038
- ComStar 'Mechs stationed at CC HPGs

3039
- War of 3039 begins

3040
- War of 3039 ends

3041
- ComStar 'Mechs stationed at LC HPGs
- Armed Forces of the Federated Commonwealth created

3042
- Circinus Civil War begins

3043
- FWL League General Accounting Office created

3044
- Operation Flush ends

3047
- TC forces destroy misjumped FC JumpShip
- TC begins military buildup

3048
- Explorer Corps vessel Outbound Light encounters Clan Smoke Jaguar
- Bidding for the right to invade takes place
- MH military buildup begins
- Rim Collection formed

3049
- Clan Operation Revival launches
- ComStar makes contact with the Clans

3050
- Clans invade Inner Sphere
- ComStar begins aiding the Clans
- Turtle Bay Massacre
- Operation Revival halted

3051
- Operation Revival resumes, reserve Clans brought in
- MC makes overtures to Periphery states about Periphery-wide alliance

3052
- Battle for Luthien
- Battle of Tukayyid
- ComStar Operation Scorpion takes place
- Word of Blake formed with ComStar Schism
- FWL signs HPG service contract with Word of Blake
- New Belt Pirates formed

3053
- Terran Peace Summit takes place
- ComStar begins announcing troop movements
- Mercenary Review and Bonding Commission replaces Mercenary Review Board
- University of Blake begins construction

3054
- MH invades Lothian League
- Fuchida's Fusiliers take control of Tortuga Dominions

CLAN INVASION/CIVIL WAR ERA

3055
- MH conquers Lothian League
- Clan Ghost Bear begins relocating their population and assets to the Inner Sphere

3056
- Federated Commonwealth officially formed
- TC and MC sign Treaty of Taurus
- Diplomatic channels between CC and MC reopen
- OA Long Road Program begins

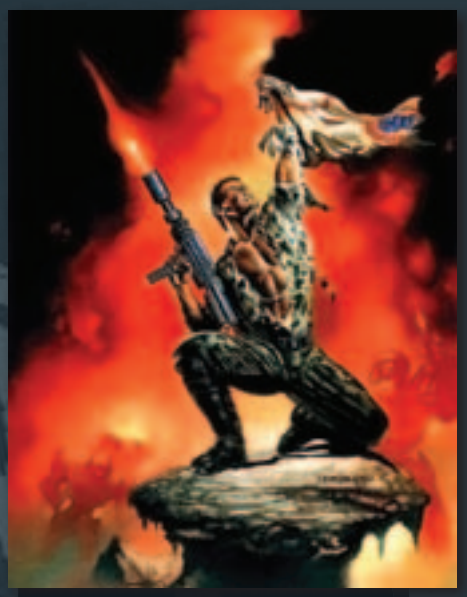
3057
- FWL and CC launches Operation Guerrero
- Lyran Alliance formed
- Clan Refusal War
- ComStar opens vaults of history to everyone

3058
- DC forces installed as peacekeepers in Chaos March
- Clan Wolf becomes both Clan Jade Wolf and Clan Wolf-in-Exile
- Word of Blake takes Terra
- Clan Jade Wolf becomes Clan Wolf
- Invasion of Coventry
- First Whitting Conference
- Inner Sphere leaders form new Star League

3059
- Clan Burrock absorbed by Star Adders
- Harvest trials among the Clans
- Star League launches Task Force Serpent and Operation Bulldog against Clan Smoke Jaguar
- Clan Nova Cat declares allegiance to the Star League
- Smoke Jaguar forces in the Inner Sphere flee to the Homeworlds

3060
- Task Force Serpent assaults Smoke Jaguar homeworld of Huntress
- Smoke Jaguars annihilated
- Great Refusal fought on Strana Mechty ends the Clan invasion
- Star League embassy set up on Strana Mechty
- Nova Cats are Abjured and attacked by other Clans, and forced to flee Homeworlds to settle in the Draconis Combine

3061
- War between Capellan Confederation and St. Ives Compact
- Star League forces return to Inner Sphere
- War between Jade Falcons and Steel Vipers results in Vipers abandoning their Inner Sphere possessions



ARTIST: BORIS VALLEJO
PUBLICATION: BRED FOR WAR (NOVEL)
YEAR: 1995

- Second Whitting Conference held on Tharkad
- Nova Cats granted autonomy in the Irece Prefecture of the Draconis Combine

3062
- Trinity Alliance formed
- First Babylon Diet
- FedCom Civil War begins on Kathil
- Combine troops attacked in Lyons Thumb
- FedSuns troops invade the Draconis Combine
- Combine annexes Lyons Thumb
- Ghost Bear/Combine War begins with Black Dragon attack on Alshain

3063
- Marian Hegemony conquers Illyrian Palatinate
- War between Capellan Confederation and St. Ives Compact ends with the annexation of the latter
- End of Ghost Bear/Combine War
- Combine troops move to counter FedSuns invasion

3064
- Diplomatic relations opened between Clan Snow Raven and Outworlds Alliance
- Jade Falcon Incursion into Lyran Alliance; Clan Hell's Horses abandons their Inner Sphere possessions
- Third Whitting Conference held on Atreus
- ComStar, the Taurian Concordat and Word of Blake admitted to Star League as probationary members

3065
- Clan Wolf assaults Jade Falcons
- End of Jade Falcon Incursion
- Clan Diamond Shark seizes Twycross
- Free Skye revolts
- Fighting continues in the former Federated Commonwealth including battles on Kathil and New Syrtis
- Draconis Combine launches reprisal strikes on Federated Suns

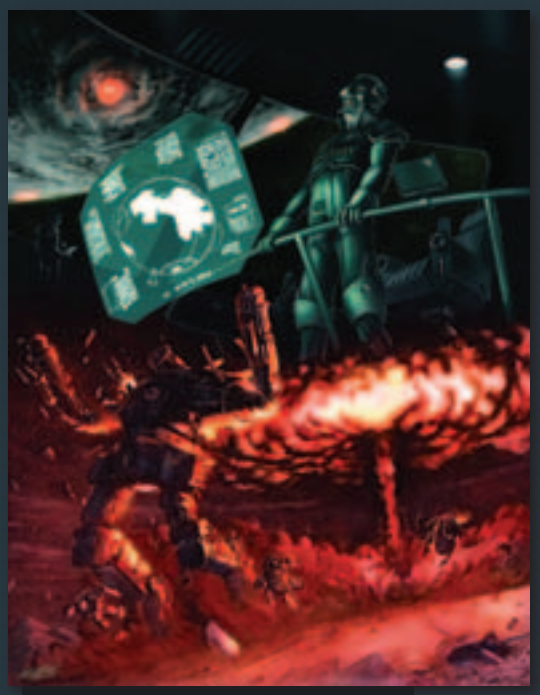
3066
- Ceasefire between Draconis March and Draconis Combine
- Formation of Fronc Reaches and Calderon Protectorate
- Fighting continues in the former Federated Commonwealth, including battles on Tikonov, Tharkad and New Avalon

3067
- FedCom Civil War ends
- Wolf's Dragoons attacked on Outreach by coalition of mercenaries
- Fourth Whitting Conference held on Tharkad
- Star League dissolved
- Word of Blake attacks Tharkad and New Avalon
- Start of Word of Blake Jihad
- Outreach nuked by Word of Blake

3068
- Word of Blake attacks Luthien and Tukayyid
- Word of Blake sparks Skye/Free Worlds League war
- ComStar launches Case White against the Terran system, but is defeated in massive loss
- Capellan March invades Capellan Confederation
- Jade Falcons invade Lyran Alliance
- Draconis Combine capital moves to New Samarkand
- Capellan Confederation counterinvades the Federated Suns

3069
- Nuclear strikes on Ramora destroy a Clan Snow Raven naval Star
- Clan Wolf invades the Lyran Alliance
- Alarion and Galax poisoned during Blakist assaults
- Clan Snow Raven invades several Draconis Combine worlds
- Kathil shipyards crippled by Capellan Confederation
- Galedon bombarded by Snow Raven fleet; plague spreads across world
- Capellan counterattack hits New Syrtis, capital of the Federated Suns Capellan March, but is ultimately repelled

JIHAD ERA



ARTIST: KLAUS SCHERWINSKI
PUBLICATION: DAWN OF THE JIHAD
YEAR: 2005

- Ceasefire between League and Lyran forces
- Andurien invades several Capellan worlds

3070
- Capellan ceasefire with Federated Suns
- Word of Blake occupies Hesperus II
- Draconis Combine cleanses Galedon V by nuclear strikes
- Word of Blake occupies Donegal
- War between Taurian Concordat and Calderon Protectorate
- Clan Ghost Bear takes first steps towards merging with Free Rasalhague Republic
- Word of Blake attacks St. Ives and Sian
- Clan Hell's Horses invades Inner Sphere Clan Occupation Zones
- Scouring of Tamar

3071
- Clan Ice Hellion invades Inner Sphere Clan Occupation Zones
- Word of Blake occupies Robinson and Pesht
- Word of Blake attacks the Marian Hegemony
- Azami population of the Draconis Combines rise in rebellion
- Word of Blake occupies Gibson, their old capital
- Clan Hell's Horses turns on Clan Ice Hellion
- Duchy of Tamarind declares itself independent of the Free Worlds League
- ComStar expelled from Outworlds Alliance

3072
- Tharkad liberated
- Robinson and Donegal liberated
- Filtvelt Coalition declares itself independent from the Federated Suns
- Clan Ice Hellion forces defeated on Vantaa, expelled from the Inner Sphere
- Kittery Prefecture formed by Devlin Stone
- Clan Nova Cat attempts to liberate Luthien, but is repelled with heavy losses
- Lyran Archonettes formed, decentralizing control of the Lyran Alliance
- Benjamin liberated

3073
- Donner suicide bomb at Arc-Royal
- Malagrotta declares itself independent of the Federated Suns

3074
- Battle for Odessa
- Word of Blake assault on Sian repulsed
- Word of Blake attacks and poisons Radstadt
- Coventry liberated
- Asteroid strike on Taurus, Federated Suns is blamed
- Taurian Concordat renews its invasion of the Federated Suns
- Battle for Skye, Word of Blake repulsed
- Word of Blake retreats from New Avalon, Mount Davion destroyed
- Clan Ghost Bear attacks Luthien and Pesht
- Hesperus II liberated

3075
- Luthien and Pesht liberated
- Clan Ghost Bear clashes with Clan Wolf at Odessa
- Asteroid strike on Shinonoi
- Tikonov liberated
- Capellan Confederation launches invasion of Blake Protectorate
- Canopus liberated
- Clan Ghost Bear invades the Blake Protectorate
- Irian liberated

3076
- Galatea liberated
- Clan Snow Raven joins Clan Ghost Bear taskforces against Word of Blake
- Word of Blake raids Regulus
- Allies invade Blake Protectorate
- Free Rasalhague Republic troops mutiny against the Ghost Bear Dominion
- Word of Blake counterattack against Clan Ghost Bear on Dyev

3077
- Dieron liberated
- Northwind liberated

3078
- Terra liberated by allies
- Gibson sterilized by Regulan Task Force
- Word of Blake Protectorate collapses
- Many Word of Blake military forces scatter
- The Master and his minions retreat from Gibson toward Circinus
- Terra declared a neutral holding

3079
- Devlin Stone launches political and diplomatic initiatives to assume control over the worlds surrounding Terra and the shattered Blake Protectorate

3081
- Circinus sterilized by Regulan Task Force
- Word of Blake Master killed
- Word of Blake Jihad ends
- Republic of the Sphere formed
- Inner Sphere worlds around Terra, except for Capellan holdings, join the Republic of the Sphere

3082
- Combine capital returns to Luthien.
- Marik-Stewart Commonwealth founded
- Fighting between Regulus and Oriente.
- Resettlement Act in Republic begins shifting populations around; not popular with everyone

3083
- Military Materiel Redemption Program begins in Republic
- Outworlds Alliance and Clan Snow Raven merge into Raven Alliance

3084
- Minor border conflicts between Ghost Bear Dominion and Draconis Combine
- Lyran Alliance renamed Lyran Commonwealth
- Fighting between Regulus and Oriente

3085
- Treaty of Tikonov signed by Capellan Confederation, recognizing Republic
- All major powers establish or have established diplomatic relations with Republic
- Republic Senate meets for first time
- Reactionary unrest in Combine to reforms, specifically MMRP-related drawdowns

DARK AGE ERA

3086
- Regulan Fiefs founded
- Oriente Protectorate founded

3088
- Knights of the Sphere founded

3091
- Borders finalized for Republic Prefectures

3092
- Marian Hegemony seizes three former FWL worlds

3093
- End of reactionary unrest in Combine

3090s
- During this decade, Stone discontinues military enforcement of relocation policies

3095
- Unrest in former FWL starts up

Late 3090s
- Great Reavings among Inner Sphere Clans

3098
- Second Ghost Bear-Combine war begins

3100
- Clan Diamond Shark changes name to Clan Sea Fox
- Border conflicts between Raven Alliance and Combine
- Lyran Commonwealth declares war against Brotherhood of Cincinnatus

3101
- Last battles of Reformation
- Grassroots movement to reclaim Capellan worlds from Republic
- Second Ghost Bear-Combine war ends

3102
- Low-level pro-Capellan terrorism starts on Liao
- Mystic Caste created by Clan Nova Cat with O5P help

3103
- Ghost Bear Dominion officially renamed Rasalhague Dominion

3104
- Republic stations troops on former Capellan worlds after terrorism increases
- Brotherhood of Cincinnatus destroyed

3105
- Victoria War between FedSuns (mostly House Hasek) and Capellan Confederation

3110
- "Rogue" House Ma-Tsu Kai and Republic forces battle on Kurragin
- Unrest in former FWL put down under threat of invasion by Republic
- Capellans invade Republic

3111
- Liao Massacre

3112
- Warrior House Offensive

3113
- Battle for Liao
- Capellan invasion of Republic ends
- Bannson Universal founded

3117
- Capellan Confederation begins raiding former FWL worlds

3119-3120s
- Fighting between various FWL claimants

Early 3120s
- Capellan raids into Republic

3121
- Border dispute between FedSuns and Capellan Confederation

3122
- Senatorial conspiracy begins

3123
- FWL raids into Republic

3124
- Pirates, secretly backed by Sandovals, raid Republic

3128
- Student rebellion on Liao

3130
- Republic retaliatory attack against Capellan Confederation on Corey

3131
- Republic intelligence begins intercepting messages about a mysterious "triumvirate"

3132
- Gray Monday, 80 percent of HPGs go down
- Republic of the Sphere splinter groups starts local insurrections

3133
- Draconis Combine raids Republic of the Sphere

3134
- Steel Wolves faction attacks Terra
- Clan Jade Falcon invades Republic of the Sphere
- Capellan Confederation invades Republic of the Sphere
- Marik-Stewart Commonality attempts to capture Stewart
- Battle for Skye, Lyran Commonwealth joins Republican forces against Jade Falcons

3135
- Senatorial rebellion on Terra against Republic of the Sphere
- Draconis Combine invades Republic of the Sphere
- Fortress Republic protocol enacted, withdrawing Republic of the Sphere borders to a slightly expanded Prefecture X
- Clan Jade Falcon Civil War
- Clan Jade Falcon and Clan Hell's Horses clash
- Rasalhague Dominion sends peacekeepers to former Republic worlds

3136
- Clan Nova Cat joins Combine invasion of Republic of the Sphere
- Spirit Cat faction invades the planet Marik
- Clan Wolf migration begins

3137
- Clan Wolf attacks Republic of the Sphere
- Draconis Combine civil war
- Lyran Commonwealth invades former Free Worlds League states
- Lyran Commonwealth attacks former Republic worlds
- Oriente Protectorate and Marik-Stewart Commonwealth clash in fighting
- Clan Wolf attacks Marik-Stewart Commonwealth in support of Lyran war

3138
- Fighting breaks out between Oriente and Andurien
- Marik-Stewart Commonwealth dissolves under pressure of Lyran advance after the fall of Stewart

3139
- Free Worlds League reforms under Oriente leadership, Andurien and Regulus decline to join

ARTIST: STEVE VENTERS
PUBLICATION: UNPUBLISHED WORK
YEAR: 1987

ARTIST: MIKE JACKSON
PUBLICATION: BATTLETECH FOURTH EDITION
YEAR: 1996

ARTIST: SLAWOMIR MANIAK
PUBLICATION: JIHAD CONSPIRACIES: INTERSTELLAR PLAYERS 2
YEAR: 2008

OZYMANDIAS

VICTOR MILAN

BORGAN'S RIFT
MAGISTRACY OF CANOPUS
22 FEBRUARY 3049

Cassiopeia Suthorn, probably eighteen, knelt naked on the floor inside the tent, the tip of a wavy-bladed dagger pressed to the sweat-rivulet running down her sternum.

It was cool in the little tent. The texture of the inadequate microbubble pad built into the shelter bottom embossed her knees. An escaped strand of long tied-back black hair tickled her cheek.

Around her in the gloom lay a sad little scatter of uniform and gear. She had no real possessions. Only the *kris* she'd brought with her from her homeworld.

Her eyes were dry until stinging sweat ran into them.

Her arms quivered. She drew a deep breath, straightened, applied pressure. Felt the welcome pain of *Blood-drinker's* point dig into the skin over her heart.

"*Private Suthorn!*" a voice rapped from right outside. "Front and center. The boy *jefe* wants you."

She hesitated. She was so close to freedom. Maybe for the first time in her short life.

But Staff Sergeant Buck Evans was one of the few people in the whole Seventeenth Recon Regiment, known as Camacho's Caballeros, who treated her halfway decent.

She sighed and lowered the knife. After all, it was always with her.

"Coming," she shouted. "I been asleep. Just gimme a minute."

In a moment she was outside, trying to pluck and yank her baggy, olive-drab Free World League Military-pattern coveralls into something resembling order. Though they fit her as well as if she'd pulled on the one person-tent, they still felt constricting.

Dawn on Borgan's Rift's consisted of a tiny, bluish-white point between the horizon and yellow clouds. It hurt to look anywhere near it. She felt the distant sun's UV sizzling on her cinnamon-colored skin. It reminded her of home.

She'd hated her homeworld, Larsha. At least after the BattleMechs had destroyed her home and killed her father in a raid when she was small. Then, thirteen years later, enemy 'Mechs—different outfit, different foe; Cassie hated the walking killing-machines all the same—had come back to Larsha. That time she'd gone with them.

As always, the BattleMechs were the first thing to meet her eyes when she emerged: four vaguely manlike shapes, ten meters tall and more, parked quartering the hilltop where the Caballeros had pitched their camp so that a single missile volley wouldn't take them all out at once, facing outward as if vigilant.

Next was Evans himself, tall and lanky, with pale blue eyes perpetually squinting in a face that looked as if it had been hacked out with a chainsaw and topped with a shock of straw hair. He nodded and turned toward the hilltop. Loose gait and generally disreputable air notwithstanding, his regulation OD MechWarrior jumpsuit was spotless.

Cassie followed through the small camp. The colorful tents mostly belonged to what the 'lleros called *Aztechs*; like any MechWarrior outfit, the detached Lance carried far more technicians than pilots. She passed Tino, a White Mountain Apache kid, bandy-legged and shorter than her 165 centimeters, pushing a TIG welder on a cart. His moon face split into a quick grin beneath his turned-around ball cap before he looked quickly away.

Along with Evans, he was the closest thing she had to a friend on this alien world. The rest …. well, at best they didn't deign to notice her.

She missed the children. Camacho's Caballeros were as much a tribe as a military outfit; mothers were liable to pilot 'Mechs alongside fathers, and the children came with them. Cassie got along okay with the kids. They lacked the adults' prickly pride—and their prejudices.

A hand clamped onto her rump. "Hey, there, li'l darlin'!" an unfortunately familiar voice said in her ear. "'Least you got *some* meat worth hanging onto, skinny little thing that you are. Turn around and give Cowboy a kiss, now."

BORGAN'S RIFT

World Name: Borgan's Rift
Star Type (Recharge Time): F1V (172 hours)
Position in System: 2
Time to Jump Point: 20.26 days
Number of Satellites: None
Surface Gravity: 0.91
Atm. Pressure: Standard (Breathable)
Equatorial Temperature: 35° C (Warm-Temperate)
Surface Water Coverage: 53 percent
Recharging Station: None
HPG Class Type: B
Highest Native Life: Mammals
Population Size (3049): 198,000,000
Socio-Industrial Levels: D-C-B-C-C

Borgan's Rift is a typical example of Periphery worlds during the Succession Wars: after an initial economic and technological collapse, slow decay gripped the world as offworld trading partners disappeared and pirates began to pillage remaining critical portions of its industry.

In the late 3040s, title to the world was sold to Shanti Magliss of Magliss Spirits—one of the largest producers of wines and brandies in the Periphery—with the Magestrix's approval, both of whom hoped to revive the world's fortunes. This process started with the building of numerous warehouses and distribution centers in the city of Newport. These operations have been undermined somewhat by raids from pirates based in the decaying industrial city of Howe.

She did. Whirling, she peeled his right hand off her right cheek by the wrist, locked out his elbow with her left forearm, and with a vicious hip-twist planted him facefirst in brick-hard khaki dirt.

"Kiss the planet," she suggested. "That's the only kind you'll get from me."

Though just a year older and rail-lean himself, Cowboy was much stronger than Cassie. Of course: he was male. Further evidence of the Universe's intrinsic unfairness.

To even the odds, Cassie didn't fight fair. She'd learned better, in the snake-ridden paddies and city streets tight and twisty as intestines and smelling about the same, of Larsha. And Guru Johann had schooled her well in the art of *pentjak silat*.

The one thing in her universe she *wouldn't* cheat was her family. The Caballeros. Yet still they refused to accept her.

Using the trapped arm as a lever, Cassie gave Cowboy a nasty twist to remember her by. She knew firsthand how much force it took to pop an elbow. Or dislocate

a shoulder. But she wouldn't. Big a jerk as he was, Corporal William Payson was one of only four MechWarriors in the detachment. She couldn't unfit him for duty.

Releasing him, she walked on. When she'd gone a safe distance, he bounced up. He wore faded dungarees, a tee-shirt with a holoimage of Cowgirl singing star Sarah McCandless, and pointy-toed snakeskin boots.

"Yo, Sergeant, you saw that! That private laid hands on a superior!"

"Didn't see nothin'," Evans drawled. "Especially not a forty-kilo girl plowing this unfertile soil with your face. Totally unrelated subject: didn't see a noncom sexually harassing an enlisted. 'Cause if I had, God have pity on you, because *La Dama Muerte* surehell wouldn't."

La Dama Muerte was Lieutenant Colonel Marisol Cabrera, executive officer to Colonel Carlos Camacho, and some said lover as well: a wiry, age-lined but still pretty woman. "The Lady Death" kicked in at any hint of threat to her *coronel* or her *familia*. From within *or* without.

"We been hangin' around these bossy *putas* runnin' the Magistracy of Canopus too Foxtrot long," Cowboy said. "Goin' to the womenfolks' heads."

Evans had nothing to say to that; it was a literally accurate description of the MoC power structure, although they'd undoubtedly phrase it differently.

"I've been here a year," Cassie said as they left Payson pouting, hearing the whine in her voice and hating it. "He just got here. Yet he's treated like he *belongs*. I'm not."

Buck shook his head. "Gotta understand, Suthorn," he said. "Folks from the Southwestern Worlds, the Trinity, we're a pretty clannish lot. There's Southwesterners, and there's *gringos*. You ain't Cowboy, *Norteño*, or Indian, from Sierra, Galisteo, or Cerillos, you're a stone outsider. Payson, there, he's from Cerillos. Natural talent in a BattleMech cockpit, got him just enough family connections to get himself into one, 'steada some correctional camp."

"You might as well start sayin' your goodbyes, Runt!" Cowboy yelled after her. That was Cassie's callsign. "We all been sent to this Sierra-hole to wash out. And you're circlin' the drain fastest of all!"

She ducked her head down between her shoulderblades. She knew that. *Blood-drinker* was a comforting weight bouncing in its hip-scabbard.

An awning was spread out next to the feet of Lieutenant Gavilán Camacho's 45-ton *Phoenix Hawk*. The 'Mech resembled a man with weird antenna-like projections from either side of a round head, holding a big gun in his right hand. Painted mottled yellow and khaki, like the other 'Mechs, to match the region's rolling midsummer grasslands, it had Camacho's personal badge, a kestrel with wings spread, across the chest.

Chairs had been set beneath the awning. Beneath its shade, a short woman with long black hair wound around the back of her head in a braid stood with her pretty face knotted in a scowl. She wore MechWarrior halter top and briefs, which give her an excuse to show off the goods despite Trinity prudery. She showed a bit of a roll top and bottom of the short-shorts, Cassie noticed.

Lieutenant Junior Grade Encarnación Martínez, from a politically influential but not so wealthy Sierra family, had suffered the ultimate humiliation of becoming Dispossessed when her *Vulcan* got shot out from under her by raiders. By the time her family had scraped together the funds to buy her a lowly *Locust*, her bad attitude had washed her out of the FWLM. She'd signed on with the semi-exiled Caballeros. She hated her callsign, "Princesa." Nobody doubted how she came by it.

"What're you dragging *that* along for?" she asked Evans.

"Because this little thang took down Bobby the Wolf's *Wolverine* Skinwalker all by her lonesome, with a mop and a busted power line, back when we hit Kalimantan city in July of '47," Evans said. "Reckon she showed some promise then."

"Well," said Gavilán Camacho, bustling up, with a twist of his moustached lips, "it's time for her to live up to some of that promise."

Evans cocked a brow. "So after two weeks on-planet you got tactics ironed out with our employer, the freshly-minted Baroness?"

Gabby grimaced. "You could say that."

To Cassie's surprise he was wearing dress uniform: white trousers and jacket with blue shoulder-flares and maroon piping and the Caballeros insignia—a howling coyote, sitting with its head silhouetted against a full moon —over his heart.

The other MechWarriors sat. Their Aztech crew chiefs joined them. A cool breeze washed over the hill. Cassie's nose wrinkled; vegetation on Borgan's Rift had a bit of a sour smell that summer dryness did little to help. Cassie found a seat in the back and slumped into it.

"To recap so we're all on the same screen," Gabby said, "we were hired to evict a pirate calling himself the Red Lion from the ruins of the old industrial city of Howe, ten klicks north of here." He clicked a hand-controller. The holographic image of a forbidding skyline sprang up waist-high beside him. "He was a Capellan Confederation Armed Forces Colonel. Led a BattleMech regiment. Fifteen-sixteen years ago, the Magistracy teamed up with the Duchy of Andurien, which was trying to secede from the FWL, to invade Liao space. He played a key role in beating them back.

"Then, for whatever reason, his star fell. Rumor says he got too friendly with the wrong Liao noble's wife. He turned to piracy. Since Borgan's Rift's never recovered from the Star League's collapse a couple centuries ago, and however far it had risen since got knocked down by the CapCons during the last war, he decided Howe would make a good base of operations a couple years back.

"A few months back, our employer, the Resplendent Shanti Magliss of Magliss Spirits, acting with her friend the Magestrix Emma's blessing, bought the planetary title from the impoverished holder. She intends to revive Borgan's Rift's fortunes as a manufacturing center and trading base."

"By which I'm guessing she means smuggling into the Capellan Confederation," said Buck. "Which don't allow in regular Moc traders. Much less their pleasure circuses."

Gavilán scowled. "I'm sure our employer involves herself in only legitimate business interests."

Cowboy hooted. "Combination luxury liners and whorehouses *are* legit to these Mocs."

"Whatever. The point is, the Red Lion and his pirates are a nuisance. Our employer wants them gone. That's why she hired us."

"She has like a *battalion* of Magliss mercs," Princesa said. "Why don't they do something?"

"They did," Buck said. "'Bout four months back. Got their asses handed to 'em. Red Lion's got him five or six BattleMechs in there. And the mercs're just infantry and light-armor troopies."

"I *hate* a city fight," Cowboy said.

"So do Shanti's security goons."

Gavilán nodded impatiently. "So now the time's come to earn our pay. We need recon before we move out."

His eyes fixed Cassie like black laser beams. "That's where you come in, Private Suthorn. You've screwed up every job we've tried to give you."

"They were boring!"

"*Suthorn*," Evans said, more pained than angry.

"Well, they were."

"You will reconnoiter Howe and the surrounding terrain," Gavilán told her, "and report back what you find no later than dawn tomorrow."

"Me?" she squeaked. "But I'm not—"

"You're a scout now," he said.

"She's a good choice, the way she's always sneaking around and spying," Princesa said. "Didn't she get busted poking around the Magliss warehouses in Newport?"

Newport was the new town that had grown up forty klicks south of Howe. Until she reclaimed the old city, Shanti Magliss had based her operations there.

Cassie felt her cheeks flush. "But they got all kinda weapons systems in there!" she blurted. "Even gear for 'Mechs. Reckon they should share some of that with us."

"Now, Suthorn," Evans said, "Colonel negotiated the best contract he could for us and that's a fact. We got to live with it, regardless."

She shook her head and clamped her arms around her chest.

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Standing by the awning, they watched as the expensive, open-topped, touring hovercar with the Magliss logo painted on the sides whisked their commanding officer toward Newport in a yellow roostertail of dust and dried grass.

"Shanti must've yanked his leash," Princesa said.

"Mebbe she'll give up on all this Moc woman-power nonsense, now she got a taste of a real man," Cowboy said.

"Who cares?" Princesa sneered. "All *gringas* are devils."

"At least she keeps him off my back."

Cassie thought she'd spoken under her breath. But the ears sticking like jug-handles from the sides of Cowboy's bean-shaped head had the sensitivity of his *Wasp*'s sensor suite.

"But honey," he said brightly, turning to her, "that's the only part of you worth—"

"Payson!" Evans said.

The kid braced. "Sir, yes sir!"

"Don't sir me, crapcakes, I work for a living."

Evans stood with hands on hips, glaring at the group. Princesa outranked him. But Don Carlos, *el Coronel*, had won the silver spurs of a Knight of Galisteo in the hard school of the FWLM. In *his* outfit, junior officers who did not heed wise old sergeants did not long remain officers.

Even the Colonel's own son.

"Listen up," Evans said. "We got us the short end of the stick, here, and no mistake. They keep us coolin' our heels for two weeks and all of a sudden it's why ain't you won the war for us yet, *jodidos*? But y'all know how much *el Patrón* hates to split up *la familia*. Wouldn'ta done it, but the ol' Seventeenth's down to boiling boot-leather for soup back on New Abilene. So we gotta fight this Red Lion and tie his tail in a knot. We gonna let the Colonel down?

"Now. Everybody act like you got a job and some Sierra Foxtrot notion how to *do* it. Vamoose! And you, New Scout Suthorn—you come with me."

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"'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'"

They stood on a windswept ridge overlooking gently rolling short-grass prairie that stretched from dawn to dusk. Below and about a klick ahead, a hardwood forest covered a low hill. A kilometer and a half or so beyond that rose the massive cement and steel sculpture that was Howe. It dwarfed a handful of outlying buildings, though Cassie reckoned they were big.

Two hundred meters down the gentle slope from the woods, a BattleMech slouched with its fistlike manipulators buried in the weeds. It was a *Gladiator*, an old Age of War era 'Mech. Like the great city itself, the 55-ton 'Mech had been abandoned when the Star League, the pinnacle of human prosperity and technology, had collapsed in the 28th century. The sergeant seemed to address his words to it.

"What's that?" Cassie asked.

At least Evans spoke English most of the time; the other Caballeros switched seemingly at random between it and Spanish, or spoke Spanish exclusively. Cassie had grown up speaking English, the Inner Sphere's common language, as well as her native Japanese, Mandarin, Cantonese, and the Larshan dialect of *Bahasa Indonesia*. Spanish was completely unknown to her when the Caballeros had caught her. She was picking it up slowly; she found their slangy, crude English hard enough.

"Just an old poem I read somewhere," said Buck.

"What's it mean?"

He laughed. "It's a poem. Don't mean nothin'."

"Everything means something."

"Sometimes you're too smart for your own damn good, Suthorn. Put it this way: what the meaning is, you gotta work out for yourself."

She grunted and turned to eye the creature standing by with disfavor. It was a large catlike creature, with grey-brown fur and a mane of coarse black hair running from its head to the tip of its thick tail. Though heavy-bodied, it held itself with a certain grace. A simple saddle had been strapped on its back over a blanket, and a complicated halter over its big blunt muzzle, with reins attached.

To her surprise, it didn't smell as bad as it looked. Its expression suggested it didn't feel the same way about her.

"What the hell is this thing, anyway?"

"You don't know a Tabiranth? They're all over the Inner Sphere."

"I never saw one before. How do I steer?"

"Just like a horse."

She looked at him. "What?" he said. "You don't ride?"

"Ride a motorbike," she said. "Why you not send me with a motorbike?"

"We don't have a motorbike, Private Suthorn. We are a poor-ass outfit. We can't afford one. C'mon, it's simple. Nudge the sides with your heels for forward. Pull back on the reins to stop. Pull the head left or right and it'll go that way. But *gently*. These critters got their pride."

"HDLC! How I'm gonna sneak in, riding something like that? It's *huge!*"

He shrugged. "You don't. Like I said: pirates got the city sewed up tight with spies and sensors. When they stop you, you tell 'em you're a local. Hunter, maybe. Or a farmer, looking for your lost little sheep."

"I'm dead."

"Bit earlier on, you were acting like that wasn't such a bad prospect. No pleasin' some people. You're a tricky little critter, Suthorn. Talk purty smooth when you put your mind to it. Put that to use."

She looked from the creature to the derelict BattleMech, looking sad out on the plain before the fallen city.

"We're all sent out here to die, aren't we?"

"Well—let's say this is a make or break mission for everybody on it."

"Even Gabby? He's the Colonel's *son*."

The sergeant shook his head. "Trinity're hardscrabble worlds. Everybody got to pull their own weight. Soon or late. Even a favored son."

"So we're all screw-ups." She looked at him. "What about you?"

"Maybe I was born unlucky. Now, mount up, trooper. You're burning daylight."

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At the forest edge she paused her unlikely mount and looked at the city. Around her bugs buzzed and small flying mammals chittered to each other. The Tabiranth sighed in theatrical despair at its lot in life.

Cassie studied the *Gladiator*. Up close, it looked even sorrier. Its armor and framework and myomer pseudo-musculature had resisted time, but slowly lost. Corrosion pitted every surface. Ochre and rust lichen grew on the shaded inner plates of its legs. Vines twined its skeleton where armor plating had been stripped away.

Likewise every scrap of usable electronics, weapons, ammunition, and of course the fusion engine that powered it, had all been scavenged centuries ago. It remained as a monument, Cassie guessed. Or just because it was too much Foxtrot trouble to cut up for scrap and haul away.

She drew in a deep breath. Forced her eyes toward Howe. Her destiny awaited there.

She already knew what it was. She only had to find the courage to play it out.

"Move it, rug," she said, pressing the big cat-creature's flanks with her heels as she'd been instructed.

Casting a reproachful look back over its shoulder, the Tabiranth flowed like mist downhill.

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They spotted her even before she rode through an open gate in the city walls. Of course they would: she was riding this huge *monstrosity* across 1500 meters of open terrain. *Duh*.

More to the point, she picked *them* up as soon as she rode in among the cracked cement domes and tarnished steel spires. She'd expected that. Arrogant, the pirates existed within their environment. But they didn't lower themselves to *adapt* to it. They were big, strong men and women who lived by imposing their will on everything and everybody around them.

Cassie had grown up rat-poor. She ran alleys and rooflines like a rat. And like a rat, she adapted perfectly to whatever environment she found herself in. Except for the human component, of course.

But then even rats had trouble with *that*.

They watched from what they thought was concealment. She didn't let on she saw them.

When they hailed her, she acted surprised. Alarmed. Dropping the long bolt-action hunting-rifle she carried for cover, she raised her hands.

Two pirates swaggered out of the black rectangle that had been the entrance to a bunker-style building to her left. The man carried a laser rifle, the woman a submachine gun. Both wore their hair in long black topknots; the man had shaven the rest of his head. Lurid tattoos twined up both their arms.

"What do we have here?" the man called through his drooping bandit moustache.

"I am a citizen of the Capellan Confederation, abducted by the *gweilu* bandits who call themselves the Caballeros and forced to work for them," she said in Mandarin. "Please take me to your Colonel."

That put them on their heels, blinking. For a moment she wondered if they actually understood Chinese.

"What do you want with our Colonel?" the woman asked.

"I want to come home," she said. "I can help him to do the same."

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"I don't like traitors," the huge man said.

"I'm no traitor." Like him, Cassie spoke House Liao Mandarin. "As I told your sentinels, I am a subject of House Liao. The off-world mercenaries are my captors. They …. use me as they find convenient."

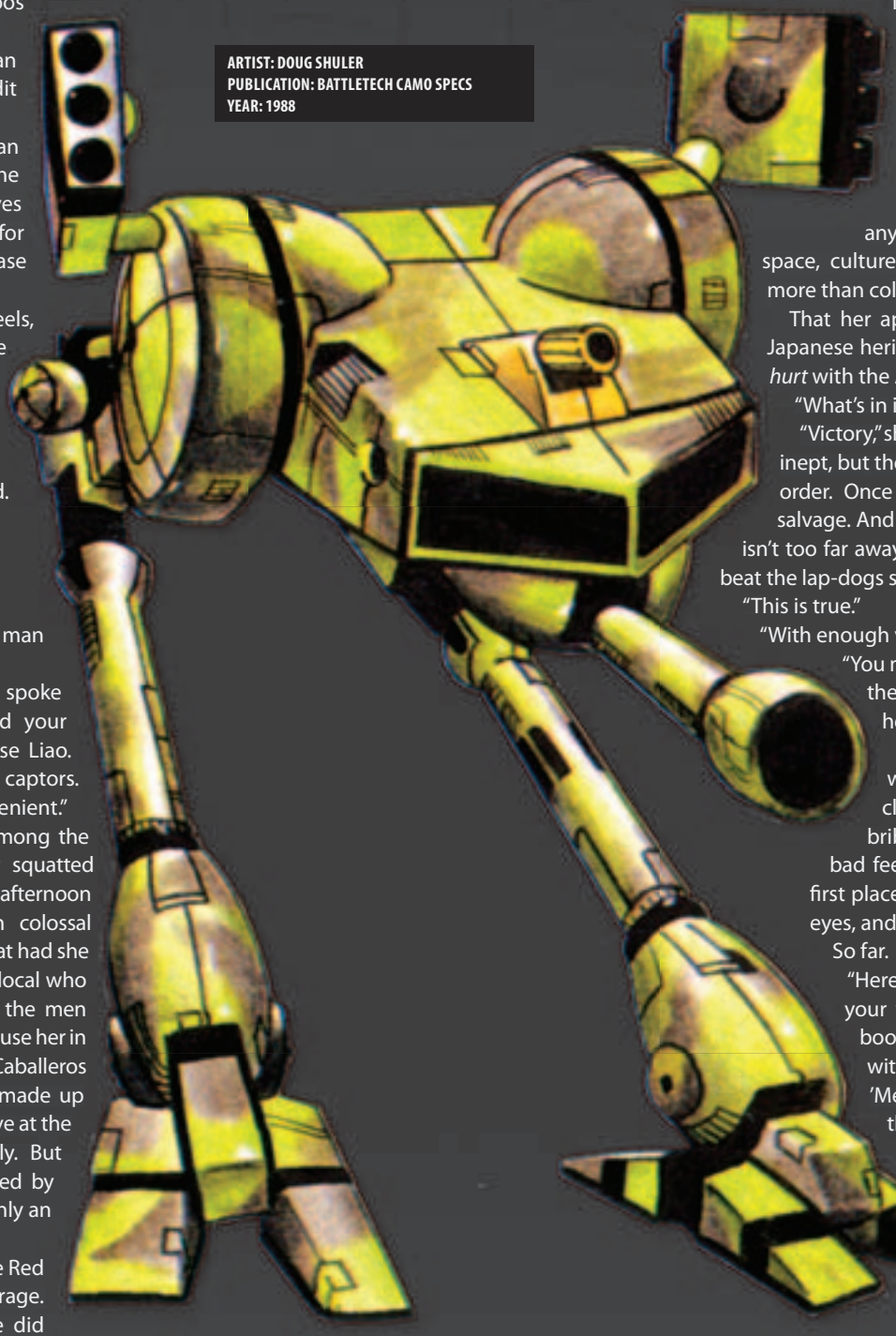
That awoke ugly mutterings among the watching pirates, who stood or squatted among shadows that by midafternoon filled streets squeezed between colossal structures. Cassie knew full well that had she been a captive, or even an actual local who wandered into the wrong place, the men would've been more than eager to use her in the way they now suspected the Caballeros of doing. And the women, who made up maybe a third of the band, would've at the very best watched disinterestedly. But a true daughter of Capella, abused by foreign devils—well, that was plainly an outrage not to be borne.

The man who called himself the Red Lion was not prone to easy outrage. That he had fallen into disgrace did *not* mean he was stupid or foolish in any way. In House Liao, perhaps even more than among the other great Houses that ruled the Inner Sphere, you could fall from power as easily by being too competent as through incompetence.

Even seated on a camp stool in a little alcove in the industrial cliff-scape the Red Lion was impressive. If by that you meant *terrifying*. He was big for a man of obvious Chinese ancestry. He wore a black leather vest embroidered with lions in red and gold thread, open to reveal muscles swelling on chest and arms, as well as the gut swelling over his scarlet silk trousers. The topknot gathered by a gold-anodized ring at the crown of his shaven skull and the moustache that framed his thin-lipped mouth were both startling bright red. The black roots visible just above the ring suggested the color owed more to chemistry than genetics.

"Why did they let you come here?" he asked.

"They think I'm spying for them."



ARTIST: DOUG SHULER
PUBLICATION: BATTLETECH CAMO SPECS
YEAR: 1988

He glanced at the heavily tattooed woman who stood, properly behind him and silent, in red MechWarrior haltertop and camo pants. She nodded.

"So what do you want?" he asked Cassie.

"To go back where I belong. I am one of you. I know you never turned your backs on Capella. Jealous bureaucrats and nobles turned their backs on *you* and forced you to flee."

The pirates themselves came in various hues and sizes, as did the population of the whole Inner Sphere. Cassie's skin color, long black hair, short straight nose, the blue-grey eyes with pronounced epicanthic folds, didn't mark her as anything special. Throughout human space, culture—language and custom—mattered more than color.

That her appearance favored her Thai/Filipino/Japanese heritage over the French and Irish didn't *hurt* with the Asian-dominant pirates, however.

"What's in it for me?" the Red Lion asked.

"Victory," she said. "The mercs seem clownish and inept, but they keep their BattleMechs in excellent order. Once you beat them, you can reap rich salvage. And who knows? The new durachi herself isn't too far away to lay hands on, and you've already beat the lap-dogs she keeps to guard her."

"This is true."

"With enough victories, who knows?" She shrugged. "You might be able to reclaim your status in the Confederation, O Colonel who was a hero once."

It was absurd, of course. But ransom wrung for a scion of the wealthy Magliss clan might *conceivably* constitute a bribe sufficient to overcome whatever bad feelings got the Red Lion exiled in the first place. Cassie saw the will to believe in his eyes, and knew she'd won.

So far.

"Here's the plan," she said. "You must send your foot soldiers into the woods, to set booby traps and then dig in under cover with anti-'Mech weapons. Then take your 'Mechs and hide in the dead ground to the east of the dead *Gladiator*."

"Wait," the Red Lion said. He sat back and waved an expansive hand. "This city is my stronghold. Yet you tell me I should leave it. How can this be wisdom?"

"The Caballeros are famed for their skill at city-fighting, Colonel," she said. "Also, the closed urban setting can only cancel the advantage your heavier 'Mechs give you. Better to fight in the open, where your greater range and firepower will decide."

"Indeed that's so." The Red Lion blinked and fingered his strong chin. "You are a worthy daughter of the Confederation. It seems to me we might well do business."

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"They have six BattleMechs," Cassie said. "Also the small DropShip they use for raiding. It's armed but scratch it: they'll never risk their getaway."

Gathered by lamplight under the awning, the Lance seemed surprised to see her back so early. Or maybe at all.

"Six," said Gavilán, sounding unhappy. The auburn-haired woman who stood

at his side, dressed in a skirt-suit of some kind of smoky blue fabric that clung to every contour of her short but lush body, put a comforting hand on his arm.

Shanti Magliss obviously kept herself in good shape. Even if she was totally old—maybe forty. Rumor claimed she'd been a popular entertainer on one of the Magistracy's notorious pleasure circuses.

Cassie knew how tongues wagged: rumor tried to make *her* out as some kind of sinister Asian seductress. She hadn't let anybody touch her like that since she was eleven. She was determined never to let anybody do it again. Not and live.

Still, the way Magliss looked at Gabby, and the way he deferred to her, suggested she held him by a leash made of more than money.

"One's out," Cassie said. "An *UrbanMech*. Main housing's off, fusion plant pulled. It's a paperweight."

"You think you know something about BattleMechs?" said Princesa disdainfully.

"I'm around them enough," Cassie said. "I have eyes." Knowing the prickly pride of MechWarriors, not just Southwesterners, she wasn't about to hint at the obsessive keenness with which she studied the objects of her hate and fear.

"The five functional ones are mostly Bravo Sierra. The three lights, two *Locusts* and a *Wasp*, aren't kept up for sin."

"Meanin' they got half-assed drivers," Buck said.

She shrugged. "Red Lion likes to think he runs a taut outfit. But he's gotten sloppy. Still, his second-in-command, tattooed woman calls herself Krait, pilots a *Vindicator* and looks like she knows how."

That got her audience looking worried. The VND-1R massed the same as Gabby's 45-ton *Phoenix Hawk*, but where the PH was optimized for speed, the *Vindicator* went for better firepower and armor.

"And then there's Red Lion himself," Cassie said. "He may have let himself and his unit discipline go. He keeps his *Rifleman* squared away."

That was the *really* bad news. The *Rifleman* was a 60-ton heavy hitter—with a war-hero 'Mech jock.

"Wait," Cowboy said. "You said you were captured."

"Right away."

"*Puta estúpida*," Princesa muttered. But Cowboy leaned forward, for once all business.

"And they let you go? With all this information?"

"They wanna intimidate us," said Buck. He sprawled back in his own chair at apparent ease. Cassie wasn't fooled.

"The Red Lion wants to show the contempt he feels for us," Cassie said. "To make sure, he gave me a message to deliver to you in person, Lieutenant."

"What?" Gavilán said, a little too sharply.

"He said that if you beard the lion in his lair, he'll make sure you don't keep the equipment to be of any use to your mistress at all. Oh, and he—he used an impolite modifier, 'long with 'mistress.'"

All the color fell out of Gavilán's face. "That's it," he said. "We're going in after that *pinche huey cabrón*."

Shanti touched his arm again. He shook his head as if shedding water.

"Uh," Buck said, a sound like a rusty gate hinge opening, "wouldn't it be a good idea if we had some kind of a *plan?*"

"They're pirate scum. We're Caballeros. We go in and kick their asses. Plan."

The other three MechWarriors turned each other ghastly looks. Forgotten, Cassie slipped away from the tent into the welcoming arms of the night.

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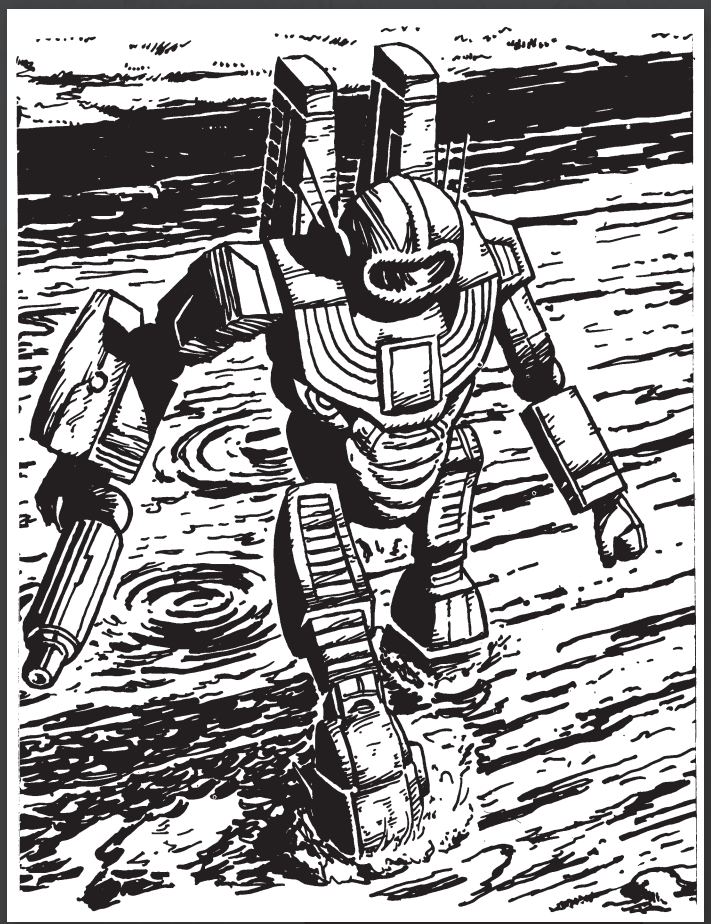

ARTIST: EARL GEIER
PUBLICATION: THE BATTLETECH COMPENDIUM
YEAR: 1990

Tino's gaze shifted nervously from the gate with the razor-tape tangle on top to the warehouse beyond and back.

"You sure this is a good idea?" he asked in Apache-accented Spanish.

"Sure," Cassie said. "Why not?"

She sat next to him in the mule's front seat. He wore his baggy utility coveralls and ball cap. She wore form-fitting black gym clothes.

"If there's all this good stuff in the warehouse, shouldn't there be, like, spotlights and all?"

"The Mocs are—" She had to go to English. "—complacent. Too law-abiding a society for real security. Don't even got cameras."

"But—*pirates*."

She laughed and got out. "Pirates're too arrogant-lazy to rob anyplace they can't bust open with a burst of autocannon fire. Plus they're afraid of the Magliss sec-force defenses, try though they might to pretend otherwise."

She went to the gate. Fortunately Tino was too worked up to ask how she knew so much about the warehouse's security. He didn't need to know this wasn't her first visit.

After brief business with a tool, the lock fell open. Cassie undid the chain and pushed the gate wide.

"*Told* you," she said. "*No hay problema*."

"Famous last words," Tino muttered.

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When his 35-ton *Jenner* "Old Paint" powered up around him, Staff Sergeant Buck Evans was surprised to find a message ticker blinking at him from his commo display. As the systems ran their self-checks he punched it up.

"*Quidate el bosque*," it read. *Take care the woods*, or near as maybe. The misspelling and sketchy grammar identified his unidentified correspondent.

"Hope you know what you're doing, girl," he muttered to their absent-without-leave problem child. He began his own diagnostics.

Despite his short trunks and cooling vest, the cockpit was warm when they crested the heights where he and Cassie had stood the previous morning. They moved in vee formation, Gabby's "*Peregrino*" in the lead, Princesa's "*Dolorosa*" taking the right wing, Buck the left. Cowboy flitting hither and yon on "Yellowjacket's" jump jets, as usual. This was the kind of time when the boy's natural propensity for looking for trouble came in *handy*.

"*Halcón*, Sawbuck," he radioed over the Lance frequency. "Don't like the look of them woods one little bit."

"*Sawbuck, you know the plan*," Gavilán's voice came back. "*Straight ahead. Speed and surprise*."

"That's a plan?" Buck asked, keeping the squelch button firmly squashed by his thumb. Then, live, "Let the Mocs go through the trees. Won't cost us any time to go around, to speak of."

As he spoke the three-sixty strip above the windscreen showed him Cowboy twenty meters up, jumping his twenty-ton BattleMech ahead. "*Cowboy here. Negative on IR signatures among the trees*."

"Yeah, but we're talking a hard-core Capellan Confederation Armed Forces field commander, here. They know about thermal mats. They can hide."

"*Negative, Sawbuck*," the Lieutenant said. "*We go straight up the middle*."

With a savage stab of his thumb Buck cut over to the private channel to his CO. "Remember what your Daddy told me before we left New Abilene, *Halcón*."

"*Don't be an old woman, Sawbuck.*"

"Then maybe you should remember what he told *you* about learning which head to think with, boy."

"*You can't talk to me like that!*"

"Why do you think I'm here?"

Silence stretched between them, popping slightly with atmospherics engendered by Borgan's Rift's small and distant but violent primary. Fortunately the Lance moved at a walk; they were still well shy of the thick forest. If there *were* pirates squatting in spider holes in there, they'd let the enemy BattleMechs get well inside before making their play. . . .

"*Halcón*, Caballeros," Gavilán said over the general freq. "Switch course to pass west of the wooded ridge—"

Buck hit the squelch button. "Never could outwait me, boy," he said.

Nonetheless, the sweat streamed down his face and his ribs beneath his arms, far harder than the BattleMech's operating heat could account for.

▲▼▲

Wedged in her special hiding place, Cassie watched the four Caballero machines appear around the stand of trees through her compact rangefinder binoculars. Lowering the now unneeded binocs, she compressed her lips in something like a smile of satisfaction. Buck had gotten her message.

Her slim body was a mass of aches. Her bandaged right hand ached with every beat of her heart. A cold wind blew through her perch; temperatures here dropped startlingly at night by Cassie's standards. Her cramped metal surroundings seemed to have turned into knives long ago. It didn't matter. She could handle pain.

What she couldn't handle was not being treated as a human. Not any more. *That* stopped now.

Cowboy's *Wasp* was airborne in advance of the marching vee. Abruptly the 20-ton 'Mech, which resembled a pint-sized version of Gavilán's ride, cut jets and dropped the hundred meters to the ground. Short yellow grass ignited below the descending metal feet as the Rawlings 52 thrusters mounted in the legs flared at the last minute to break the 'Mech's fall.

Five bright blue light-points arced out from behind a building to the west that stood outside the city. They left braided white smoke trails behind them as they streaked toward Buck's *Jenner*. With its cockpit thrusting forward from the torso, the bipedal the 35-ton BattleMech resembled the front half of a camel. An explosion flashed from the hump of the quad short-range missile launcher atop the torso. Cassie didn't think the hit penetrated armor; long range missiles carried relatively light payloads.

A beat later, blue-green medium laser beams flashed from behind two buildings closer to Cassie's lookout, east of where the LRMs had been launched. Both missed Cowboy's *Wasp*, which darted from side to side like a horse cutting out a calf from the herd.

Gavilán jumped his *Phoenix Hawk* toward the first structure, firing the large laser the 'Mech carried in its right hand. The Colonel's heir may have had the moral strength of a jellyfish and a proclivity to dither; in battle he was bold and decisive. The five-LRM launch had identified Krait's medium *Vindicator* as efficiently as an Identification Friend or Foe transmitter. He knew he faced a PPC, longer-ranged and harder hitting than any weapon the 'Illeros possessed.

The Caballeros specialized in light BattleMech tactics. Southwesterners grew up in the cockpits of the *Locusts* and armed agro-'Mechs they used to herd and protect the huge, belligerent Ranger cattle whose beef and hides were a major export—as well as settle disputes among themselves. Gavilán meant to get close and then run and gun, relying on skill. And luck.

Ignoring the *Locusts'* fire, Cowboy jumped again. The blue-green lance of his arm-mounted medium laser stabbed at the *Vindicator*, still hidden from Cassie's perch five meters off the ground. Princesa's own *Locust*, looking like a stub-winged bird with its backward-jointed legs and the long barrel of its medium laser sticking out before it, trotted toward the enemy 'Mech's hiding place as well.

The Caballeros knew the Red Lion was out there somewhere in his huge *Rifleman*. Right now the *Vindicator* was the devil they knew. Gabby plainly hoped to knock it out of the fight before the pirate chieftain weighed in.

A blue-white beam flared from the western structure, so brilliant Cassie's eyes snapped reflexively shut: a particle projector cannon. She just had time to see white sparks struck off the far side of Buck's *Jenner*. Orange afterimage pulsed behind her eyelids.

When she looked again the *Jenner* was vanishing fast into the cover of low ground farther west. Gabby's 'Mech pounded forward. The building hiding Krait's machine now also screened his from her. Cowboy dueled with the two pirate *Locusts*, jumping and dodging fire from their lasers and the machineguns mounted in their short "wings." With surprising restraint he only fired his own laser occasionally: he was clearly trying to keep the two light 'Mechs busy. He succeeded. Neither seemed inclined to venture far out of cover.

Dust and flaming bits of grass billowed from behind the westernmost building. Krait's *Vindicator* rose into the sky, a squat humanoid shape with dome head growing right out of its angular torso. Its right arm PPC blazed at Gabby but missed, igniting a thirty-meter swatch of grass behind him. The *Vindicator's* right thigh smoked and sprayed yellow-glowing, molten armor gobbets as the *Phoenix Hawk's* large laser raked it.

Smoke and the toxic stinks of burned propellants, lubricants, and explosives watered Cassie's eyes, sizzled in her nose and throat, and clawed at her lungs. The concussion of heavy weapons firing, the snap-*crack* of energy beams, and projectiles slamming ferro-ceramic sandwich armor were like steel thumbs pressing on her eardrums despite ballistic earplugs. They rang in her bones. Blastwaves stung her, shook her brains, threatened her sanity. Still she hung on, a grimly determined spectator at a gladiatorial combat of steel titans.

Movement drew her eyes up and right. A *Wasp* leapt toward the fight with the rising sun brightening its back. It fired its medium laser.

Cowboy turned and jumped to meet the newcomer. He shot, missed. Both machines touched down. Both flexing their legs, they fired their jets and sprang toward each other.

A blue-green beam bored into Yellowjacket's chest in a cloud of vaporized metal. SRMs from the dual launcher in its left leg slammed into the pirate 'Mech's left shoulder. As the machines flew past each other, Cowboy raised his *Wasp*'s left arm and neatly clotheslined his opposite number.

Cassie felt the impact as the pirate *Wasp* crashed onto its back not three hundred meters away. Descending like divine retribution, Cowboy shattered its cockpit with two more SRM's and filled its insides with blue-green laser hell-light.

Gavilán battled Krait, dodging her PPC beams and LRMs salvos, using his 'Mech's maneuverability to his advantage. He was in range to tag her with her with his arm-mounted medium lasers as well as the big laser gun. For good measure he blazed away the machineguns in his arms as well; they could only hurt a medium BattleMech by accident, but they didn't increase his heat load. And heat was every MechWarrior's worst enemy in battle.

Streaks glowed and smoked on his *Phoenix Hawk* where the *Vindicator* had scored with its head-mounted medium laser and the small laser in its left arm. *El Peregrino* didn't seem to have sustained serious damage yet.

Princesa's *Locust* now engaged its two opposite numbers. The former heavy-BattleMech driver didn't fully respect the light 'Mechs, either her own or her enemies'. Now one of the light pirate machines had emerged from cover to catch her in pincers.

The flash and thunderclap of the PPC snapped Cassie's attention back to the west. She saw the whole right side of Buck's *Jenner* glowing white from a particle-beam hit.

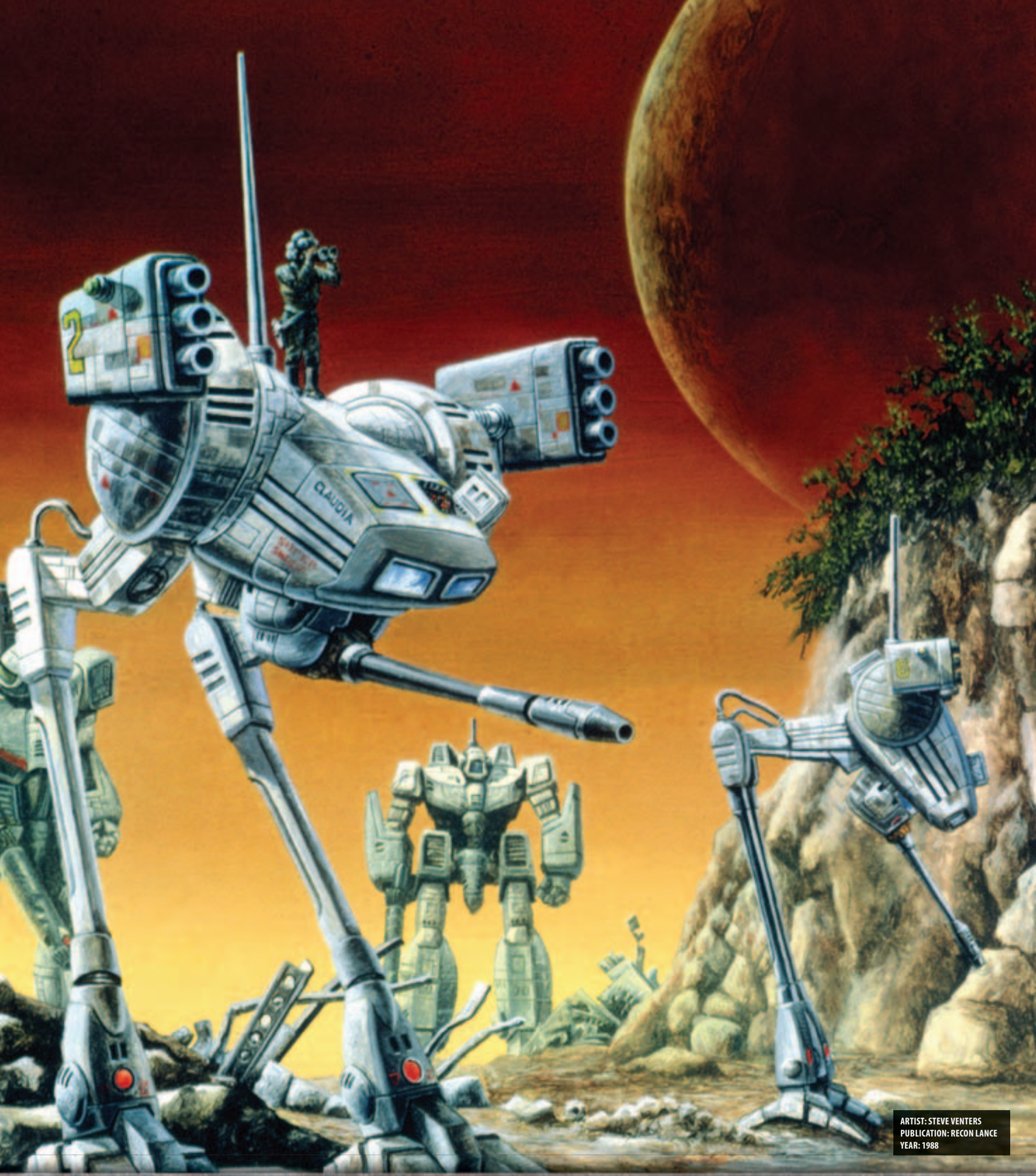
Princesa's *Locust* blew up.

▲▼▲

"Hang in there, Buck," Staff Sergeant Evans said. "We got her on the ropes."

His face's right side prickled as if from sunburn. The cockpit felt like a blast-furnace. Buck smelled ozone, burning insulation. Scorched hair. Red lights glowed all over the upper right side of his 'Mech's wire-frame image in the damage display. His right hip-actuator had a marked hitch in its gitalong and the upper of the two medium lasers that made up his right arm had a short. It might melt a rod if discharged again.

And he felt *great*. The *Vindicator* was knocked all to Sierra. Black smoke gushed from it. Shooting at him had meant Krait showing her 'Mech's thinner back-armor to Gabby's guns. And Buck was going to get off a shot from his four lasers and quad SRM rack before that damned particle cannon recharged. If they could just knock the pirate BattleMech out of the fight—



ARTIST: STEVE VENTERS
PUBLICATION: RECON LANCE
YEAR: 1988

ARTIST: EARL GEIER
PUBLICATION: MECHWARRIOR: THE BATTLETECH ROLE PLAYING GAME SECOND EDITION
YEAR: 1991

"Callsign Princesa has deadlined," the androgynous voice of his AI annunciator said.

He looked at his board. The icon for Encarnación Martínez's *Locust* blinked red. He raised his eyes to look out the windscreen.

The upper part of her fusion bottle's containment cracked. After a pause as air was sucked into the reactor's vacuum chamber, a white-light pillar joined dirt to the yellow-streaked blue of the sky. Gutted, the *Locust* teetered on its two skinny legs and crumpled to its left.

It took no time to conjure the cause for BattleMech and MechWarrior's swift end. From behind the city's ancient failed guardian, whose fifty five tons had shielded it from detection, the pirate *Rifleman* had risen up like an avenging planetary spirit to blast the *Locust's* tinfoil-thin rear armor with the two medium autocannons, mounted tandem to large lasers, which made up its arms. Its two torso-mounted medium lasers had discharged too. Neither Princesa nor her ride had stood a chance.

And now, maybe, neither did they.

"Well, hell," Buck gritted. "This is really gonna *suck*."

Then he focused all his attention on the nearer *Vindicator*. With a rebel yell he charged and fired with everything he had.

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A large laser beam glanced off the two jump jets mounted on the *Phoenix Hawk*'s back as Gavilán Camacho spun to face the new threat.

Cassie could hear heat pinging from the laser's long shroud as the *Rifleman* rolled by within meters of her. The 60-ton monster's joints whirred and creaked as plastic muscles pulled at them. Its footfalls rattled her perch.

She made herself look away from the terrifying spectacle of the behemoth, all her nightmares made steel and walking by close enough to *touch*. Instead she concentrated on her notecomp screen.

Autocannons ripped the sky with demon noise as the *Rifleman* moved in front of her position. A vast metal leg appeared in her display.

Cassie threw all her slight weight against a long, steel prybar. Above her, a great weight shifted. So did the viewpoint on her screen.

A reticule flashed red. She pressed a button. Clutching the notecomp, she threw herself out of her hidey-hole.

Above her, Hell erupted.

▲▼▲

The PPC beam passed so close to Buck Evans' charging *Jenner* that it made the hair stand up on his nape between his helmet and his cooling-vest.

Suddenly a *change* seemed to overtake the enemy 'Mech. "Enemy *Vindicator* entered thermal shutdown," his annuciator intoned passionlessly.

Buck whooped. His own heat was crowding the redline. He stopped for the little thermal conservation that gave him, mashed buttons to fire all his lasers and missiles as one. White sparks fountained through his peripheral vision as the upper-right laser blew out.

Even as he fired on the *Vindicator*, the blue-green beam of Cowboy's medium laser stuck it from behind. The long-range missiles stowed in its left torso blew up. Explosions ripped the 'Mech front and back like squibs on a stunt-person in one of those action holovids Southwesterners loved so dearly.

Garish light illuminated Krait's windscreen from the inside. Her machine rocked, then settled, dead. She didn't eject.

Buck choked back a reflex cry of triumph. He'd probably bought himself nothing but a couple minutes more life, and then his own loud and messy death under the *Rifleman*'s arsenal. Slowing the *Jenner* to a walk, he switched his attention to the Red Lion's monster.

He saw flashes as short-range missiles smashed into the thin-skinned back of the *Rifleman*. Impossibly, a grey smoke puff indicated they'd launched from the *Gladiator*. Which had stood inert and eviscerated for over two hundred years.

The ripple of powerful blasts tore through the heavy BattleMech's paper-thin rear armor, where a mechanical shrieking announced the demise of the 'Mech's gyroscope. For a moment the *Rifleman* continued to stagger forward, precariously upright, held by the Red Lion's piloting skill. And will.

The shot that Gavilán Camacho put into the big 'Mech's right shoulder from his large laser as he jumped toward the now-crippled machine was just piling on insult to injury. It was physics that doomed the Lion and his ride.

The *Rifleman* fell on its face so hard it bounced two meters into the air. Gabby flayed its back with his three lasers. Then all forty-five tons of his *Phoenix Hawk* came down on the back of the *Rifleman*'s cockpit and crushed it like a roach underfoot.

▲▼▲

She sat on the grass with her arms tight around drawn-up knees. Her reddened eyes were dry now. Tear-tracks prickled her cheeks.

Through the ringing aftershock, she could barely hear the gravel-voiced, "Suthorn?"

Then, "Cassie?" She sensed a looming presence kneeling down beside her. Turned and looked at Buck Evans. His badlands face was deeper-grooved than normal with concern.

"Honey? Are you all right?" He touched her on the shoulder.

She went rigid. "Oh, Sierra, Suthorn. Give me a break. I'm not gonna molest you. Hell, it ain't safe. You just killed a goddam heavy BattleMech pretty much single-handed. All Gabby did was put the icing on the cake."

"Everybody okay?"

"Well, Princesa's with the Virgin now, which I admit I'd pay to see. Plus Cowboy ground-looped his 'Mech doing a victory dance and busted his fool arm. Past that, peachy."

Cassie shivered. Buck looked up at the metal giant looming above them in all its corroded glory.

"Where in the name of Tommy Marik's bleeding piles did you get hold of a damn SRM six-rack? And how the hell did you get it up and *into* that old wreck?"

"From Shanti's big warehouse outside Newport last night," Cassie said. "With a pulley and a mule's power winch."

She held up her right hand. Red had seeped through the bandages that swathed it. "Kinda munched my hand."

"And then you sent me that message, and crouched up there half the night, hurtin' and freezing your little fanny off, while the pirates crept out about you and took up their ambush positions? *Jesu Cristo*."

He knelt beside her again shaking his head. "What do you got runnin' through your veins, girl?

She gave him a tight little smile that brought arcs of cheek into her fields of view. "Worked, didn't it?"

"I'd say so."

He sat down heavily beside her. He was bareheaded. The right side of his face glowed bright pink. The hair on that side of his head was curled crisp by heat.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Nothin' I won't get over. You should see the other guy. Or, uh, gal."

"We won?"

"Hoo, did we. One *Locust* driver gave up when you took down his boss. The other died running. Hear that?"

From the direction of Howe came the thud of distant explosions. Brown smoke rolled into the sky from half a dozen points inside the great industrial jumble.

"Shanti's goons're mopping up. Went through them pirates in the woods like crap through a condor. They were set to bushwhack 'Mechs, not men. And whilst them security boys'n'girls ain't much mortal use against BattleMechs, they're decent for groundsloggers. Better'n the pirates.

"You know what you done, girl? You didn't just save *our* bacon. Even though Shanti'll grab the lion's share of salvage, both as employer and 'cause her troops're actually fighting, what the Regiment's gonna get from the enemy 'Mechs, plus the success bonus, will be a *huge* help to the Caballeros. Difference between life and death. And I know, and I'll make damn sure *el Patrón* knows, it's all due to you."

"I guess so," she said.

"Answer me a question, Suthorn?"

"Maybe."

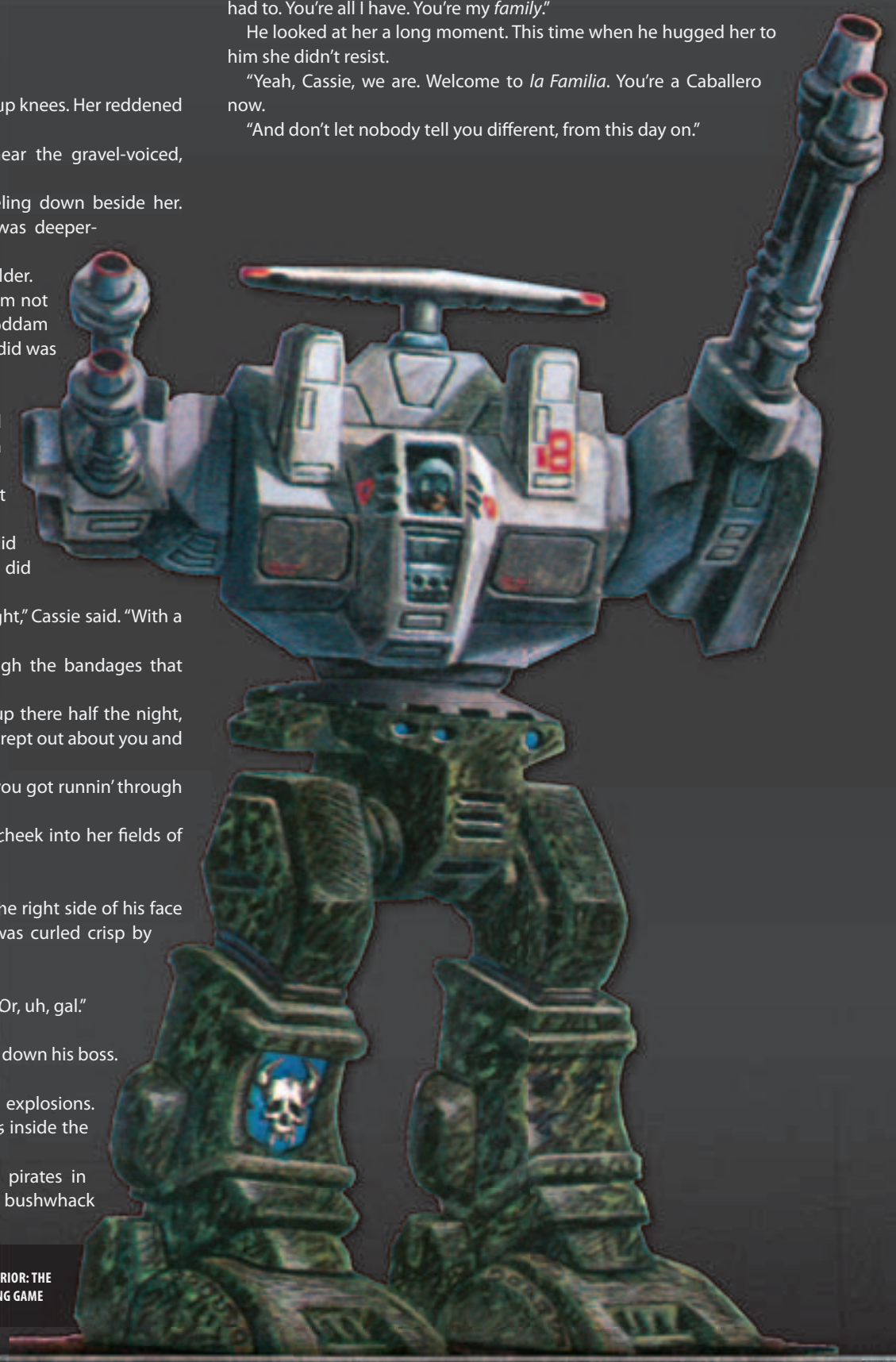
"Why'd you take such crazy risks for people who've been treating you, all things taken together, like a stray three-legged dog?"

She turned blinking eyes at him. "You don't understand," she said. "I had to. You're all I have. You're my *family*."

He looked at her a long moment. This time when he hugged her to him she didn't resist.

"Yeah, Cassie, we are. Welcome to *la Familia*. You're a Caballero now.

"And don't let nobody tell you different, from this day on."



ARTIST: STEVE VENTERS
PUBLICATION: MECHWARRIOR: THE BATTLETECH ROLE PLAYING GAME
YEAR: 1986

STATS, STORY

BATTLETECH
TECHNICAL READOUT 2750

CLASSIC
BATTLETECH
THE SUCCESSION WARS
TECHNICAL READOUT
3025

BATTLETECH
TECHNICAL READOUT 3025
FASA

CLASSIC
BATTLETECH
THE SUCCESSION WARS
3026

BATTLETECH
THE RETURN OF KERENSKY
TECHNICAL READOUT
3050

CLASSIC
BATTLETECH
3050
UPGRADE

CLASSIC
BATTLETECH
3039

BATTLETECH
THE FUTURE OF WARFARE
TECHNICAL READOUT
3055

CLASSIC
3055
UPGRADE

AND PICTURES

Since *Technical Readout: 3025* first published in 1986, the Technical Readout series has proven to be one of the most successful line of gaming sourcebooks ever published. With over a dozen books released, and *Technical Readout: 3025* in continual publication for well over 20 years, a new Technical Readout is a much anticipated event.

The ultimate guidebooks to the weaponry and war machines of the 31st century, *BattleTech* Technical Readouts describe the BattleMechs, Combat Vehicles, Support Vehicles, aerospace fighters, DropShips, WarShips, infantry and more of the *BattleTech* universe. Each fully illustrated entry in these reference books contains complete *BattleTech* game statistics.

ARTIST: DOUG CHAFFEE
PUBLICATION: TECHNICAL READOUT: 3039
YEAR: 2008

ARTIST: MARC SASSO
PUBLICATION: FIELD MANUAL: PERIPHERY
YEAR: 2001

ARTIST: STEVE VENTERS
PUBLICATION: BATTLEFORCE BOX SET
YEAR: 1987

STARFIRE

WILLIAM H. KEITH, JR.

***DROPSHIP* RAMBLIN' WRECK**
IN-BOUND ROSETTA SYSTEM
PERIPHERY
10 OCTOBER 3028

"The system is completely crazy," Beth Ann Lindstrom said. "It shouldn't have a planet at all. *Especially* not one with a viable ecosystem!"

Three of us were in the *Ramblin' Wreck*'s common room, going over the final details of the plan. Light blasted the room, streaming in from the local star displayed on the viewall. Even stopped down by the ship's optics, the searing white glare was impossible to look at directly.

"Rosetta's star *is* pretty bright," I admitted. "Type A1. But the old Star League was *good* at terraforming. Given enough time, they could make lifeless rocks bloom."

"I don't question that," Beth said. The light from the viewall gleamed off the skin of her face and the frizz of her hair, touching them with blue-white ice. "But every so often that white dwarf companion is going to swing in close and scramble things, and it's hard to imagine how a planetary system there could remain stable."

"Well, the good news is," I told her, "that we won't have to be there long enough to see for ourselves. In and out, a quick smash-and-grab."

"With the emphasis on *grab*," Julian Kirkpatrick said, leering. He was leaning against a bulkhead, arms folded, his considerable mass all-but-filling the relatively small compartment. "You tell me what you want on that dirtball, babe, and me an' old Skullcrusher'll get it for you. No problem!"

Beth gave him a cold look. Kirkpatrick had been posturing and flexing in front of her for the whole voyage out from Tharkad, I knew, trying to get into her pants.

"So what's your problem with Rosetta?" I asked, trying to steer the conversation back on track. "The Planetbook lists it as Type E-12v. That's marginal for humans, but well within the star's habitable zone."

"It's the 'v' that worries me, Chris," she said. "V for variable. Ptolemy is not a variable star, and our target world does not have a strongly-elliptical orbit. We don't have any hard data on the system's variability."

"Like I said," Kirkpatrick rumbled, verbally shouldering into the conversation once again. "*No* problem! Ain't nothing me and Skullcrusher can't handle!"

"Do you *mind*, Lieutenant?" I asked him. "We're trying to have a planning conference here."

"Mechdrek," he said. "What's to plan? We go in, we find the depot, we empty it. If the damned lokies get in the way ..." Graphically, he smacked fist against palm, showing what he had in mind for the locals. "Job over, healthy bonuses all around!"

"Listen, Julian," I said, leafing through a sheaf of printouts on the table in front of me. "I still need your pre-action report."

"It shoulda already been there."

And it was, but I wasn't going to admit that to him. "Nope. You have that ready for us?"

"Yeah ... drekkin' all the way down in the 'MechBay. Why ... you want it now?"

"Please." I gave him a bright smile. "If you would be so kind."

I thought he was going to balk, but after an uneasy moment he seemed to reconsider. He ambled out of the common room, mumbling something about armchair malfs. I let the borderline insubordination pass. Kirkpatrick was a law unto himself, and I knew better than to push too hard.

"Why do you put up with that?" Beth asked after the grumbling man-mountain had left.

I shrugged. "He's not normally my problem," I told her. "But he was assigned to us for this op. And he *is* one of the Roughriders' best 'Mech pilots. So he's all ours until we get back to Tharkad."

Hansen's Roughriders currently held a mercenary contract with Katrina Steiner, and it was Steiner's Tech Bureau that had come to us with an urgent mission, codenamed Operation Prometheus. The Colonel had accepted, but our assets were tight and Prometheus was going to be a shoestring op—two 'Mechs, two heavy tanks, and a platoon of light infantry in support.

ROSETTA

World Name: Rosetta (Moon of Champollion)
Star Type (Recharge Time): A1V (162 hours)
Position in System: 4
Time to Jump Point: 47.06 days
Number of Satellites: N/A
Surface Gravity: 0.89
Atm. Pressure: Standard (Breathable)
Equatorial Temperature: 29° C (Arid)
Surface Water Coverage: 70 percent
Recharging Station: None
HPG Class Type: None
Highest Native Life: None
Population Size (3028): 12,150,000
Socio-Industrial Levels: D-C-B-D-B

Formerly a possession of the Rim Worlds Republic, the terraformed moon Rosetta is the third (of thirteen) major moons of the super-Jovian planet Champollion, which is in turn the fourth planet of the A1V-type star Ptolemy-A. Per convention, the system is named after the habitable world, Rosetta. The moon was terraformed during the Star League to ease access to its mineral resources and, like many Republican worlds, was settled by colonists from the Terran Hegemony in the Star League's "safest" region of the Periphery.

Rosetta's terraforming has been remarkably stable, and it is (with the assistance of Champollion) in Ptolemy-A's life zone. Ptolemy-B, a white dwarf, complicates this stability, though, by making close passes to Ptolemy-A every 50 years. Every third pass, Ptolemy-B also approaches Champollion closely. This doesn't warm Rosetta directly, but tidal interactions do cause an outburst of tectonic and volcanic activity. Sulfur-rich Rosetta then often floods its plains with molten sulfur. The first time this happened after colonization, the Star League was prepared for it. The second time, both the Star League and the Rim Worlds were long gone and the colony was devastated. Since then, the colony (slowly declining from a peak of about 14 million inhabitants) has relocated away from the region where the worst activity occurs, Rosetta's nearside to Champollion.

Rosetta is ruled by a small planetary council in the capital of Young, but on occasion pirates have taken over the world and used it as a base of operations for raiding the Lyran Commonwealth.

Of course, a large reason for the light load was the need for empty cargo space on our DropShip. The *Ramblin' Wreck* was a venerable *Union*-class in-system hauler, with a normal 'Mech bay capacity of twelve 'Mechs. By going in with just two 'Mechs on board, Connelly's *Cicada* and Kirkpatrick's big-ass *Atlas*, we would have bay slots for ten more coming out.

That was the point of the op, of course. Well ... part of it. The thing about Star League *lostech* is that you could never quite be sure what the real payoff was going to be. If our lovely technoarchaeologist on loan from House Steiner was as sharp as I thought she was, we might be coming away with a whole lot more than factory-new BattleMechs. We could be looking at the score of a lifetime.

"Back to Tharkad," Beth said, repeating my last words. "It can't happen soon enough."

"Has lover-boy there been giving you a bad time?"

"What ... besides the passes? Not really, but if he doesn't learn to keep his slimy paws to himself ..."

"I'll have a word with him, if you want." Not that it would do much good. Julian Kirkpatrick was the quintessential 'Mech-driver hot-shot—an absolute holy terror in combat, which made him damned valuable, even irreplaceable.

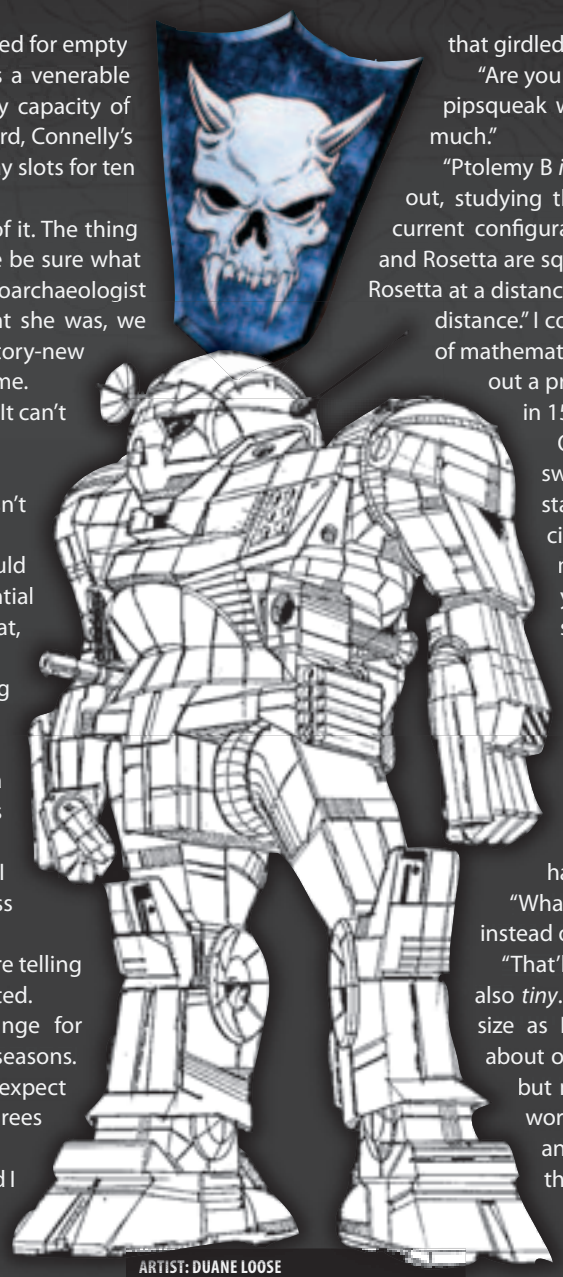
And he knew it, unfortunately, which meant a long string of commanding officers had winked at insubordination, conduct unbecoming, recklessness, even outright violation of direct orders. The guy could *fight*, and he could handle a one-hundred-ton BattleMech like it was an extension of his own body.

"Well, you can have a word with him," Beth said, "or I can kick him in the crotch the next time he gropes my ass in a narrow ship's passageway."

I decided it was safest to change the subject. "You were telling me about the variability in the Rosetta System," I prompted.

"Right. The Planetbook gives the temperature range for Ptolemy IV C as ten to sixty degrees. No axial tilt, so no seasons. We'll be at about fifty degrees south latitude, so we can expect to be at the cooler end of that range. Twenty, thirty degrees Celsius?"

"Still plenty warm," I said, nodding. Colonel Hansen and I had been over the stats before we left Tharkad. I tapped out an access code on a keypad set into the table top. The glare from the viewall faded out, replaced by orbital schematics of the Ptolemean system.



ARTIST: DUANE LOOSE
PUBLICATION: TECHNICAL READOUT: 3025
YEAR: 1986

In common usage, of course, the star was often called "Rosetta," though that was actually the name of the planet. Nearly identical in most respects to the Sirius star system, much deeper in the Inner Sphere, Ptolemy consisted of two stellar components—Ptolemy A, the big, bright Type A1 beacon which had burned so brightly on the viewall a moment before, and Ptolemy B, a shrunken white dwarf in an elliptical, fifty-year orbit around A.

Unlike Sirius, however, Ptolemy had a superjovian world, Champollion, aka Ptolemy IV, orbiting at a distance of 4.6 astronomical units, circling the primary once in 6.8 years. Rosetta was an Earth-sized satellite of Champollion (Ptolemy IV C), 1.8 million kilometers from the planet and orbiting it every sixteen days.

"There are several factors affecting the planet's surface temperature," I said. "There's Ptolemy A, of course, the primary. But apparently Champollion—the superjovian planet—is radiating a lot more heat from its interior than it gets from Ptolemy A. It's practically a brown dwarf."

"Uh-huh," she said, agreeing. "The Champollion-Rosetta pair is pretty far out in A's habitable zone. You would expect glaciers and ice caps. Instead we have a planet with a land surface area that's eighty percent desert and sulfur flats, and daytime temperatures ranging from comfy to sweltering."

"Well, yeah. That superjovian adds about ten percent of the energy driving Rosetta's climate, both from direct radiation, and through tidal effects on Rosetta's crust."

Rosetta was tidally locked with the massive Champollion, eternally keeping the same face to its immense primary. Tidal flexing within Rosetta's crust helped warm the moon, and powered the chain of thousands of equatorial volcanoes that girdled the world's inhospitable tropics.

"Are you worried about Ptolemy B?" I continued. "I thought that pipsqueak was too small to affect Ptolemy A's planetary system much."

"Ptolemy B *is* almost at its closest point to Ptolemy A," she pointed out, studying the colored arcs and ellipses describing the system's current configuration. "Not only that, but on this pass, Champollion and Rosetta are squarely between A and B. Look . . . Ptolemy B is passing Rosetta at a distance of less than three and a half AUs. Absolute minimum distance." I could almost hear the wheels turning in her brain. A set of mathematical calculations appeared on the screen as she tapped out a problem set. "That only happens once in ... make it once in 150 years."

Once every fifty years, the white dwarf Ptolemy B swung in close to Ptolemy A and its retinue of unlikely, star-baked worlds. During those fifty years, Champollion circled Ptolemy A seven and one third times ... which meant that once in *three* orbits of Ptolemy B—150 years—they would line up again with Champollion squarely between the two stars, a one to three orbital resonance.

"So ..." I asked, uncertain, "is that a problem?"

She shook her head. "Shouldn't be. Even at its closest, B doesn't get closer to Rosetta than three and a half AUs. There'll be gravitational effects, of course, but the system has held this orbital configuration for three hundred million years, and the planetary orbits haven't been disrupted yet."

"What about a temperature increase? Two stars in the sky instead of one?"

"That'll have even less effect. Ptolemy B is hot, yes ... but it's also *tiny*. All of that mass is packed into a ball about the same size as Earth—a classic white dwarf. Its luminosity is only about one ten-thousandth that of its partner. It will add light, but not enough heat to pose a threat. We'll have more to worry about from the UV and soft x-rays it's giving off, and Rosetta's atmosphere should shield us from most of that."

Once, Ptolemy B had been bigger and brighter than Ptolemy A, but 120 million years ago it had burned up most of the fusion fuel at its core, expanded into a red giant, then dwindled down to a shrunken, fiercely-incandescent white dwarf. It was now so dense that a cupful of starstuff scooped from its surface would mass as much as a fair-sized mountain. As Beth had noted, it was a fairly strong source of x-rays and ultraviolet radiation. Rosetta's atmosphere would block most of that, however, and we would be wearing shielded utilities. We'd be safe enough for the short time we'd be on the moon's surface.

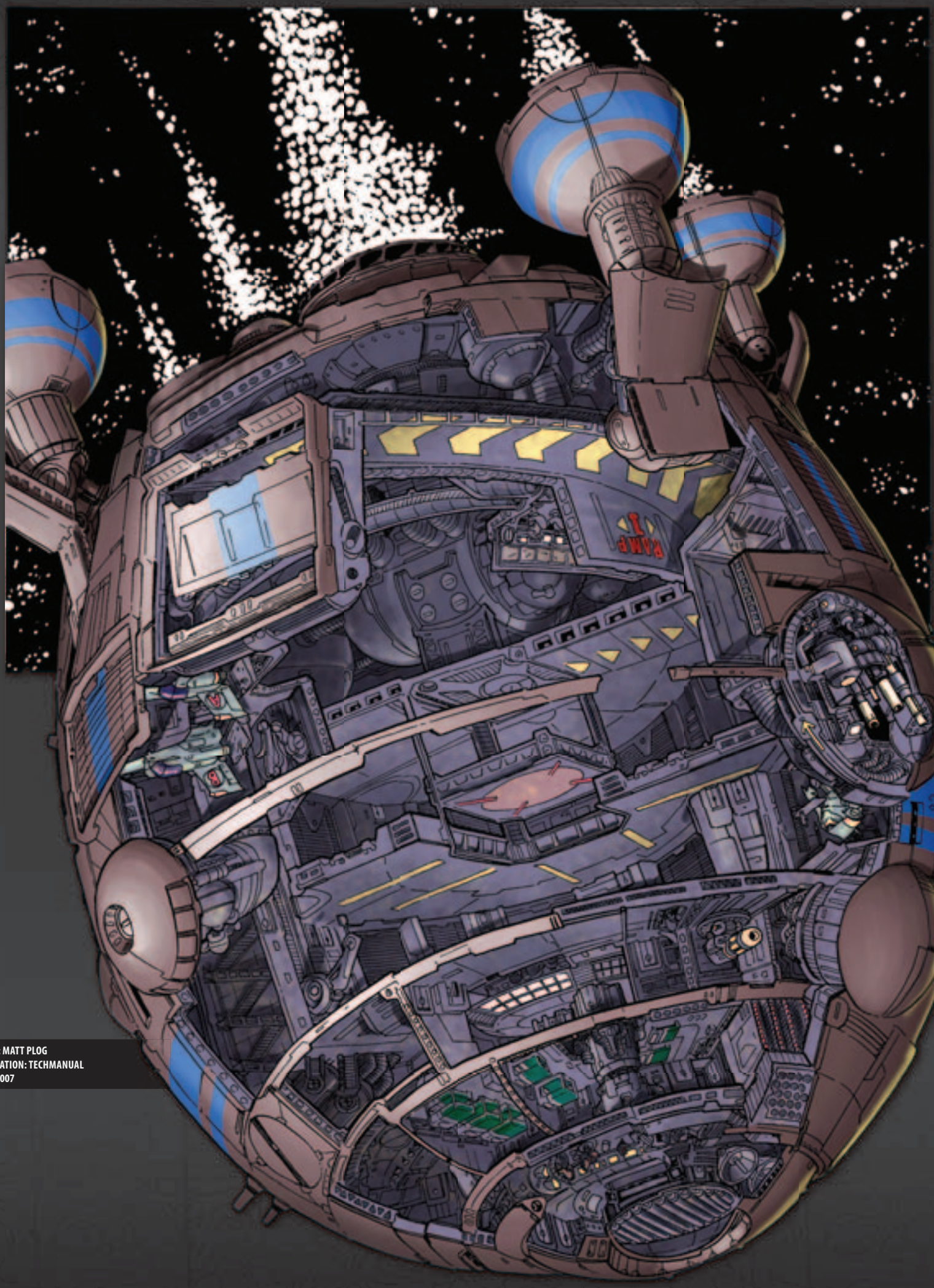
Beth tapped out another command on the keyboard, and the orbital schematics were replaced by an optical image of Rosetta.

It looked ... wrong, somehow, *evil* ... a diseased-looking black and gray, red, yellow, and white. Something less than half of the surface was covered by shallow, circular seas, and most of the land area, as Beth had pointed out, was either ocher desert or smooth black, red, and yellow swaths of sulfur plain. Mountain ranges, in places thrusting as high as thirty kilometers above sea level, ringed the world's equator and crinkled out between seas and deserts like wrinkles in the skin of a rotting piece of fruit. There were no ice caps, no glaciers or snow cover even on the highest mountaintops; the white we saw was the gleaming swirl and spatter of cloud formations, and the duller, metallic white of numerous salt flats encircling dark and slowly dwindling seas.

"The planet," she continued, "is a geological mess. An anomaly. Lots of solid sulfur on the surface. Hot salt springs. Lots of volcanoes. I'm just afraid that we're not seeing the entire picture, here. There could be dangers we're not anticipating."

"It's a *planet*!" I laughed. "There are *always* unanticipated dangers!"

"A lot will depend on just how good the Star League terraforming was," she told me. "How well it took. How well it's lasted."



ARTIST: MATT PLOG
PUBLICATION: TECHMANUAL
YEAR: 2007

I nodded agreement. "Well, the last time the Planetbook was updated, Rosetta had a population of 12 million. The place has been inhabited for over 400 years ... and that means they've been through a few close passages of Ptolemy B already."

"The last one in 2878," she said, running another fast calculation. "Around the beginning of the Third Succession War."

"Records from that period are kind of scattered," I said. "But the colony's still there, obviously."

"But this system is so damned unlikely," she said. "These planetary orbits *can't* be stable over the long term."

I knew what she meant. Champollion and its system of moons, including Rosetta, could only have been in their current orbits for three hundred million years or so ... an eye's blink in the cosmic long view. Ptolemy B's red giant phase would have significantly altered planetary orbits, though it was impossible to guess what they'd been like before.

We did know that prior to the arrival of humans in the system, Rosetta had been barren and utterly lifeless. Three hundred million years is simply not long enough for life to evolve from a standing start. Star League planetary engineers had imported cometary ice to create the seas, and fusion converters to transform water vapor and ammonia into oxygen and nitrogen, a long and intricate process.

"Oh, we'll find the unexpected, all right," I told Beth. I switched the viewall back to the external view, and again the dazzling glare of Ptolemy A filled the compartment.

"But it's the human element we're likely to encounter that always worries me."

"That won't be a problem," she told me with a shrug. "The nearest local dome to our objective is three thousand kilometers away. Three thousand *rugged* kilometers, on the side of Rosetta away from Champollion. Like that pet Neanderthal of yours said, we go in, grab the goodies, and leave. Nothing to it!"

Beth Lindstrom, obviously, was a thoroughgoing civilian. If she'd had ten grams of genuine military experience in her kit, she'd have known better.

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Two days later we made planetfall.

The DropShip passage from the Ptolemean zenith jump point out to Champollion-Rosetta had taken the better part of seven weeks. We backed down into orbit on our torch, and once again fell into the stomach-flopping lack of up and down that marked microgravity.

The local system was primitive to the point of barbaric. Rosetta was out on the Periphery, outside of Lyran space and within a ragtag collection of cast-off worlds that was calling itself—this year at least—the Ptolemean Province. Next year, the pirates that notionally ruled it would probably be gone, leaving the Province's worlds to fade back into obscurity.

Normally, nowadays, the Periphery was seen as nothing but trouble; back in the days of the Star League, they'd been the frontier, the leading edge of Humankind's expansion into the galaxy.

But that had been before the Star League's fall, before the ongoing collapse and chaos of the Succession Wars. Today, the Periphery consisted of bandit worlds and pirate havens, petty star-kingdoms, even planets where civilization had crumbled all the way back to the stone age, in some cases, or places where there was nothing left but bombed-out ruins and death.

ARTIST: DAVID R. DEITRICK
PUBLICATION: MERCENARY HANDBOOK
YEAR: 1987

We knew there was still technic civilization of some sort on Rosetta; the local traffic control net had challenged us shortly after we'd dropped into the system, and we'd given them our cover story. So far as they were concerned, we were an independent trading vessel, working our way through the Periphery. Apart from being given landing instructions, we'd been left alone.

As Beth had already noted, all of the local settlements—old-style plasteel domes and scattered collections of half-buried habitats—were on the side of the moon facing away from Champollion, the nearest three thousand kilometers from our target area.

Which was perfect. We weren't likely to have unwanted guests looking over our shoulders.

Beth used the time up on the control deck, checking scanner returns with her data in order to pinpoint our objective. Once she'd done that, Captain Carleton gave the order and we de-orbited, balancing down on a tail of fire toward a nondescript spot in the rugged moon's southern hemisphere.

I met with the detachment's two MechWarriors in the main bay. Since Rosetta's atmosphere was breathable, both airlock doors were open, and harsh light spilled in from outside. Our troops were already clumping down the ramp to establish a defensive perimeter, following the two Roughrider tanks we'd brought along for infantry close support. The two 'Mechs, Connelly's CDA-2A *Cicada* and Kirkpatrick's towering AS7-D *Atlas,* stood locked in their alcoves, partly masked in shadow, partly illuminated by the glare of work lights as their tech crews completed their final mission prep.

Kirkpatrick and Lieutenant Mike Connelly were waiting for me in the bay when I got there, already stripped down to trunks and cooling vests, ready to lock in.

"There's no sign of response from the lokies," I told them. "I think they bought our story. So it goes down as planned. Mike, you're on scout-recon, but don't get more than five klicks from the ship. Julian ..."

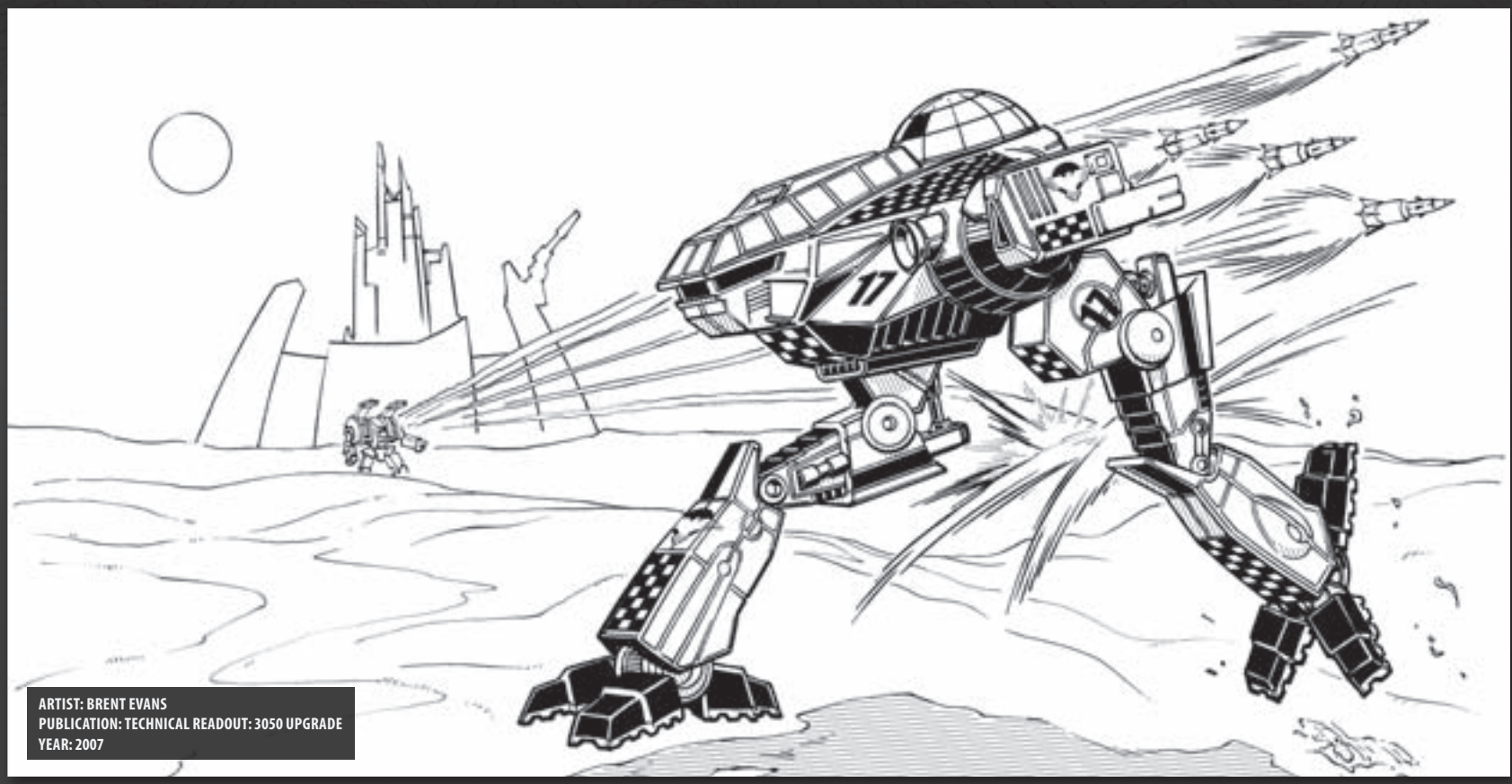
He made a face and interrupted. "Yeah, yeah. Manual labor. Connie here gets to play soldier while I get to get Skullcrusher's hands dirty!"

"That's why we brought along an *Atlas*," I told him. "It wasn't because of your charming personality."

"It's drekkin' nonsense, is what it is," he grumbled. "You should—huh? Whassat?"

Kirkpatrick looked around, startled. The DropShip's steel deck was trembling slightly, a gentle, rolling motion, and we could hear a far off rumble.

"Planetquake," I told him. "A *tidal* quake, actually. The white dwarf star in this



ARTIST: BRENT EVANS
PUBLICATION: TECHNICAL READOUT: 3050 UPGRADE
YEAR: 2007

system is approaching its closest passage. Ship's Planetology says we can expect a lot of those in the next few days. It won't be a problem. We've spotted what we think is our objective, two point one kilometers southwest. You'll mount guard there until the diggers need you."

"How about we just use 'Crusher's lasers?" he said, pulling his hands from imaginary holsters and pointing his forefingers at me, thumbs up, miming a couple of hand guns. "*Ssst*! *Ssst*! We'll have that bunker melted out in no time flat!"

"You listen to me, Kirkpatirck," I said, my voice dropping to what I hoped was a suitably dangerous growl. "I have had all the hot-shot back-talking insubordinate crap out of you I am going to take. We're here to support Beth Lindstrom and her team. That means you shut the hell up and do as you're told. You aren't going to *sneeze* unless I give you the go-ahead ... you understand me?"

Kirkpatrick glared at me, and I thought for a moment I was going to get an argument from him. I almost welcomed the chance to have it out with the jerk. I wasn't piloting a 'Mech this time around, but me and my *Warhammer* had seen plenty of action with the Roughriders, and I'd been a *Centurion* driver before that, back in my days with Steiner's House Guard. If I had to, I'd toss Kirkpatrick's ass into the brig and take his *Atlas* out myself.

"I ... understand," Kirkpatrick said after a heavy moment. "*Sir*."

The honorific was more sneer than anything else, but he didn't give me the expected argument. Turning on his heel, he strode toward the service elevator that would take him up to his 'Mech's cockpit.

"That guy is a royal pain in the jump jets," Connelly said, shaking his head. "That attitude of his is going to get him into real trouble someday."

"Haven't you heard, Mike?" I said. I knew how much he hated the nickname Kirkpatrick had hung on him—*Connie*. "The guy is invulnerable. He tells me so every morning."

Connelly chuckled and headed for his *Cicada*. I pulled a laser rifle from a bulkhead arms rack and started down the ramp.

Light blazed outside, a white-hot glare. Ptolemy A hung low above the eastern horizon in a violet sky, tiny, intolerably brilliant. Ptolemy B scintillated in the northwestern sky, a pinpoint only, but searingly bright nonetheless. And between them, to the north, Champollion spanned almost eight degrees of sky, its edges bright-lit by the two suns, the rest glowing a sullen and angry deep red.

A hot breeze smelled of rotten eggs. A low-lying cloud in the distance was tinted yellow, sulfur dust on the wind. The DropShip had touched down on solid rock, luckily, but patches of yellow ground nearby had been set alight. Pools of bubbling red, molten sulfur gave off clouds of steam and that rotten-egg stench, the perfect image of the Medieval myth of Hell. There were trees in the distance—wizened, dry-looking things that must have been the descendents of gene-tailored vegetation brought from Earth by the Star League.

A deep boom sounded from behind me as Connelly's *Cicada* stepped down the ramp and onto the surface. The CDA-2A *Cicada* was a recon 'Mech, fast, maneuverable, and massing just forty tons. The machine mounted three lasers, and possessed a respectable battle history. Under Mike Connelly's guidance, the 'Mech, named Strider, stretched out its long legs and began fast-pacing toward the south.

A deeper, more thunderous boom sounded, and Kirkpatrick's *Atlas* stepped out of the deeply shadowed DropShip entryway.

The *Atlas* towered about thirteen meters high, over half-again taller than the *Cicada*, and massed an earth-shuddering 100 tons. Its spherical head had been painted with a grinning, jagged-toothed mouth, turning the machine's death's head into the face of a fierce-grinning demon, the stuff of nightmares. The *Atlas* was the big gun of any 'Mech detachment but, this time at least, we'd not brought one along for the firepower.

Beth and I had something else in mind. This time around the *Atlas* was going to be our WorkMech.

"It looks like we have the right place," Beth said, coming up behind me. "We've found a large structure of some sort, right where it was supposed to be. It's buried, but there are some pylons at the surface with legible Star League emblems, and there's a number matching the code on the Carlyle data."

"Excellent," I told her. "Show me."

A few months earlier, another mercenary unit called the Gray Death Legion had made a remarkable find on a world in Marik space—a place called Helm. They'd found there a cache of *lostech*, including a computer memory core preserved from the days of the old Star League.

The Legion's commander, a guy named Grayson Carlyle, had made the unprecedented gesture of copying the memcore and distributing the copies to all of the Inner Sphere houses.

The guy's reasoning, I'd been told, was that technic civilization was on the point of collapse across the Inner Sphere; that memory core included a vast library of data on such mundane skills as growing better crops, employing better hygiene, and developing better medicines—all the things necessary for stopping the fall of civilization and holding back the onset of the Long Night.

Some people in the Lyran Commonwealth were spitting mad about that. He

could have kept the data secret, allowing House Steiner to survive while everybody else fell. In a war for survival, of *course* things like growing food and healing people had military importance. Carlyle was a humanitarian idealist, sure, but I swear the jerk had zero strategic sense.

Steiner's people became even more pissed when one of their research librarians discovered a list on that memcore describing the locations of Star League military depots. In the 241 years since the fall of the Star League, most of those depots had been plundered by one of the Successor State houses or another ... but a few might have survived. Katrina Steiner had talked to Colonel Hansen about securing as many of those depots as possible, before anyone else figured out what those coded depot lists meant.

High on the list was Depot SLD 601 in the Rosetta system. There were no records that it had ever been found and emptied through the last few centuries of savage war sweeping across the stars. When the Periphery had fallen away from the Inner Sphere, the world and its secret cache had been forgotten.

And now Beth was telling me that her team had found it.

A Pack Rat LRPV took us over to the site, buzzing across a flat and arid sulfur plain. The dig zone had already been marked off with blue tape just in front of a black-rock cliff; mottled yellow, red, and gray rock and sand lapped up against the cliff, pierced here and there by small structures like corroded ventilators or sensor masts protruding above the surface. A dozen men with laser cutters were already at work, wearing masks against the boiling clouds of toxic compounds fuming off the yellow rock.

Beth pointed. "We think the depot is built back into that mountainside. There was an entrance here ... but a few hundred years ago a flow of molten sulfur covered it over. That's why no one ever found the place!"

"Molten sulfur? What would cause that?"

She shrugged. "Volcanism, maybe. This is a highly volcanic region. Lots of hot springs and vents."

There would be, I guessed, on a world like this one, constantly squeezed and tugged in the gravitational embrace of that huge, red-glowing eye hanging above the northern horizon. The terrain at the objective was very much the picture of a yellow sea lapping against black cliffs ... the sea frozen hard, and broken in places along the cliffs into house-sized blocks of solid sulfur.

But the important thing was that the Star League weapons depot we'd been sent to find had been partly buried by the sulfur unknown centuries ago, and its very existence, apparently, forgotten by everyone, even by the locals.

Which made it fair game for us.

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Some forty hours later, we'd reached the front door.

Kirkpatrick's *Atlas* made the work ... not easy, exactly, but doable. Under Beth's guidance, he would maneuver the big machine into position, then fire bursts from his medium lasers, cutting grooves in the hard sulfur. The workers would then use pry bars and levers to crack one- and two-ton blocks of the yellow rock loose; Kirkpatrick would then reach in with his BattleMech's huge, articulated hands, pick up the soft and steaming blocks, and toss them aside.

The air stank of rotten eggs. Sulfur itself is odorless, but each laser burst vaporized sulfur and split water molecules in the air into hydrogen and oxygen, much of which recombined with gaseous sulfur into hydrogen sulfide. All of us had to wear masks in the work area. Besides the hydrogen sulfide, clouds of poisonous sulfur dioxide and corrosive sulfuric acid made the work dangerous as well as intensely unpleasant. With no night to interrupt, we'd worked in six-hour shifts, with Saunders and Fuselli relieving Connelly and Kirkpatrick.

But now we had a long flight of steps cut into the rock leading down toward the base of the cliff, and we could see the massive, fifteen-meter-high steel doors of Depot SLD 601. Burned into solid rock just above the door was the Star League emblem.

The Carlyle memory core had included access code groups. The door, obviously, was pressure-sealed and locked, but all we needed to do was transmit a set of access codes through a small transmitter on a particular frequency. I pressed the send key and stepped back. With a dry hiss of equalizing pressure, followed by a deep-throated rumble, those massive doors began to part.

GRAYSON CARLYLE

ARTIST: JEFF LAUBENSTEIN
PUBLICATION: GRAY DEATH LEGION
YEAR: 1986

"How long has it been?" I asked Beth, feeling a little awed. It was a lot cooler inside. The temperature on the surface had climbed in the past hours to over thirty-five Celsius and the ground was hotter than that. Inside, it must have been twenty or less.

"At least two and a half centuries," she said. "Maybe three and a half. The records aren't exactly coherent."

I nodded as I switched on a hand lamp. We'd lost so *damned* much in a thousand years of war. Records were fragmentary. Whole chapters of Humankind's history were simply missing.

And that, of course, was the main reason Katrina Steiner had sent the Roughriders on this op in the first place. The Star League's military technology had been almost mythic in its scope and power. Their terraforming prowess had transformed barren rocks like Rosetta into places where humans could live. Their lightweight fusion power plants, their starfaring JumpShips, their HPG communications stations ... we couldn't hope to even begin to match their technology today. In a sense, we were primitives scrabbling in the garbage heaps left by long-vanished titans, fighting over scraps.

To either side, in alcoves like those on board the DropShip, stood BattleMechs, silent sentinels in the darkness. Some of those towering forms were familiar—a *Griffin* ... the immortal *Shadow Hawk* ... a couple of *Riflemen*. All Star League models, I noticed, 27th century or so, not the GRF-1N and SHD-2H I was familiar with.

But we weren't just after 'Mechs. There was something else listed on those old records. Colonel Hansen had given me special and specific orders ...

"Over here," I told her, turning left.

"Where are you? ..." I heard her boots snap on the bare, ferrocrete flooring behind me. "Damn it, Chris, what are you doing?"

"Following orders," I told her. "Looking for HHM-Starfires, Mark 2500."

"I saw that entry on the depot contents list," she said. "What the hell is it?"

The list had included a layout of the SLDF facility, and I knew where the crates would be. I turned a final corner, casting my light about, and then saw the boxes, dull aluminum-hued crates each stenciled with "M-2500" in the archaic Star League alphanumerics.

"This," I told her, shining my light up and up and *up* the stacks of ammo crates. My God! They were *here*! And *intact*! "The lost Holy Grail of military technology."

"Which is? . . ." She sounded impatient, but I was having trouble speaking.

"HHM," I told her, feeling just a little giddy. "*Head-hunter missiles*! ..."

Those crates were going to drekking change the course of modern warfare.

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Hell, we couldn't even build a decent heat-seeking missile nowadays, and those things were simple-minded things, almost low-tech. A head hunter was far more sensitive and discriminating, with—as I'd heard the stories—sensors that could actually pick up the electromagnetic flux of control signals flowing out from a BattleMech's command center, and the return flow of sensory data and kinesthetic feedback. A head hunter did just that ... home in on a BattleMech's head, no matter whether it was high up on top of the machine, as with the *Atlas*, or tucked in between the hip actuators, as with the *Cicada*.

And the head of any BattleMech tended to be a small target, but a terribly vulnerable one. A few direct hits and the 'Mech was dead, its pilot killed or incapacitated, its control net wrecked, its guidance and weapons systems destroyed. God, just think what a few 'Mech lances armed with head hunters could do in a typical 'Mech engagement! No wonder the Steiners were hot to find this cache.

Especially before anyone else found that cryptic entry in the Carlyle memcore and came looking for it, like us.

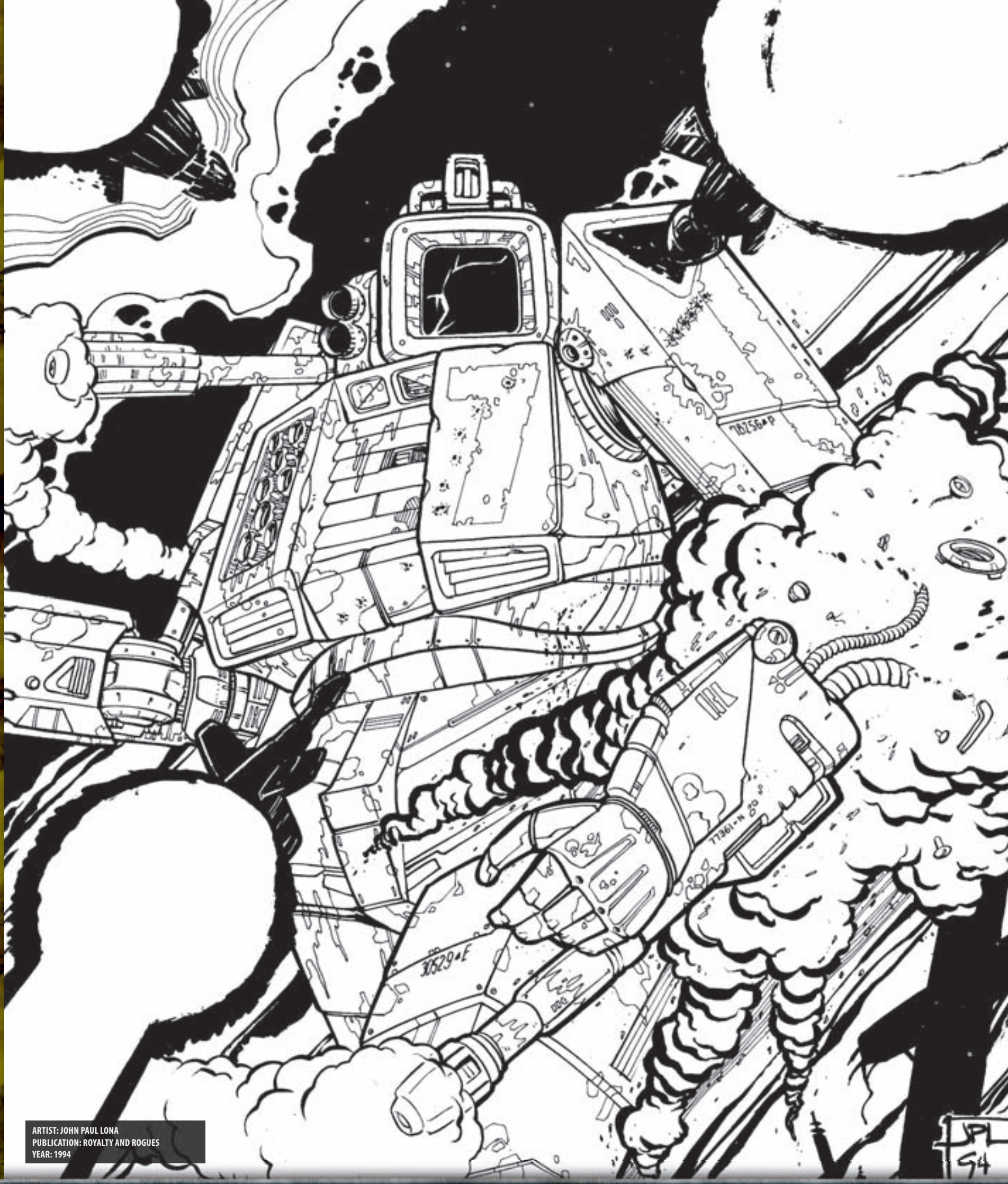
According to the records, the Rosetta depot held several thousand M-2500 HHMs. That in itself was pretty good; the real payoff, though, would come when Katrina Steiner's technical experts reverse-engineered one of those tracking systems, and we learned how to build the things ourselves.

I laid my hand on one of the crates, caressing it. "Let's call in your people," I told Beth. "We should start loading these on board the DropShip at once."

"What about the BattleMechs?" she said. "Or the computer center?"

"The 'Mechs can wait," I said. But she had a point about the facility's computer.

ARTIST: DOUG CHAFFEE
PUBLICATION: WARRIOR TRILOGY OMNIBUS
YEAR: 2009



ARTIST: JOHN PAUL LONA
PUBLICATION: ROYALTY AND ROGUES
YEAR: 1994

There might be another memory core here, like the one Carlyle had found. Possibly with different data sets. "As for the computer—"

"Captain Kyle!" The voice cutting in over my command circuit was Connelly's. "We have incoming!"

"What? Ground or air?"

There was the slightest of hesitations. "Pegasus hovercraft, Captain. Six ... correction ... *eight* of them. Coming in fast from the southeast!"

Armed and armored hovercraft—ground *and* air, in a sense. Fast, maneuverable little bastards, each mounting a couple of SRM pods and a medium laser, with twice the speed of an *Atlas*, more speed even than the *Cicada*.

"On my way."

I was running full-out when I hit the cut-sulfur block steps, racing up out of the cool interior of the depot into searing heat. The temperature had been climbing steadily since our arrival. That had been unexpected; the Met people on the *Ramblin' Wreck* were laying the blame on Champollion, which had steadily been growing brighter, its sullen red atmosphere more turbulent almost hour by hour.

"Let me go get 'em, Skipper," Kirkpatrick called. His *Atlas* was standing above the entrance, its head turned to face the southeast. I could see plumes of sulfur dust rising in that direction, but couldn't see Connelly's *Cicada*.

"What do you see, Julian?"

"The sons-of-bitches are runnin' rings around Connie! Let me go squash 'em!"

"Negative," I told him. If those hovercraft could outpace Mike's *Cicada*, they would leave Kirkpatrick's *Atlas* in the dust, and chasing them would be worse than futile. "We'll bring them to us."

I started snapping orders over my comm. With a shrill whine, our two Patton heavy tanks began deploying across the desert, splitting up to provide enfilade fire. Tanks weren't much good against 'Mechs, but we hadn't expected a heavy BattleMech presence on Rosetta. They would have been useful if we encountered hostile local militia, however, and their firepower might deter a head-on run by those hovercraft out there.

"Connelly!" I called. "Fall back on the depot! You can't do any good out there!"

"Roger that!" I heard in my earpiece. "Here I come!"

I clambered up on top of a tumble-down block of red-brown sulfur for a better view, pulling out my electronic binoculars and zeroing in on the running fight. Individually, those Pegasus 'craft—Pegasi?—didn't stand a chance. Each massed about thirty-five tons, and a direct hit or two would cripple it, smashing through armor to trash the vulnerable internal systems.

But eight working together were a different story, like a pack of Skye sabrewets bringing down a bull trino. They wove in and out at high speed, the blast from their fans throwing up clouds of dust that both concealed their vehicles and attenuated the laser beams directed at them from Mike's *Cicada*. As I watched, one slewed around in front of Mike's machine, skittering sideways as it loosed a swarm of SRMs at damned near point-blank range. I could see the flashes as warheads detonated, smashing through armor; he'd taken at least a half dozen hits squarely to the boxy front of his 'Mech, just beneath his cockpit, and I wondered if he was okay.

"Mike! Mike, do you copy?"

I got back a hiss of static, then silence. The channel was dead. The 'Mech was still moving, though, emerging from the dust cloud, stepping past the swarm of midgets at its feet and continuing to stride toward the dig.

Kirkpatrick's *Atlas*, suddenly, took a half dozen strides forward.

"Hold your position, damn it!" I didn't want him getting out in the middle of that whirlwind of Pegasus missile-fire.

The *Atlas* pulled to a halt, still facing southeast. The air around the huge BattleMech shimmered—both with waste heat dumped from the huge machine's heat sinks, and rising from the scorching sulfur desert. The ground underfoot was trembling with another long, drawn-out tidal quake, strong enough that I dropped down off the boulder to keep from being thrown.

"Skipper . . ." Kirkpatrick began. He sounded almost contrite.

"Hold your position," I repeated. "Mike will bring them in close."

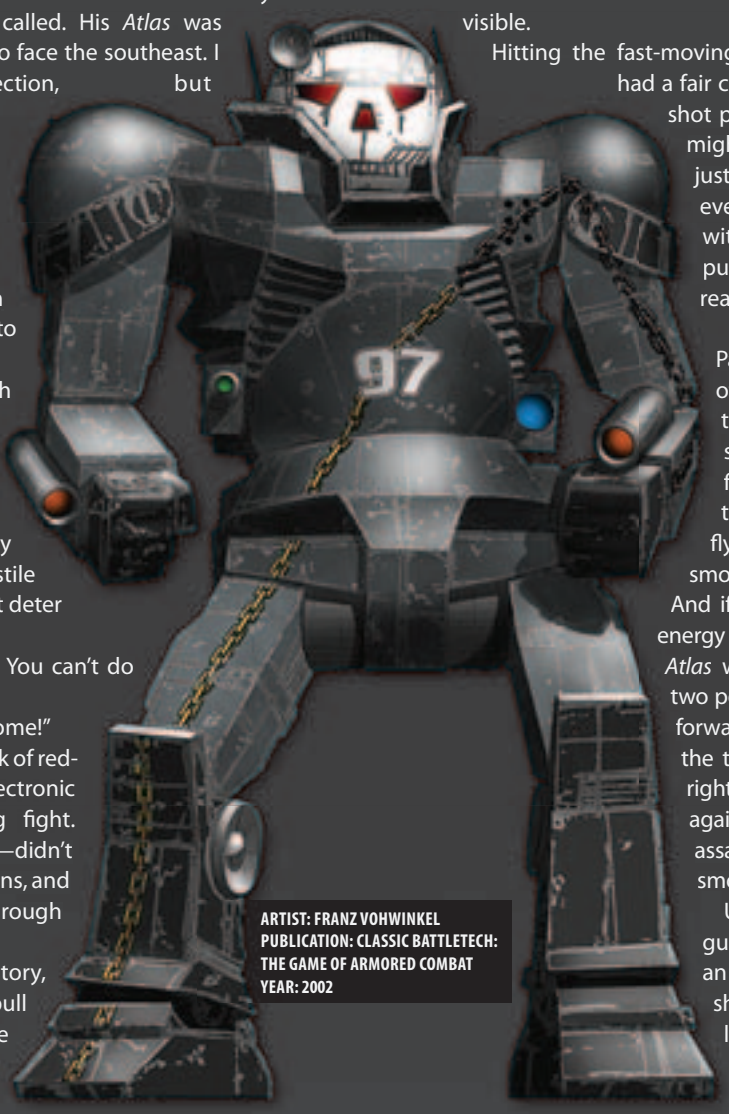
Five kilometers is two and a half minutes for a *Cicada* striding all-out. It took longer, five minutes, and it was the longest five minutes of my career. Mike's machine had been badly savaged and was weaving a bit as he guided it toward our position.

But at last the racing Pegasus hovercraft were howling across the desert flat within effective range of our medium lasers, and I gave the order to fire.

Both Pattons opened up from the flanks with their main weapons, the *slam-slam-slam* of their heavy autocannon echoing off the cliff face behind us. The line of ground troopers in front of the dig opened up with shoulder-fired missiles and laser weaponry. Explosions gouted flame and smoke from the sulfur flats, as the dust cloud made the slash and burn of laser beams sharply and brilliantly visible.

Hitting the fast-moving hovercraft was like shooting craps. Lasers had a fair chance of hitting one *if* the gunner had a clear shot past the dust clouds, a trick tougher than you might think, and man-portable laser weaponry just didn't have the megajoules to burn through even a hovercraft's armored sheath. Tagging one with missiles or autocannon rounds was almost pure happenstance; by the time an aimed round reached one, the target was gone.

Even so, we were scoring hits. One of the Pattons slammed three rounds, one after the other, into a Pegasus as it veered directly toward the tank; armor peeled back from the 'craft's skirts and side, and suddenly the machine flipped onto its side, striking the ground and tumbling wildly through exploding dust and flying metallic debris to end up on its back, black smoke billowing from its engine compartment. And if man-portable lasers weren't up to the high-energy requirements of armored combat, Kirkpatrick's *Atlas* was. His 'Mech mounted four medium lasers, two pointed ahead, two aft, and he was working the forward lasers as flat-out fast as he could cycle them, the torso of his machine pivoting slightly left and right as he took aim and fired again and again and again. One of the hovercraft abruptly broke off the assault and limped off toward the south, trailing smoke.



ARTIST: FRANZ VOHWINKEL
PUBLICATION: CLASSIC BATTLETECH: THE GAME OF ARMORED COMBAT
YEAR: 2002

Under the covering fire of the *Atlas*, Connelly guided his *Cicada* in close to the dig, slewing to an unsteady halt, then flexing the knee joints sharply like some awkward, long-legged bird, lowering the angular torso and front-mounted cockpit to within a couple of meters of the ground.

As the torso dropped toward the ground, I could see a gaping burn-through at the side and lower front of the cockpit, a hole big enough for a man to crawl through. Clambering up the hand-holds on the side of the 'Mech's folded legs, I reached the hole and pushed up inside the cockpit. Mike Connelly was slumped against his seat restraints, blood streaming from his left arm and side.

"Medic!" I called over my comm. "MechWarrior hurt, *Cicada*!" I began working to unfasten him from the restraints, removing the neurohelmet and gently pulling off the cooling vest. Several SRMs had impacted at the same point just below the head, and I wondered if the bastards were mounting head hunters. The hits had weakened the armor, then blasted through, spraying the pilot with shrapnel. He was still alive, but we needed to get him back to the *Ramblin' Wreck*'s sickbay *fast*. He was unconscious as the medics arrived to lower him from the machine; I don't know how he stayed conscious long enough to pilot his wounded *Cicada* back

to our lines.

And that's when Kirkpatrick went nuts.

He'd been maintaining a steady covering fire with lasers, LRMs and autocannon, holding the six remaining hovercraft at bay. When he heard my call for the medics, though, he bellowed something unintelligible over the combat frequency, and charged, a lumbering berserker wading into the melee. By the time I was on the ground again, he was a kilometer off, chasing the retreating hovercraft with great, ponderous strides.

"Kirkpatrick!" I yelled. "Get your ass back here!"

"Negatory, Skipper!" was his reply. "I'm gonna drekkin' *finish* this! ..."

The thing was, those hovercraft could easily have outdistanced him. Instead, they were staying *just* beyond his reach, weaving and evading as they led him farther and farther out onto that shimmering sulfur plain.

I was just trying to figure out what their strategy was, what the hell they were up to, when Kirkpatrick's *Atlas* broke through the surface.

From a distance, it looked as though he'd taken a step and suddenly dropped into the ground, leaving only his torso, arms, and that ridiculously grinning ogre's head free.

"God!" Beth said at my side. "What happened to him?"

"The sulfur is melting," I told her. I could feel the feat rising from the yellow rock around me. "Melting from *underneath*. He just broke through, like a guy trying to walk on thin ice!"

It was an uncomfortable metaphor when the air was this blazing hot, but it seemed to describe Kirkpatrick's plight perfectly. Through my binoculars, I could see him waist-deep in liquid yellow rock; the stuff becomes red at higher temperatures, say, around 200 Celsius. This stuff was still yellow, and from here it looked like the consistency of thick honey.

Kirkpatrick's *Atlas* was thoroughly trapped.

The hovercraft were circling the bogged-down 'Mech, careful to stay out of the arcs of Kirkpatrick's autocannon and SRMs. As they circled, they poured volley after volley into his battered torso, pummeling Kirkpatrick with medium lasers and short-ranged missiles. Impact after impact rocked his 'Mech, and I saw smoking fragments of armor spinning off through the air.

I could see only one way to save the big idiot. Turning, I sprinted for Connelly's abandoned *Cicada*, scrambled up the handholds, and squeezed into the cockpit.

The coolant vest had been sliced open by shrapnel. The hell with it; I'd cook if I had to. The neurohelmet settled down over my head and shoulders, and I felt the link switch on. Lots of people have the notion that MechWarriors pilot their BattleMech by guiding it through the helmet. What a neurohelmet actually does is provide feedback through the pilot's inner ear. We sense our 'Mech's balance that way, letting us run, twist, dodge, lunge, and fight without tripping over our own size ten-thousand extra-wide feet.

The *Cicada* was already warmed up—hell, the temperature gauge was showing me on the verge of an overload already—and ready to go. I input my personal code to unlock the controls, then stood up.

I tap-screened the damage-control report. The *Cicada* was hurt, but how badly? Line schematics came up, highlighting damaged areas in red. The center-torso Magna 200 laser was off-line, and four of my ten heat sinks were down. The Hartford J15 B comm was junk. Life support was minimal, and my personal coolant system, as I'd already ascertained, was useless.

But I could still stand, still move, and when I leaned into it and throttled up the power plant, I was able to lurch into an unsteady run.

For short stretches, I could actually match a Pegasus hovercraft going flat-out, topping out at better than 125 kph, but only a fool would hold that speed for long, *especially* with damage to the 'Mech's internal coolant system. I kept it down to a ground-eating eighty-five, pounding across the sulfur flats toward the billowing clouds ahead.

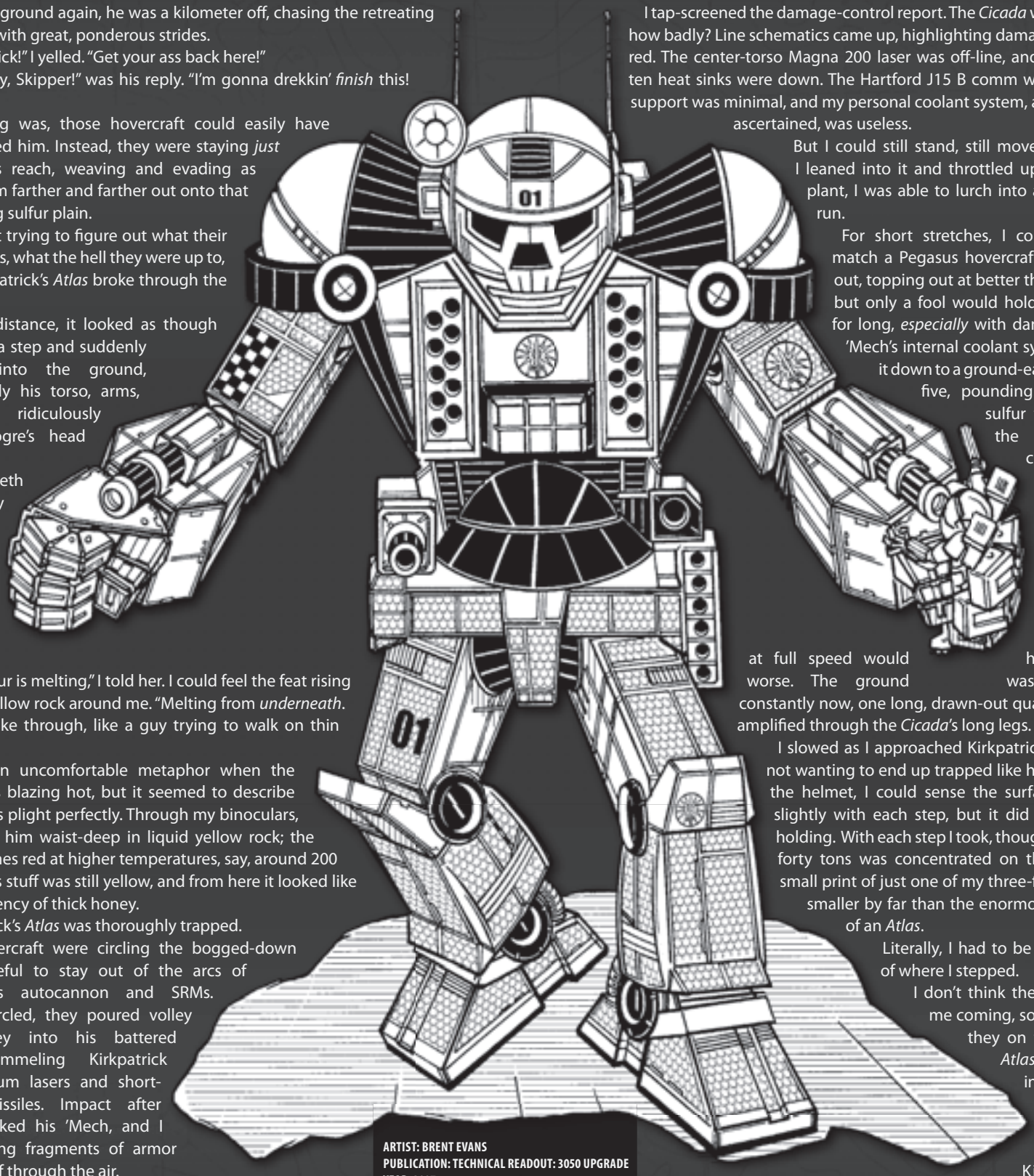
I was feeling pretty unsteady on my feet in any case, and running at full speed would have been worse. The ground was trembling constantly now, one long, drawn-out quake that was amplified through the *Cicada*'s long legs.

I slowed as I approached Kirkpatrick's position, not wanting to end up trapped like him. Through the helmet, I could sense the surface yielding slightly with each step, but it did seem to be holding. With each step I took, though, my entire forty tons was concentrated on the relatively small print of just one of my three-flanged feet, smaller by far than the enormous footprint of an *Atlas*.

Literally, I had to be very careful of where I stepped.

I don't think the Pegasi saw me coming, so intent were they on the trapped *Atlas*, firing into it from just thirty meters away; Kirkpatrick's left arm was junked, hanging uselessly from the exposed ball joint, and the grinning demon's head had taken several direct hits.

I came in with both of my lasers firing, the beams flashing as they sliced through clouds of sulfur dust. That dust was a problem for energy weapons, since it attenuated the beams, but when I got up close like this, they still packed plenty



ARTIST: BRENT EVANS
PUBLICATION: TECHNICAL READOUT: 3050 UPGRADE
YEAR: 2007

of heat. I slammed three bursts into one of the circling 'craft before he knew I was there, carving through one of the SRM launchers mounted above his aft deck.

Then a second hovercraft skewed past the *Atlas* and slammed hard into my right leg; the impact jolted me and I took a step back, wondering if I was going to fall. I didn't, quite, and the hovercraft rebounded from my leg and drifted a bit too close to the trapped *Atlas*. Kirkpatrick twisted his machine's torso and brought his immense right arm down in front of the racing hovercraft. The resulting collision ripped the vehicle's hover skirt wide open, causing it to drop and tumble across the ground, smashing it like a toy. At the same moment, a third hovercraft managed to brake to a halt thirty meters in front of me and avoid a similar collision ... and as it slowed I opened up with both lasers, volleying bolt after bolt into the machine's forward armor, skirts, and deck, blowing open the cockpit and shredding the high stabilizer fin aft.

Seconds later, the stricken vehicle exploded, flame pouring from engine hatch and cockpit. The four surviving Pegasus hovercraft broke and ran, then, racing away across the desert toward the south, raising rooster-tails of yellow dust behind them.

"Kirkpatrick!" I yelled over the comm ... then remembered my comm suite was dead. I wondered how the hell I was going to get Kirkpatrick out of there. With molten sulfur encasing his legs, he couldn't get free—he was as trapped as an elephant in a tar pit. And the heat inside his 'Mech must be soaring.

He leaned his 'Mech forward, trying to drag himself free one-handed, but actually managed to sink a bit deeper into the yellow liquid. I stepped back a few meters, unable to help with no arms, *willing* him to eject ...

The *Atlas* exploded when the heat overload detonated the on-board ammo, the blast opening a gaping crater in the solid sulfur crust that very nearly caught me as well. Bits of hot metal pinged and banged off my *Cicada*, and the blast wave nearly knocked me down.

Somehow, *somehow*, I kept my feet as I searched for some sign that the big idiot had punched out in time.

He hadn't.

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It was a long walk back to the dig. I had to take it slow because my *Cicada* was threatening to overload at any second. The outside temperature was up to fifty degrees Celsius; the ground temperature was closer to eighty ... and getting hotter with every step back. The 'Mech's internal temperature was a sweltering forty-seven, and my uniform was drenched with sweat.

They were evacuating the dig when I got back. The subsurface sulfur was melting quickly, flowing in a sluggish mass to fill in the carefully cut steps and force its way inside the open depot doors. Donnellson, my 2IC and the commander of one of the Pattons, had already ordered the tanks, the troops, and the diggers to fall back toward the DropShip. I saw her wave at me from the tank's commander's hatch as I approached, pointing at the flooding depot and gesturing as if to say "What the hell do we *do*?"

There was nothing for it but to head back to the ship and boost off-planet.

I felt empty, a bit lost. I suppose it was to be expected. Personally, I couldn't *stand* Julian Kirkpatrick ... but he was one of mine, know what I mean?

A few hours later, we were boosting for orbit, then settling in for the long haul out to the system jump point. The lokies didn't try to stop us. I sat down to write my after-action report. How the hell was I going to tell the Colonel that we'd had everything we'd gone to Rosetta to find ... and come up empty?

Worse, we'd lost a good MechWarrior, and his irreplaceable machine.

It was the planet ... that, and going in without a clear picture of what was waiting for us. We—Beth and I—had thought we understood the interaction of the system's elements—Ptolemy A and B, and Champollion and its misbegotten moon.

That was the unexpected, though, the orbital interactions. Even at its closest, Ptolemy B couldn't add much heat to Rosetta, but what it *did* do was put the gravitational squeeze on the gas giant, stirring up its core and causing it to generate more internal heat than usual ... a *lot* more heat. When Ptolemy B made its closest passage to Champollion, once every 150 years, the side of Rosetta facing Champollion was briefly heated by the giant planet to over 120 degrees Celsius, well above the boiling point of water.

And *just* above the melting point of sulfur.

We were gone long before things got *that* hot, but it turned out that the melting was helped along by the tidal effects on Rosetta itself. It was actually hotter underground than on the surface. We figured out later that those sulfur plains were already molten under a thin crust of hot-but-still-solid sulfur. When Kirkpatrick took his 100-ton *Atlas* out onto that plain, he'd inevitably reached a point where the crust could not support his assault 'Mech's mass, and he'd broken through—with fatal results.

No wonder the people living on Rosetta had all of their domed communities on the side of the moon facing *away* from Champollion. Back in 2878, or during the close passage before that, in 2728, the unexpected flood of molten sulfur would have buried the SLDF depot, along with any local communities that had been on that hemisphere of the planet. The records of that flood must be common knowledge to native Rosettans—but had long since been lost and forgotten by everyone else.

Colonel Hansen even wondered if the Rosettans had used that knowledge deliberately, luring Kirkpatrick out onto that plain, knowing that if they could trap or destroy the *Atlas* there, they'd have easy pickings with the rest of us. He told me it wasn't my fault ... that I'd probably saved the entire force with my one-'Mech charge into that dust cloud.

Maybe.

And maybe the commander of that hovercraft lance didn't know what he was doing either.

Me, I still wonder if the damage to Connelly's *Cicada* had been caused by a salvo of head hunters. We may never know for sure, but it was a damned lucky shot, if not.

It's just possible that the lokies had a small supply of the things saved from before the last round of sulfur floods. It would be one way for an almost-nonexistent local military to fight off marauders, pirates, and other unpleasant characters out in the anarchy of the Periphery.

I do wonder if the lokies are going to try to dig out that depot, once Ptolemy B recedes again and Champollion settles down. The doorway into the SLD Depot was completely submerged again, once the sulfur turned liquid, but they might be able to clear it out, chisel those legendary Star League 'Mechs free of their yellow rock crypts, and uncover thousands of Starfire head-hunter missiles.

Or will someone else show up to grab that prize, someone else clued in by Carlyle's idealistic generosity?

Actually, though, I doubt anyone is going to have time for archaeological pursuits during the next few years—even ones with as critical a military application as this. On the long voyage back to Tharkad, we received a message relayed through the HPG station at Alekseyevka. While we'd been on our way to Rosetta, Melissa Steiner had married Hanse Davion in a gala ceremony on far-distant old Earth. "My dear ... I give you the Capellan Confederation," had been Davion's words to his new bride, launching what would undoubtedly become known as the Fourth Succession War. The signatories of the Concord of Kapteyn—the Draconis Combine, House Liao's Capellan Confederation, and House Marik—would all be committed against the Steiner-Davion alliance, the Federated Commonwealth. Most of the fighting will be in toward the core of the Inner Sphere, in places more strategically important than Rosetta.

No one will have time or ships or BattleMechs to spare for the far-off Periphery. Maybe we'll have a chance to go back some day.

Or maybe the SLDF depot will be forgotten for another century and a half.

But I want to go back. I owe it to a brave MechWarrior named Julian Kirkpatrick.

Even if he *was* an idiot.

ARTIST: FRANZ VOHWINKEL
PUBLICATION: CLASSIC BATTLETECH: A GAME OF ARMORED COMBAT
YEAR: 2002

ARTIST: TOM BAXA
PUBLICATION: BATTLETECH FOURTH EDITION
YEAR: 1996

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT:
ARTIST: FRANZ VOHWINKEL
PUBLICATION: BATTLETECH TRADING CARD GAME

ARTIST: DOUG CHAFFEE
PUBLICATION: TECHNICAL READOUT: 3025, REVISED
YEAR: 2002

ARTIST: KEVIN LONG
PUBLICATION: THE FALL OF TERRA
YEAR: 1996

ARTIST: MIKE JACKSON
PUBLICATION: BATTLETECH FOURTH EDITION
YEAR: 1996

ARTIST: JEFF LAUBENSTEIN
PUBLICATION: FIRST STRIKE
YEAR: 1996

▲ ARTIST: DOUG SHULER
PUBLICATION: BATTLETECH CAMO SPECS
YEAR: 1988

▶ ARTIST: FRANZ VOHWINKEL
PUBLICATION: CLASSIC BATTLETECH:
A GAME OF ARMORED COMBAT
YEAR: 2002

▼ PUBLICATION: BATTLETECH REINFORCEMENTS
YEAR: 1987

ARTIST: LES DORSCHEID
PUBLICATION: THE BATTLE OF COVENTRY
YEAR: 1996

THUS IT SHALL STAND

JASON SCHMETZER

THE DALES
COVENTRY
LYRAN ALLIANCE
15 APRIL 3058

Shapes moved between the trees in the pre-morning twilight. The 'Mech's sensors drank information, broadcasting nothing but soaking up every erg of radiation striking their inputs. Even the 'Mech's cockpit lights were off. The pilot sat pensively in his command couch, watching. The shapes revealed themselves.

"Elementals," he murmured, not loud enough to trigger his microphone. A larger shape moved in the background. "*Shadow Cat*." He waited, still watching. More shapes—the smaller, bulky, less angular shadow of Elemental armored infantry. An *ad hoc* Star, he figured. Four Points of Elementals and an OmniMech.

"Prey," he breathed. A switch brought his 'Mech to life.

"Baker-Third," he said. His radio was on.

Across the woods the Jade Falcon 'Mech slowed, its angular torso twisting under the pull of heavy abdominal myomers to face toward him.

"Attack your nearest target," he ordered. "Ten seconds from hack."

The Elementals burst into motion. From where they had been striding quickly forward they erupted into the air on silver jets, moving obliquely to their original direction of travel. The *Shadow Cat*, forty-five tons of Clan-made OmniMech, twisted its feet around in line with its torso and strode forward.

The man in the 'Mech grinned, a harsh grin, a hunter's grin. His 'Mech lurched into motion, gyros whining as he slammed his throttles forward. "Jade Falcon!" he roared. "I am Samson Furey, lieutenant of Wolf's Dragoons." He touched a control on his console, sending a time hack.

His speakers crackled as the *Shadow Cat*'s pilot spoke. "You dare claim the name of an honorable Clan, mercenary?"

Samson smiled. His computer pinged a range on his heads-up display, six hundred meters between the *Shadow Cat* and his *Black Hawk*. *Six seconds*. He brought his OmniMech's arms—and the PPCs and lasers mounted there—up to bear.

"I won this Bloodname in the first months of the invasion," Samson said, watching the clock count downward. "When I was a Smoke Jaguar."

"And now you are a mercenary!"

"I am," Samson said, still grinning. The counter clocked to zero.

Three dust-gray 'Mechs—all of them wearing snarling black wolf's heads on red disks—rose from concealment and opened fire. Stuttering ruby laser fire and the heavy coruscating wash of PPCs lit the damp morning air. A Point of Elementals died.

"Cowards!" the *Shadow Cat*'s pilot screamed. "You strike like bandits!"

Five hundred meters. The trees between them thinned. Samson adjusted his aim, painting the crosshairs over the *Cat*'s jutting nose. "Not bandits," he murmured. "Dragoons."

He fired.

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"The Jade Falcon was correct," MechWarrior Barron said.

Samson looked away from the wreckage of an Elemental suit. He'd been toeing the shattered helmet with his boot, admiring the craftsmanship of the falcon plumage painted across the top. Barron stood a few meters away. He wore a jock's out-of-cockpit undress, Dragoon blue coveralls and a ballcap with the red Delta Regiment D. His face was composed, but Samson had seen Clansmen conceal contempt before. *Crinkles around the eyes*.

"Do you feel like a bandit?" Samson asked.

"I am *abtakha*."

"As was I."

"As you are, Star Commander."

"*Lieutenant*." Samson turned to face the bondsman squarely. "You are a Dragoon now, Barron. There are no Stars in Delta."

"Bloody freebirth ranks," Barron spat.

"Ten days ago you were Jade Falcon," Samson said. "Today you are a Dragoon. You wore the bondcord, you swore the oath. Are you reconsidering?"

"*Neg*."

"Then stop acting like a bloody Falcon, Barron. You're a Dragoon. We don't bother with *zellbrigen*. It's too wasteful."

"Wasteful?" Barron chuffed. "You are calling the distillation of two hundred years of Clan combat wasteful? An honorable duel between two warriors. Wasteful?"

"*Aff*," Samson said. "It wastes the most precious commodity in the universe, Barron." A triple-toned beep snapped from the communicator on his web gear. He pulled it free and read the short text displayed.

"What 'precious commodity,' Lieutenant?"

Samson clipped the communicator back on his belt and signaled the other jocks to mount up. "The only thing they're not making more of," he said.

"Time."

COVENTRY

World Name: Coventry
Star Type (Recharge Time): F4V (210 hours)
Position in System: 3
Time to Jump Point: 16.10 days
Number of Satellites: 1 (Wellston)
Surface Gravity: 1.01
Atm. Pressure: Standard (Breathable)
Equatorial Temperature: 35° C (Tropical)
Surface Water: 80 percent
Recharging Station: Zenith, Nadir
HPG Class Type: A
Highest Native Life: Mammals
Population (3058): 3,721,000,000
Socio-Industrial Levels: A-A-A-A-A

A paradise world when it was first settled, Coventry had become an industrial and agricultural powerhouse by the time the Lyran Commonwealth was born. The world became a major trade center for the Commonwealth and the nearby Rim Worlds Republic, and eventually developed significant military industries.

Today, Coventry is home to a range of major manufacturers for the Lyran Alliance, including Coventry Metal Works, Defiance Industries, Ceres Metals, Greenbill Aerospace and Nashan Computers. Its subtropical islands also host a moderate tourist business. The Succession Wars and industry have not harmed the world's natural beauty.

While relatively well off during the Succession Wars, Coventry was a target of major Clan raids and the site of a turning point in the Clan invasion.

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The *Black Hawk*'s cockpit was still warm, despite the cool morning air and the open hatch. Samson sealed the hatch as he dropped into the command couch, pulling the neurohelmet from the overhead rack and settled it into place. His tactical console was beeping softly. He secured his helmet and looked.

Five red dots were blinking at him, two kilometers away and approaching slowly. *Looking for your patrol*? he wondered. "Baker-Third, report status."

"Three-Two, up," Sergeant Hannah Lyons said.

"Three-Three, up," Sergeant Benicio Cruz reported. His *Enforcer* was still.

"Three-Four, nominal," Barron said. If a 'Mech could be said to sulk, his *Vindicator* was sulking.

"Incoming," Samson said, "two minutes."

"We staying or going, Ell Tee?" Lyons asked. Her 'Mech, a slender *Hatchetman* in Delta grays, took a practice swing with its deadly three-ton hatchet at a nearby Coventry fir. The tree swayed with the displaced air as the blade passed near it.

"Two seconds," he said, then toggled a different frequency. "Baker Six, Baker Three-Six."

"Furey. Go." Captain Matthew Norman—Baker Six—sounded busy.

"Incoming Star," he said, reading off the coordinates. "We just killed a patrol. They're probably coming to look for them."

"Status?"

"Golden." They'd lost a bit of armor taking down the Star—Barron, of course, had blundered into a Gauss round from the *Shadow Cat*—but nothing serious.

"IDs?"

"Not yet."

The was a pause—two seconds, no more—before Norman spoke. "Battalion wants this line held," he said. "Cavalry's coming, Sam. Six minutes." There was a click and then atmospheric squeal.

"Quite a talker, the captain," he chuckled. Samson toggled the lance frequency.

"We're holding them. Help's on the way."

"Joy," Lyons said.

"Let's get out and see what we're up against," Samson said. He used the touchscreen on his tactical map to place a few nav points, then squirted the map packet to his lance. "Recon points marked. We should get a good line-of-sight there, see what we're up against."

The nearest high ground—a rise, if it could be called such, above trees—was about four hundred meters to the east. The *Black Hawk* strode forward, shouldering the Coventry firs out of the way. The rest of his lance fell into line behind him, Lyons and Cruz thirty meters out to either side, Barron ninety meters behind. They covered the ground in a little more than a minute, and as the *Black Hawk*'s canopy cleared the treeline the computer started beeping with 'Mech identifications.

Two light *Baboon* support 'Mechs. A pair of middleweight *Griffin IIC* second-line 'Mechs. And in the center of the Star's tactical column, eighty-five tons of *Marauder IIC*. As the Dragoon 'Mechs detected them the column leads—the *Griffins*—stutter-stepped as they picked up the Dragoon 'Mechs.

"Shit," Samson muttered. He started to look at the range but jerked to the right as a trio of star-bright PPCs slashed past his canopy. "Close enough," he said. "Contact forward!"

"Orders?"

"Five minutes," he said. "We hold them for five minutes and Six will be here."

"Is that all?" Cruz said. His 'Mech staggered as a Jade Falcon laser carved more than half-a-ton of armor from his left shoulder.

"Who's got who?" Samson asked.

"Well, the big boy's got you," Lyons said. "Cruz has one of the *Griffin*s, and I've got the other. One of the *Baboon*s just launched at Barron."

"I thought we disregarded *zellbrigen*, *quiaff*?" Barron said.

"*Aff*, in the normal course of events," Samson said. "But recall what I said it cost?"

"Time?"

"And what do we have to spend?"

"Time."

Samson smiled. "Let's play with the birdies, kids," he said.

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Until the Clans called on Luthien, capital of the Draconis Combine, Samson Furey had been a proud warrior of Clan Smoke Jaguar, winner of a Bloodname at twenty-six and a Star Captain in command of a Trinary of OmniMechs. He had believed the superiority of the Clans, and the ideology of the Crusaders, who believed that it was the Clans' sacred duty to conquer the Inner Sphere and capture Terra. He hadn't had any doubts.

Until Luthien.

Captured by mercenaries and made bondsman, Samson had suffered through his crisis of faith. He'd emerged from that with a new understanding of warfare, a new respect for his new Clan—the Dragoons—and a new recognition of much of himself. He was truly a Dragoon now, and an officer. His lieutenant's disc was barely a year old, and the major gave him most of the new bondsmen to break in. He was good as this task; he knew the right buttons to push, having pushed them in himself carefully.

A Clan Trueborn such as he had been when he'd been a Smoke Jaguar would have challenged the *Marauder IIC*'s pilot, and fought him in open battle, honorably, with the others forming a Circle of Equals around him. Challenges had their place, even in the Wolf Pack.

The battlefield was not one of them.

The *Marauder* had thirty-five tons over his *Black Hawk*, and a bevy of weapons above and beyond the third PPC that outmatched his two. It carried more armor and a boatload of heat sinks. It also lacked the one flaw that most advanced 'Mechs were saddled with—the vulnerable extra-light engine. In order to kill this 'Mech Samson would have to core out the engine or decapitate it … and that would take the whole of Baker Company.

Which meant he had to fight for the time it would take the captain to bring the rest of the company up. Five minutes, give or take.

There would be no Circle.

▲▼▲

The table of organization for Baker Company listed Samson's 'Mech as a *Black Hawk* OmniMech, fifty tons, Configuration Alpha. It had started that way, but Samson had worked with his technicians to modify it a bit. Where a normal Alpha carried a pair of anti-missile systems in the shoulders, Samson's 'Mech replaced them with heat sinks. Instead of the single pulse laser, he split the weight across two standard extended-range middle beamers. It gave him an edge in heat dissipation, as the two extra sinks would keep up—barely—with the PPCs, and when the heat rose too high, the beamers gave him bite long enough to cool.

The rise they'd used for line of sight dropped off about thirty meters straight down. Samson eyed the *Marauder*'s course, checked his sensors, and stepped off the cliff face. He stomped the *Black Hawk*'s jump jets into life halfway down, coming to a knee-bending landing below, and then stalked forward. Roars announced the rest of his lance following, and missiles from the quick-firing *Baboon* pelted the rock face behind them.

"Rope-a-dope?" Cruz asked.

"Roger that," Samson said. Barron moved up to pace him. Cruz fell in behind Lyons.

"You are headed away from the *Marauder*," Barron said a few moments later.

"I know," Samson said.

"But—"

"But nothing, nestling," Samson said. "Watch your sector."

"*Aff*!"

Samson slowed the *Black Hawk* to a crawl. His sensors blipped at him. A large mass of metal was moving through the trees about one hundred fifty meters forward. He couldn't make it out—the woods were much thicker here—but he didn't expect it to be the *Marauder*. *One of the* Griffin*s, probably*. They had the speed to get this close this fast. He pushed a dead, half-rotted hardwood out of his way and moved toward it.

"Sir," Barron warned.

"Don't shoot until I tell you," Samson whispered.

A green-painted *Griffin IIC* burst from the trees ninety-meters ahead of him, weapons raised. Samson didn't move. The *Griffin* didn't move.

No one fired.

Samson moved the *Black Hawk* around to the side. He kept the 'Mech's movements slow, as if he were checking his footing with each step. The Jade

ARTIST: EARL GEIER
PUBLICATION: NULL SET
YEAR: 1992

Falcon 'Mech did the same, mirroring him. A few steps more and it disappeared into the woods.

"Why did you not fire?" Barron asked.

"He's not my opponent."

"Zellbrigen?"

"*Aff*."

"For time," Barron spat.

"*Aff*."

"So we can gang up on them with the rest of the company?"

Samson grinned, stepping the *Black Hawk* into the path crushed by the *Griffin IIC*. "Of course. We're dishonorable bandits, *quiaff*?"

"*Aff*."

Wrong answer. Samson risked a glance off his track to check his tactical map. The green icons of his and Barron's 'Mechs were vibrant and green, as was the red of the recently-departed *Griffin*. The others—both Dragoon and Jade Falcon—were half-translucent approximations. The sensors couldn't pin them down—too much interference from the trees and terrain.

"We should be near the *Baboons*," Samson said a minute later. "Anything?"

"*Neg*," Barron said.

A boom erupted, loud enough to reverberate through the thick canopy ferroglass of the *Black Hawk* and shake the broad leaves the blackpalms nearby. He checked his sensors but nothing had changed. *Someone's gone ka-boom*.

"And when we reach the *Baboons*?"

"How long do you think you can hide from that Star in this mess?" Samson asked. Two minutes left.

"In this?" The sneer in Barron's voice was audible. "Forever. Did I wish to hide, that is."

"And so when we reach the *Baboons*, and we destroy them, and zellbrigen ends, how long do you think it will take us to get past the *Marauder* and back to a position to support Six when he arrives with the rest of the company?"

"Long enough," Barron said.

"*Aff*."

A ping announced another MAD contact. Samson looked at his map and smiled—the last *Baboon* has remained where he'd stopped, waiting for one of the others to be killed so he could engage in honorable battle. Samson oriented the *Black Hawk* toward the contact and pushed forward, picking up speed. Seconds later, he cleared a small rise and there it was.

No one would ever call the *Baboon* an imposing 'Mech, not when placed next to the angular grace of the *Marauder IIC* or the imposing bulk of a ninety-ton *Mauler*. Twenty tons, and most of those missile launcher, the *Baboon* was an excellent choice of 'Mech for warriors just out of the sibko, a ride for them to learn their place in the Clan and the patience—some called it humility—that a warrior needed to survive the bloodlust of combat.

Samson stabbed the *Black Hawk*'s arms forward like he was surprised to see the 'Mech. The *Baboon* stood motionless, the dull-green paint doing a decent job of folding it back into the shadows beneath the towering Coventry fir it was nestled against. Its arms stayed motionless at its side. The *Black Hawk*'s systems detected no active targeting.

One minute.

"Freebirth," Barron muttered, loud enough to trip his microphone and send the curse across the meters to Samson's ears. The *Baboon* twitched. The Jade Falcon jock must have seen the spike on his sensors as the *Vindicator* transmitted.

Impressive discipline, nestling, Samson thought. He twisted the *Black Hawk*'s torso away, as if searching for another target. *I hope you survive to become a bondsman*. His cheeks tightened, pulling his face into a predatory rictus beneath is neurohelmet.

The *Black Hawk*'s right arm snapped out, as fast as a man's. The *Baboon* didn't have time to move, to shoot, to do anything. The PPC that replaced the Dragoon Omni's right fist snarled iridescent particles at just beneath a laser's velocity. The coruscating shot struck the *Baboon* dead-center, eating at the armor there, through the armor there, and devoured the heart of the Jade Falcon 'Mech. It dropped as fast as Coventry's gravity could grab it.

So much for zellbrigen. He eyed the fallen 'Mech for a moment, then dialed his radio's power up. "Baker-Third: rally, rally, rally." He swung the *Black Hawk* around, toward the way he'd come. Barron's *Vindicator* stood watching.

"What?" Samson asked. Acknowledgement clicked through his system as Lyons and Cruz checked in. *Neither of them had gone ka-boom*, a voice in his head told him with a chuckle.

"Impressive gunnery, Lieutenant."

Samson laughed at the tonelessness of the kid's voice. Barron could have been that *Baboon* pilot—for all intents, *had been* that *Baboon*'s pilot, eleven days ago. He gathered the *Black Hawk* into a half-crouch.

"Now for the big fish," he said, and kicked down on the jump jet pedals.

▲▼▲

He knew the plan was shot by the time the *Black Hawk* reached the apogee of its jump.

Samson had intended to let his sensors get a good sip of information without the blurring distraction of the forest. His long-range sensors pinged announcements and painted seven green icons on his screen, a klick and a half distant toward Leitnerton. Baker Company.

A half-dozen red icons were clustered among them.

"Baker Six, Three-Six," Samson sent as the *Black Hawk* dropped toward the ground.

"Going to be late, Sam," Captain Norman said. Samson heard the bells of heat overload alarms in the background of the transmission. "Two Stars, six plus four."

Six 'Mechs and four Points—twenty—Elementals.

"Do you need support, sir?"

"When you're done in there, Sam. I can't have a heavy in my backfield."

"Roger that, Captain," Samson said, and cut the channel. He stomped the *Black Hawk*'s foot, clawing a rent in the soft forest floor. "Shit."

Barron's *Vindicator* dropped out of the sky forty meters short of where Samson had landed. He appeared through the trees about ten seconds later. "Sir! I saw–"

"So did I."

"Baker-Third," Samson said. "We're on our own."

"Unity, Ell Tee," Cruz said. "Four on three, with a *Marauder*?"

"The captain's bogged down with a Binary," Samson said. "Report status."

"One *Griffin* destroyed," Lyons said. "An earth-shattering ka-boom."

"I heard."

"The *Marauder* is between us," Cruz said, reading off a position report. "I've been playing tag, but he's good. Couple more hits and I'm done."

Samson grimaced. "What about the other two?" His sensors were blank—the red icons representing the other Jade Falcon 'Mechs were cross-hatched, indicating approximations, not fact.

"The other *Griffin* is shadowing the *Marauder*," Lyons said. "I think he's hoping the big boy will scare me up."

"The last *Baboon*?"

"Lost it in the tr—"

Missile exploded against the *Black Hawk*'s right arm and right leg. Samson hurled the OmniMech forward, out of the line of fire, as the last *Baboon* stepped through a narrow breach in the trees. It twisted to follow him while its weapons recycled. Samson saw the jets as compressed air blew the last wisps of exhaust from the launcher before cycling the next warheads in. It stepped closer …

… into a pattern of ruby laser fire from Barron's *Vindicator*. The young jock was swinging his 'Mech around the *Black Hawk*. The big Warrior PPC in the *Vindicator*'s forearm came up, static ghosts dancing around the aperture as its capacitors discharged. The lightning-snap shot took the *Baboon* in the shoulder, tearing its left arm off and spinning the twenty-ton 'Mech around.

"Never mind," Samson spat. He jerked at his controls, bringing his 'Mech around.

"*Neg*!" Barron cried. "He is mine!" The *Vindicator* crashed forward.

"Boy—"

"*NEG*!"

The *Baboon* righted itself and drove left, away from the two Dragoon 'Mechs. A half-flight of missiles arrowed past Samson to spend themselves against the virgin armor over the *Vindicator*'s left thigh. Samson cursed under his breath and wrenched at his controls. The *Black Hawk*'s arms were coming up.

The *Vindicator*'s PPC flared to life again, this time smashing the armor protecting the *Baboon*'s heart. From Samson's Clan-made monster, that shot had cored the other *Baboon*. Barron's 'Mech mounted the inferior Inner Sphere-made weapon, however. It only destroyed the Jade Falcon's torso armor and nicked the

latticework structure beneath. *Nice shot, though*.

The *Vindicator*'s medium pulse laser flashed, driving ruby energy into the gaping wound from the PPC. The *Baboon* collapsed, its engine scramming as its shielding was devoured. Barron dragged his charging 'Mech to a stop with the fallen Jade Falcon at his feet.

"Second *Baboon* down," Barron said on the lance frequency.

"First blood for the rook, Ell Tee?" Cruz asked.

"First blood."

"Ooh-rah, kid," Lyons said.

"There's still two more of them," Cruz put in.

"Then let's deal with them."

▲▼▲

"This way," Cruz said. Static rippled through the radio—evidence of the near-passage of an ionizing PPC bolt. "That was close. The *Griffin* is still with him."

"I can deal with the little one, if we can get them apart," Lyons said. Samson could hear it in her voice—the *Hatchetman* was slapping the haft of its hatchet against its other hand. He was surprised he couldn't hear the clangs.

"We'll take them together," Samson said. "Six will need us soon."

"We could disengage," Cruz said. "Rally with the rest of the company."

"We could," Samson allowed. "But I'm the Ell Tee, and I say we're not. *Quiaff*?"

"*Aff*."

"He is coming," Barron said. The *Vindicator* pointed.

A Coventry fir could grow to sixty or seventy meters if given enough nutrients, a break from the wind, and a few decades. The line in front of them must have been some of the oldest in the forest. *Like watchmen*. Samson washed his sensor focus across them and it beeped: heavy metal.

"Got them," he whispered. "Close on me." He raised the *Black Hawk*'s arms, licked his lips. Flinched as missiles burst against the *Black Hawk*'s left side. He looked up.

The final *Griffin IIC*, forty tons of Clan refinement to a classic BattleMech, dropped out of the sky on flaming jets. The large laser buried in the *Griffin*'s chest glared at him, bursting more than a half-ton of armor from his left leg, nearly laying it bare.

"Contact," he screamed. Then he fired.

Both PPCs smashed into the *Griffin*'s torso, one to either side. The ravenous bolts stripped the armor protection from its side torsos but didn't penetrate. The 'Mech staggered as it landed, almost two tons lighter than when it left the ground. Samson leered, started the *Black Hawk* forward.

Barron fired past him, his smaller PPC no less brilliant in the flashing light. It took the *Griffin* high in the chest, just missing the gaps torn by Samson's strike. The *Griffin* stumbled back a step, driven by the impact. Barron's missile barrage flew wide, exploding in the branches of the great fir behind the Jade Falcon.

"Run away, little bird," Samson rasped. His throat was parched in the heat of his cockpit. He ignored it, bringing his lasers to bear. He fired. Both beams converged on the *Griffin*'s left leg, eating deeply into the armor. The *Griffin*'s laser flashed again, the wet loam bursting in steam explosions between the *Black Hawk*'s legs. Splinters exploded from the ground and shredded themselves against his leg armor.

"He will not," Barron said. He didn't.

The *Griffin* charged.

Samson set himself and drew a bead. Both lasers and PPCs flickered out, caressing the armor over the *Griffin*'s arms, its leg, and its denuded torso. The 'Mech's left arm flew away, clipped at the shoulder. The *Griffin* stumbled, nearly fell, but the Falcon jock must have clutched in his gyros tight. It lowered its right shoulder, sparks snapping beneath the tortured armor, and accelerated.

"Shit," Samson whispered.

The *Griffin*'s shoulder deformed under the impact as it took the *Black Hawk* just under its right side, actually lifting the fifty-ton OmniMech a meter or so from the ground and depositing it on its back. Sensors screamed for attention as the *Griffin* clanged away from the impact, light glaring from its torso. The impact had driven parts of its own structure through its engine shielding—if it had been a man, he'd have broken his clavicle and driven several ribs into his lungs. The *Griffin* made it almost forty meters past where the *Black Hawk* lay and then skidded to stop. Plasma wuffed out from the breached reactor, finishing the *Griffin*.

The soft explosion barely rocked Samson. He was already halfway turned over from the collision, ignoring the new red warning lights flashing on his console, when he saw it.

The *Marauder IIC*.

Brilliant green, well-painted with a fierce green jade falcon stooping as if it would fall off the 'Mech's nose and flay its enemies. Samson grunted, rolling the *Black Hawk*. "*Savashri*!" he cursed, falling back unconsciously on the diction of his youth.

The *Marauder IIC* seemed to regard the wreckage of the *Griffin* for a moment—but only an instant—before it set itself and fired. All three PPCs, three identical weapons to those in Samson's *Black Hawk*'s forearms. Three bolts of subatomic hell. All three struck their target.

Blowing Barron's *Vindicator* right off its feet.

▲▼▲

"Kid!" Samson yelled. He worked the *Black Hawk* to its feet and kicked the jump jet pedals. The *Black Hawk* hurtled into the air and back, over the writhing *Vindicator*, to land with a copse—a slender copse—of trees between it and the Jade Falcon monster.

Static crackled across the space between the two 'Mechs. "Still here," Barron gasped. "He spread the shots. Lost about three tons of armor, but everything still works."

Samson grinned. "Then get up, nestling!"

The *Marauder* advanced. Samson toggled his screens to thermal: the Jade Falcon 'Mech was warm but not overheated too badly. *Damn heat sinks!* He'd been hoping the heat burden would slow it down but it wasn't. He checked his own levels, and watched the heat sinks bleed off the last of his waste heat.

"Almost there," Cruz reported.

"The same," from Lyons.

"Okay," Samson murmured. He sidestepped the *Black Hawk* far enough around the trees to get a line on the *Marauder*. He fired, both arms. The PPCs tore matching scars across the Jade Falcon's left chest and left thigh. The medium lasers, firing two instants later, scorched dual paths down the 'Mech's right shin. Most of three tons of armor shed in less than ten seconds.

The *Marauder* barely stumbled before it fired back. Two of the Jade Falcon's PPCs devoured the trees between Samson and the *Marauder*. The third burst through the conflagration and drilled most of the way through the *Black Hawk*'s chest armor. Samson staggered back under the impact, letting it push him back and out of sight behind the newly-growing smoke and pyre.

"Barron?"

The *Vindicator* dropped out of the air behind him. Samson glanced at it as it landed, but then jerked his head back around to stare. The forty-five ton 'Mech lurched as it landed, its left knee actuator failing in a shower of rose-colored sparks.

"Freebirth!" Barron swore. "Well, I *was* operable."

Samson smiled. "Stick with me, kid." He backpedaled.

"Contact!" Cruz shouted.

Samson looked up, trying to see through the smoke. A breeze whispered through—it might have been wash from Barron's landing—and drew aside the curtain of smoke. Cruz's *Enforcer* waded out of the treeline behind the *Marauder* and raised both arms. The big laser fired first, striking the *Marauder* square in the back. Samson saw the reflected light as the armor exploded away. Then the *Enforcer*'s right arm came into line and bucked as the LB 10-X cannon fired. Sparks flashed from across the *Marauder IIC*'s frame as the submunitions sanded armor from the Jade Falcon 'Mech. It slowed, twisting in place to bring one arm to bear on the Cruz's 'Mech.

"Easy, big boy," Lyons said. Her *Hatchetman* appeared sixty meters south of Cruz's 'Mech, arms leveled. Two pulse lasers sputtered light against the *Marauder*'s side. Her cannon boomed, sending solid-shot rounds across the small clearing. They connected with the *Marauder*'s right leg, staggering it.

Four on one, Samson thought. He kept backpedaling, trying to increase the distance between them. *We've got him. He's got to know that*. They'd hit the *Marauder* at least once in almost every armor zone. A Dragoon in this situation and with that much damage would cut and run to try and save his machine.

The Jade Falcon straightened up and turned back toward the two newest

'Mechs, Lyons and Cruz. It started forward, a slow walking pace, and brought its weapons to bear. Samson opened his mouth to shout a warning, closed it. Cruz and Lyons were good jocks. They didn't need warnings. The *Marauder* fired.

Three PPC struck Cruz's *Enforcer* full in the chest, one smashing at the armor over the fifty-ton 'Mech's heart and the other two on the side already weakened by the fight with one of the *Griffin*s. Those two beams did the most damage, slicing through armor and structure both to destroy the vulnerable shielding protecting the extra-light engine. The *Enforcer* managed another step before collapsing. Cruz's swearing trailed off as his transmitter lost power, but Samson knew the jock was still cursing in his now-darkened cockpit. *Three to one*, he corrected himself.

Even outnumbered the *Marauder IIC* was enough machine to take out all three Dragoon 'Mechs and escape. Its weapons carried enough force to match the three Dragoon machines' combined firepower, and its armor would hold up to repeated strikes. The Dragoons' would not: another hit on any of Barron's exposed surfaces would amputate the limb easily, and the *Black Hawk*'s armor was in similar shape. Lyons was fresh but thin--one good exchange with the *Marauder* and she'd be in the same state.

"Stick and move, people," Samson ordered. He jammed the throttles to the stop, angling the *Black Hawk* into a leaning run. The next time he stopped he'd be on the ground--or the *Marauder* would. They couldn't stand still against the assault 'Mech's firepower.

"I can't run, you know that," Barron spat. Samson grinned. *A contraction; soon he'll be back-shooting Capellans with the rest of us*.

"Best speed and keep to cover." The *Black Hawk* shouldered through a stand of young firs, shattering the six-meter-high trees like weeds. He rotated the torso around, trying to bring his guns to bear. The *Marauder* was twisting away to track Lyons. Samson fired.

One of this PPC missed wide, immolating an ancient fir. The other struck the armored bollard over the *Marauder*'s left knee. The casing shattered and flew apart, but the armor did its job and kept the delicate knee actuator intact. The Jade Falcon 'Mech staggered, but the impact threw its shots off. Instead of spread trip PPC flares across Lyon's *Hatchetman*, only one connected, ripping into the armor over its left thigh.

Barron, staggering after Samson's Omni, managed to tag the *Marauder* again in the chest with his PPC, but his missiles and laser missed. Lyon's cannon missed—shaken by the PPC strike, no doubt—but two of her lasers connected, striping the armor on the *Marauder*'s left forearm.

We've got a chance, Samson realized.

The Jade Falcon must have been thinking the same thing. He shifted his advance to face the gap left by Cruz's fall and lurched into a sprint. Samson grunted and reversed his own turn to follow. The *Marauder* disappeared behind a line of firs before Samson's PPCs recycled. Snarling inside his helmet, Samson slowed. "Form on me," he said.

"We're following him?" Lyons asked.

"He's headed toward the rest of the company."

"Good. There's more of them than there are of us."

Samson swallowed. "We can take him, and we can't let him get behind the Six."

"We're not going to catch him talking about it," Barron said.

"Anyone see sign of Cruz?"

Lyons laughed. "He's fine, Ell Tee. I saw him out of his cockpit kicking the side of his 'Mech."

"Then let's go."

The *Marauder IIC* had left a path through the woods where he'd crushed the trees out of his way. Samson led the trio toward the first gap, apprehension clawing at his stomach. The *Black Hawk*'s heats sinks wicked the last of the heat overload free while the life support made the cockpit tolerable again.

Approaching at half-speed, Samson swept his sensor focus across the trees to either side; were he the *Marauder*'s pilot, he'd be waiting on the other side, ready to ambush the first 'Mech through. The *Black Hawk* didn't detect anything but Samson wasn't taking any chances. He rushed the opening, twisting the *Black Hawk*'s torso to the right just in case he found eighty-five tons of pissed-off Jade Falcon waiting for him.

There was nothing. He kept moving, clearing the way for the others. Another 'Mech-sized hole appeared in the trees in front of him. "He's headed for the company," Samson said. He adjusted the *Black Hawk*'s course. "Come on."

"Ell Tee—" Lyons' voice disintegrated in wash of plasma-discharge static. Samson looked up into his three-sixty HUD and gasped. The *Hatchetman* was listing to the side, blue-white static traceries slithering across it. Its left arm had been amputated.

The *Marauder IIC* had circled around.

The big 'Mech slapped a thick-bodied fir out of the way with a smoking PPC-arm and brought the other one to bear. Lyons was still disoriented from the first strike and way overbalanced from the loss of the arm. She staggered. Samson clutched at his controls, willing the OmniMech to turn. *Slow… too slow—*

Barron's *Vindicator* hit the *Hatchetman* in a credible body tackle, taking both 'Mechs down. The *Marauder*'s second PPC tore over the pile of 'Mechs. Barron struggled to extricate himself from the fallen *Hatchetman*. Lyons' cursing filled the lance channel.

Samson completed his turn. "Howdy," he whispered, and squeezed his triggers.

Both PPCs slashed at the *Marauder*'s left shoulder, tearing the limb off at the joint. Sparks showered from the blown actuator as the arm fell away, dropping to the forest floor like the tailings from a grinder. Heat blossomed again in the *Black Hawk*'s cockpit, but Samson ignored it. He squeezed his secondary triggers, hitting the *Marauder* with the paired lasers. Both shots struck true, savaging the little remaining armor over the *Marauder*'s chest. A sickly-green flash-puff announced the death of a heat sink.

"Fall, dammit," Samson growled.

The *Marauder* righted itself and turned away from the fallen Dragoons. The lasers, quiet until now, flared to life, cutting at the exposed myomers and structure on the *Black Hawk*'s leg. A lurch and flashing alarms told him the Jade Falcon had fused his ankle, hobbling the *Black Hawk*. Samson stumped to the side, trying to put the *Marauder* between him and the fallen Dragoons. The Jade Falcon jock would have to decide.

"Dammit, kid, get *off me*!"

"I am trying!"

Samson flicked his eye between his HUD and his PPC indicators. Four seconds… six… eight… *green*. He fired, held down the triggers. *The lasers would only be a second or more…*

His right-arm PPC missed, destroying yet another tree. The left-arm weapon connected, spreading plasma and kinetic damage across the *Marauder*'s left chest.

ARTIST: EARL GEIER
PUBLICATION: THE BATTLETECH COMPENDIUM
YEAR: 1990

The sparking shoulder actuator darkened abruptly as the power connections severed. The lasers hit the same part but only further damaged already-fused components. Heat alarms burst to life in Samson's cockpit.

The *Marauder* fired again. Samson saw blue-white, felt the *Black Hawk* lurch—

—and then blinked at the tree canopy above him. *What*…

"Get up, Ell Tee."

Samson shook his head… he worked his controls, rolled the balky *Black Hawk* to its chest, then pushed it to its feet. Its left arm was snagging—*the elbow is fried*—but he got to his feet. *Where*…

The *Marauder IIC* was down and smoking.

"How long was I out?"

"Not long," Lyons said.

"You got him." He dialed up the magnification on his display. The *Marauder*'s chest was intact but a glance at the thermal showed it glowing. It had lost its reactor shielding. He tried to judge the damage, but it was too complex. "Lyons?"

"It was the kid, Ell Tee," she said.

"Barron?"

"You were down, Lieutenant," the former bondsman said. "Sergeant Lyons was having trouble standing. There was nothing else to be done."

"I'm not dressing you down, kid," Samson said with a chuckle.

"We disregarded *zellbrigen*," Barron said.

"*Aff*." Samson quieted the alarms screaming for his attention. "Just like bandits."

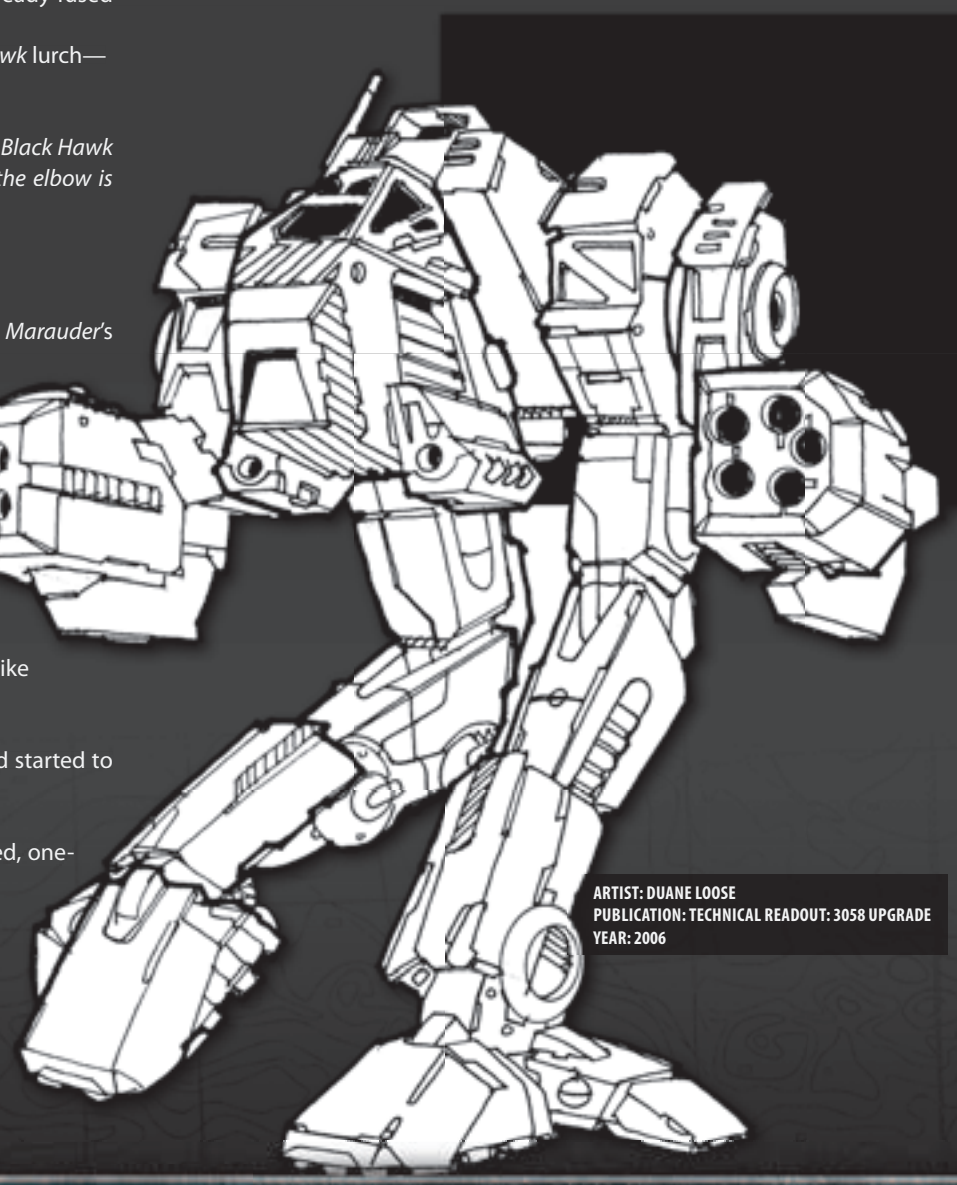
"*Neg*," Barron said. "Like Dragoons, *quiaff*?"

Samson laughed. "Unity, kid. Finally." He turned the *Black Hawk* and started to hobble back toward the opening in the trees. "Let's go get Cruz."

"Unity," Barron said hesitantly. "I begin to see."

"There's hope for you yet, kid," Lyons said. She shuffled her battered, one-armed *Hatchetman* into line. "Let's go."

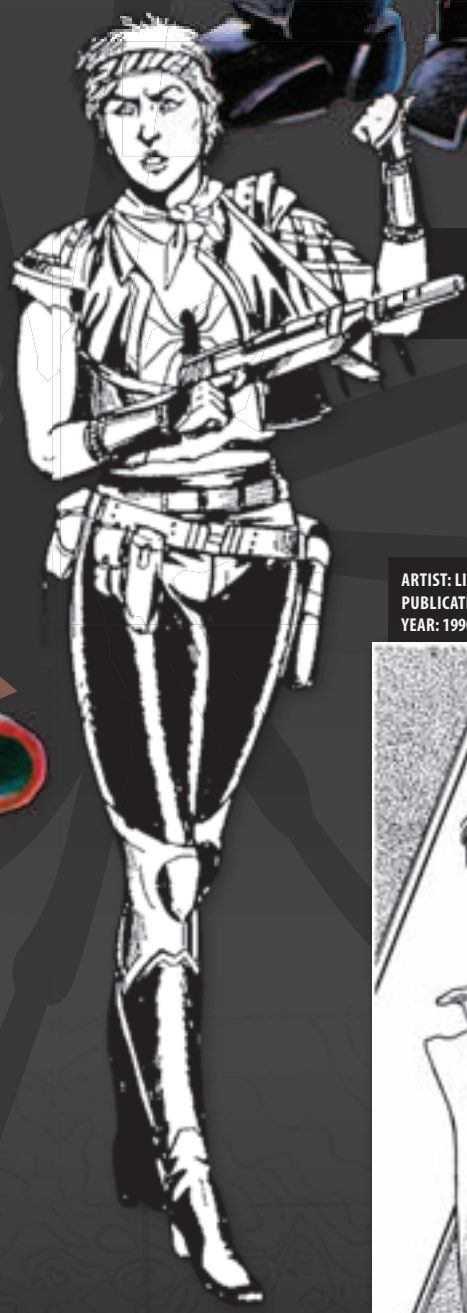
"*…until we all shall fall*…" whispered across the radio.



ARTIST: DUANE LOOSE
PUBLICATION: TECHNICAL READOUT: 3058 UPGRADE
YEAR: 2006

ARTIST: DOUG SHULER
PUBLICATION: BATTLETECH CAMO SPECS
YEAR: 1988

ARTIST: STEVE VENTERS
PUBLICATION: MECHWARRIOR: THE BATTLETECH ROLE PLAYING GAME
YEAR: 1986



ARTIST: TODD MARSH
PUBLICATION: TALES OF THE BLACK WIDOW COMPANY
YEAR: 1985

ARTIST: LIZ DANFORTH
PUBLICATION: MORE TALES OF THE BLACK WIDOW
YEAR: 1990

NATASHA KERENSKY

ARTIST: TIM BRADSHEET
PUBLICATION: MORE TALES OF THE BLACK WIDOW
YEAR: 1990

In any fictional setting with a pantheon of characters, every fan gravitate towards a favorite: Boba Fett and Darth Vader, James T. Kirk, Wolverine, and so on. These characters encapsulate everything that makes a particular setting cool. What's more, they kick butt, don't take prisoners and are the ultimate male/female; you want to date them but you're afraid they'll break your arm if you try a move.

For the *BattleTech* universe, with its legions of characters literally of every stripe, there is still one that stands above the rest: Natasha Kerensky. Sexy, deadly, uncouth, enigmatic. From the moment the *Tales of the Black Company* scenario pack was published, Natasha Kerensky took center stage as the ultimate warrior, with an unknown history and an attitude of "gun you down or kiss you." As the *BattleTech* story unfolded across the years and the secrets of her past were revealed, she became, if possible, even more powerful and alluring. Her call-sign, the Black Widow, a perfect totem for the perfect warrior.

There are numerous fantastic characters in *BattleTech*, many with just as long and storied histories: Morgan Kell, Yorinaga Kurita, Kai Allard-Liao. And additional characters are added continuously as the ever-changing, epic storyline continues, some of who will become fan favorites.

Yet they're all measured against the Black Widow and her *Warhammer*.

ARTIST: FRANZ VOHWINKEL
PUBLICATIONS: CLASSIC BATTLETECH INTRODUCTORY BOX SET AND TOTAL WARFARE
YEAR: 2006/2007

ARTIST: STEVE VENTERS
PUBLICATION: THE BATTLETECH COMPENDIUM
YEAR: 1990

A LITTLE PIECE OF WAR

THOMAS GRESSMAN

THULE CITY
THULE
GHOST BEAR OCCUPATION ZONE
22 MAY 3050

Acrid fumes from burning petrochemicals, melted wiring and charred flesh rose up to sting Elemental Point Commander Einar's eyes. Not five meters from where he stood a bomb had shredded a captured hover transport—and its cargo of technicians and dismounted Ghost Bear warriors—to a stinking mass of seared metal and charred flesh.

Though genetically engineered and specifically bred for size and strength, inured to the sight and sound of a battlefield and trained to ignore all else, Einar was human. Caustic vapors still burned the sensitive membranes of his eyes. With a snort of disgust, he slammed the visor of his heavy powered armor closed, cutting off the stench of the smoldering wreck, and with it the eye-smarting chemical-laden smoke.

It had been two months since Clan Ghost Bear and their cousins swept across the Periphery and into the Inner Sphere to capture Thule from the barbarians who held it. And, in those two months, those barbarians had begun to learn how to fight. They had destroyed the garrison forces the Ghost Bears had left behind and forced Alpha Galaxy to return again. Still, there was little honor in the *way* they fought, as the burning hover truck proved. Reports were coming in from every world conquered by the Clans. It was the same everywhere. Instead of facing up to the Crusading Clans, in open and honorable combat and conceding defeat once they had been beaten, the Inner Sphere *surats* took to the hills, and continued their resistance. They launched hit-and-run raids on lightly protected repair facilities. They planted bombs and vibration-sensitive mines to kill men and destroy 'Mechs. They sniped at leaders, technicians and dismounted warriors. There had even been reports that, in some quarters, some Inner Sphere cowards had crept into barracks and encampments to cut the throats of Clan warriors as they slept.

Here on Thule, things had been little different. The troops of the Free Rasalhague Republic had shown themselves to be of little better quality than the rawest trainees or the bandits who tried to stand in the way of the Clans as they raced each other for the prize of being the first to liberate Terra. The second round of fighting across Thule's icy southern plains had ended days ago yet the blood of Clan warriors was still being shed in the snow by guerrillas. The vehicle bomb which had just detonated in the heart of Thule City, the planetary capital, was something new in Einar's experience. It was cowardly murder and nothing more.

"Freebirth!" Einar cursed through clenched teeth, so great was his rage and frustration at the barbarians who preferred assassination to honorable combat.

"You said something, Point Commander Einar?"

"Apologies, Star Captain Arden Vong," Einar spoke slowly in response to his immediate superior's polite reproof. "My outrage against these *stravag* attacks got the better of me. It shall not happen again."

"Indeed, Point Commander Einar." The tone of Vong's reply gave no hint of the meaning of her words. Was the Star Captain accepting Einar's assurances of his future control of his emotions, or sharing his anger at the dishonorable murder of her comrades?

"Since you feel this way, Point Commander, you will be pleased to know that Khan DelVillar has decided to put an end to these attacks. She has come to believe these attacks are not the work of the local populace, but are the last vestiges of defiance by the Rasalhague military who failed to defend Thule. What they could not hold through force of arms, they now seek to deny to us through arson and murder."

Vong paused. Einar had detected rising anger in her tone, and he knew she was now mastering her emotions.

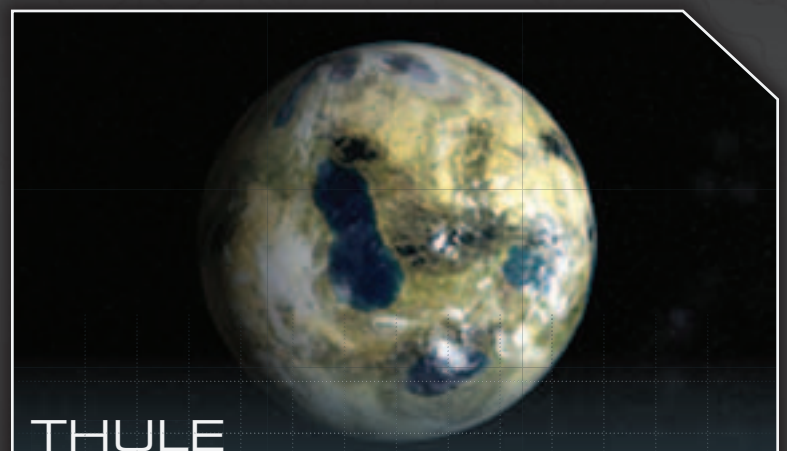
Though he may rage
The wise bear fights from the head
Not from the heart…

… Or so held *The Remembrance*, the epic poem which told the tale of the Clans, and imparted wisdom to the children of Kerensky.

"We, Point Commander," Vong resumed, "and by that I mean the Fiftieth Strike Cluster, have been assigned the task of rooting out and destroying these guerrillas. And you, Point Commander Einar, with your Elementals, will track them for us. You will trail them to their lair and destroy them. If in your judgment the enemy proves to be too strong, you will pin them in place until the rest of the Cluster arrives to wipe them out."

For a moment Einar was silent.

"Star Captain, I appreciate the honor you do me, and your confidence in my



THULE

World Name: Thule
Star Type (Recharge Time): A8V (169 hours)
Position in System: 2
Time to Jump Point: 25.77 days
Number of Satellites: 1 (Ultima)
Surface Gravity: 0.97
Atm. Pressure: Standard (Breathable)
Equatorial Temperature: 24° C (Cool-Temperate)
Surface Water Coverage: 25 percent
Recharging Station: Nadir
HPG Class Type: B
Highest Native Life: Mammal
Population Size (3050): 510,650,000
Socio-Industrial Levels: C-C-B-C-C

A chilly world on the Periphery border, Thule is a sparsely populated planet. A former member of the Principality of Rasalhague, Thule was captured along with the rest of the Kingdom by Shiro Kurita's armies. Considered unimportant by many and strategically worthless by others, the world avoided the destruction of the Succession Wars through its isolated location. Even the Ronin War bypassed Thule. Despite being the target of frequent bandit raiding, war only truly came to Thule in March 3050 when Clan Ghost Bear captured the world.

Thule has three major continents: southern Vik, equatorial Akranes, and northern Husavik. Thule City, the world's capital, is situated toward the south of Vik, along with Thule's primary starport. To the north lies the Fresdon Plain, and within it the treacherous broken terrain of the Fresdon Desert. Here the Free Rasalhague Republic's First Hussars valiantly attempted to defend the world against elements from three Galaxies, before escaping via the Great Fresdonian River onto the world's oceans.

Located within the world's temperate regions, Akranes is lightly populated and mostly given over to agriculture and vacation spots. Husavik is a frigid wasteland, home to isolated research stations and Thulian bears.

warriors, but I must protest. This is not a job worthy of Trueborn warriors. It is a task for our follow-on forces, for provisional garrison Clusters, or even for *solahma* troops."

"That may be true, Point Commander Einar." The silky tone of Vong's reply was more fitting a Nova Cat or Steel Viper than a Ghost Bear. "However, these orders come directly from Khan DelVillar.

"Muster your Point. You have three hours with which to equip yourselves. I leave the outfitting of your Elementals to your discretion. When you are ready, you may begin. You will keep me advised of your position and of the progress of your mission. That is all, Point Commander Einar."

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"Point Commander Einar. The trail dies in the rocks less than three kilometers ahead. These *savashri* hills are swept by this never-ending gale. There is no snow, and the ground is frozen—almost permafrost. It holds no track of man or machine."

Einar looked up the long, boulder-strewn grade to where Elemental Jurusk stood indicating the higher slope with his battle armor's clawed left arm.

The mind-numbing search had crisscrossed the hilly terrain north and east of Thule City. Eventually, Jurusk, the Elemental Point's *de facto* scout, picked up a series of faint and intermittent signs. With the certainty of an experienced predator, Jurusk knew this was the trail of the guerrillas who had murdered his comrades.

"Thermal sensors have been unable to pick up any trace of the enemy," Jurusk continued. "It is so cold that any heat is drained away before it has the chance to take hold."

"We must continue." Einar gave the order after a moment's deliberation. "Though the trail has wound around hills and through ravines, they have kept up a general east-by-north heading. We will fan out in a hunting line and keep an east-by-north heading. We should cross their trail again soon.

"Jurusk, you are the center of the line. The rest of us will form on you. Thea and Carlo to the left, Ranulf and I to the right.

"Go carefully. I would not put it beyond these *surats* to have left vibrabombs in their wake. I have no wish to lose any of you."

Einar's warning about vibrabombs, powerful tremor-sensing land mines which could be detonated by the vibrations of a passing BattleMech or vehicle, was not truly necessary. Each of the four Elementals knew the Rasalhague guerrillas had made free use of the passive weapons, sowing them by the score in alleyways, farm fields, and along major traffic routes. Though the mines seldom killed MechWarriors—crippling their machines instead—a correctly-set vibrabomb would explode directly under the feet of a passing Elemental. Such explosions were usually fatal.

Brief choruses of "*aff*" sounded from the three men and one woman of his Elemental point as the battle-hardened warriors took up an extended line-abreast formation. Each warrior spaced about five meters between himself and his mates. Any more or any less and they ran an increased risk of missing the enemy's trail when and if it should reappear.

For a moment Einar watched his Elementals climbing up the rocky slope. He was intensely proud of his Point. Each had proven themselves to be skilled and cunning warriors.

Einar preferred a 'Mech-killing laser, but left the individual choice of weapons up to his warriors. Ranulf and Thea imitated their commander by choosing the laser. Jurusk liked a rotary-barrel machine gun. Carlo took an almost un-Clanlike delight in using a flamer as his primary weapon.

Completing the Elemental's deadly complement was a dual-tube missile launch pack, set high up above the armor's shoulders. The whole effect was to give the Elemental the silhouette of a demon out of old Terran myth.

Though Einar held no belief in supernatural beings of any stripe, he knew most of his Inner Sphere foes did. If the outline of his Elemental powered armor gave him a psychological edge over his enemy, so much the better.

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"Contact!"

Einar recognized Elemental Thea's voice. Before she could elaborate, a deep stuttering bark echoed among the snow-covered rocks. About thirty meters to his left, Einar saw clouds of dust spout and rocks go bounding crazily into the air as a burst of autocannon fire missed its target, the shells ricocheting off the boulders.

"Contact, left! Action left front!" Thea continued. "Light armor and infantry in defilade!"

The sharp *crack-whoosh* of a missile launcher interrupted her report.

"I count three armored vehicles and about twenty infantry. No BattleMechs, I repeat, no 'Mechs."

"Understood," Einar barked. "Thea, Carlo, hold position and give us suppressing fire. Jurusk, Ranulf, we will attack the enemy's flank *en echelon*. Now!"

Almost immediately, a harsh whip-crack sounded as Thea fired her laser. A brace of twisting smoke trails followed the laser's brilliance as short-range missiles smashed into the enemy, who were still concealed from Einar's sight.

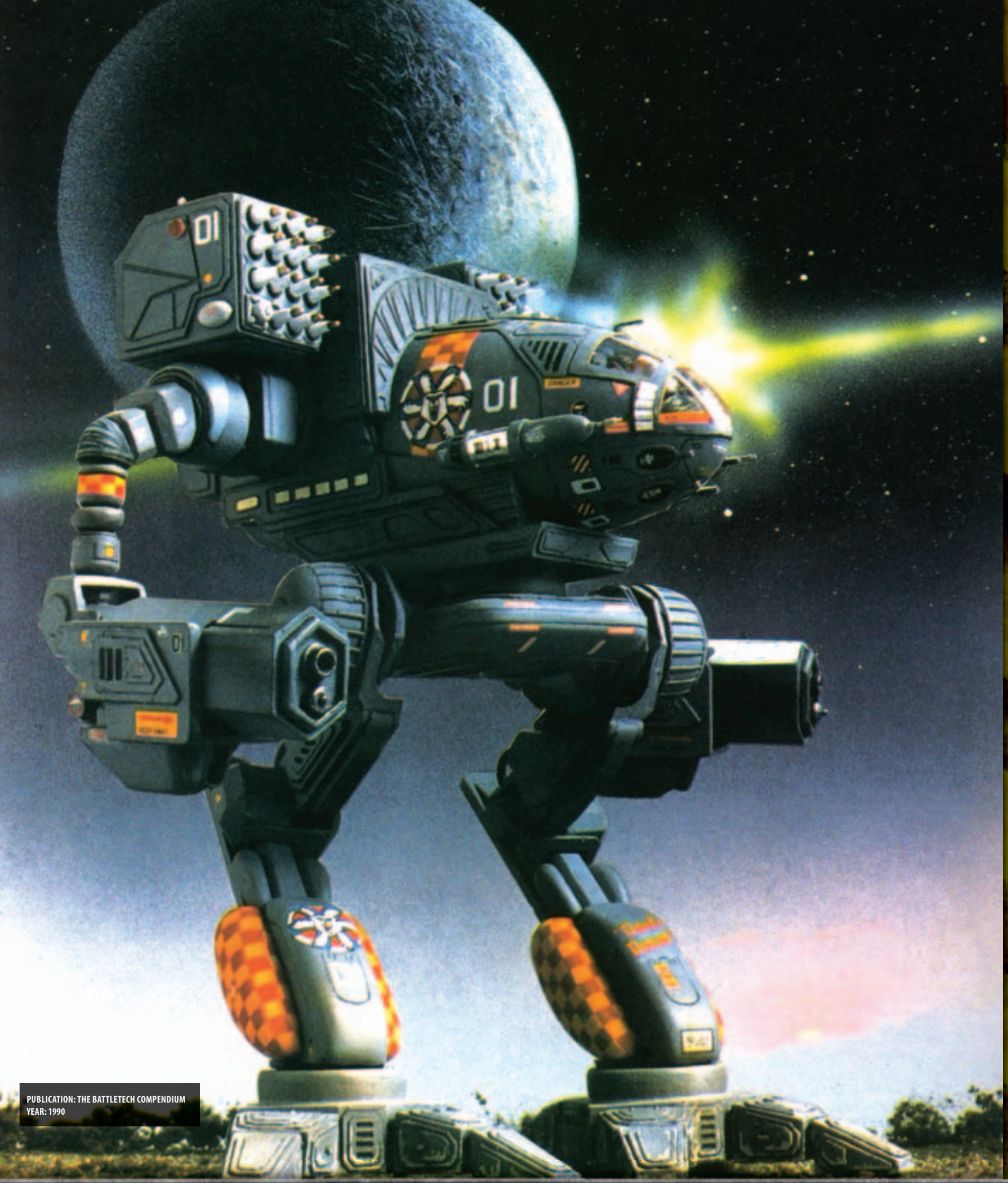
To the Point Commander's right, Ranulf triggered his powered armor's jump pack, throwing the Elemental thirty meters forward before he touched the ground again. Ranulf turned sharply left and leapt again. At the same moment, Einar bounded forward, but only half as far as his subordinate before likewise turning in toward the still hidden enemy. As he triggered his jump pack, he saw Ranulf savage a hover tank with his laser.

Saracen, I think they call it, Einar noted, seeing the missile launch tubes stacked in a flexible mount on the vehicle's back.

Before Einar could assess the damage Ranulf had done to the Saracen his jet-assisted leap passed its high point, and he dropped back to the rocky surface. On his right, Jurusk's heavy machine gun was already chattering away, spitting death and tracers into a hastily-prepared foxhole full of unarmored infantrymen.

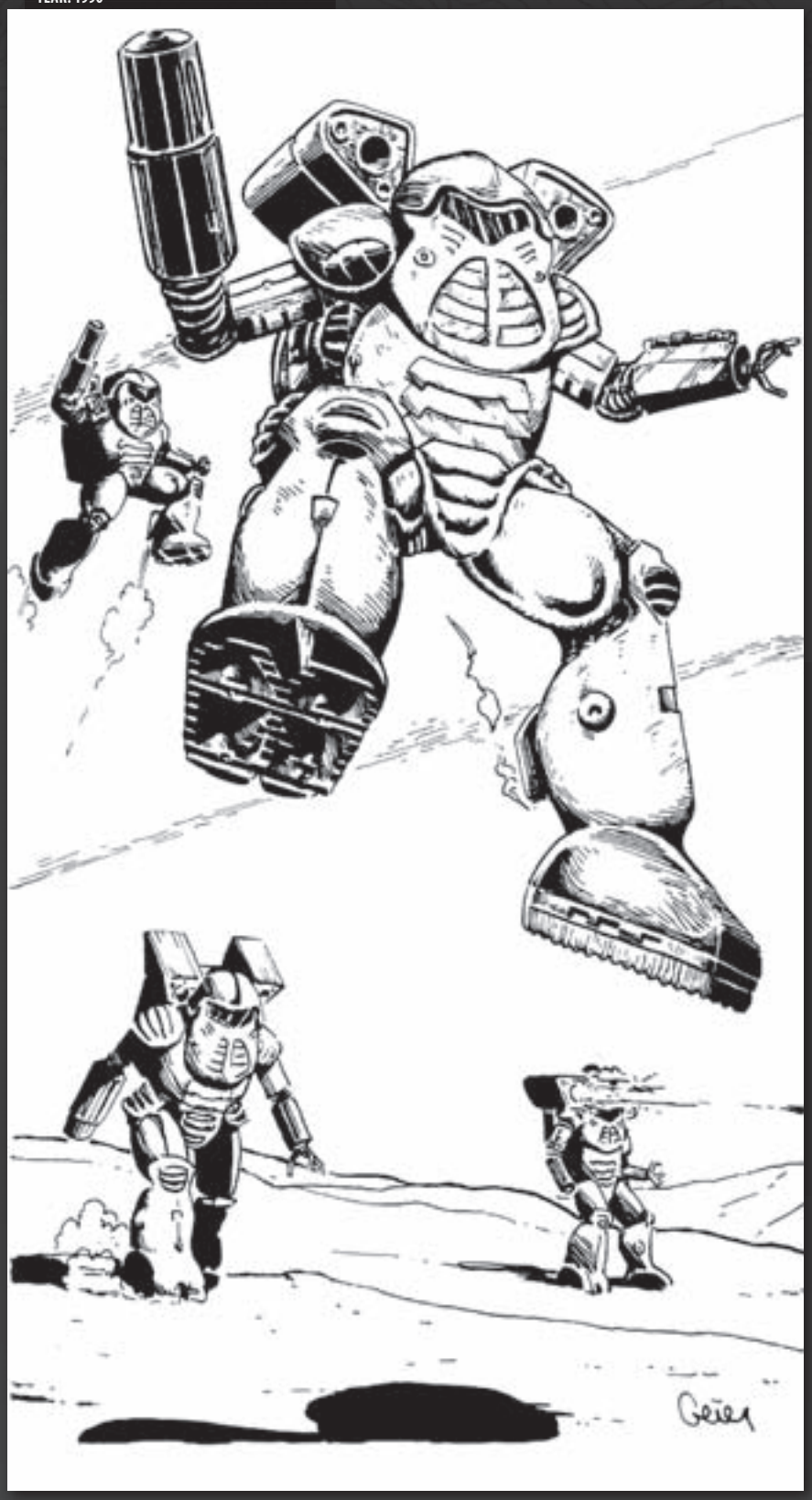
Einar's lips curled in an ironic smile as he remembered Khan DeVillar's words when Alpha Galaxy came to Thule. At seeing how the First Husars had dug in, occupying a series of trenches, the Khan said, "How polite of you to spare us the effort of digging your graves."

Leaning forward, Einar threw his Elemental suit into a heavy lumbering run. He'd gone only a few jarring paces when he spotted the plank-like shape of a hovertank. Before Einar could stop or change direction, the tank's turret swung toward him, revealing the long slim barrel of an autocannon. The weapon thumped, spitting a stream of explosive shells at Einar, but the Rasalhague gunner had been in too much of a hurry to get in the first shot. The shells detonated among the stones



PUBLICATION: THE BATTLETECH COMPENDIUM
YEAR: 1990

ARTIST: EARL GEIER
PUBLICATION: THE BATTLE FOR TWYCROSS
YEAR: 1990



behind Einar, passing over his high-mounted missile launchers. Einar skidded to a halt, dropped his targeting reticle into place over the vehicle's hull. He waited for a heartbeat until the circular indicator flashed green, indicating a lock, and pressed the trigger.

One salvo of his short-range anti-armor missiles streaked across the sixty meters separating Einar and the tank, which he now recognized as a Scimitar. The warheads plowed into the vehicle's hull, shattering armor, but accomplishing little else. Einar added a bolt of laser fire, and triggered his jump jets again, before the enemy gunner could do a better job of lining up his sights.

The Point Commander's leap carried him to his right. Then, as the Rasalhague tank crew pivoted their vehicle on its cushion of air to follow the massive Elemental, Einar jumped again, this time to his left.

The long bound ended when his steel-booted feet slammed down on the Scimitar's rear hull. Einar stooped. With one scything swing of his left arm, he clawed a long ragged gash in the tough fabric of the tank's hover skirt. The tank lurched as part of its air cushion bled away, but that minor wound alone would not bring the armored vehicle down.

The gunner swung the turret, apparently hoping to sweep Einar off the tank's hull with the long gun barrel. The Rasalhague tanker had not counted on the agility of the Clan-designed Elementals. Einar jumped from the hull deck to the top of the turret as easily as an unarmored man might walk up a flight of steps.

Kneeling again, he fired into the engine cover which had already been dented in by the impact of the heavy Elemental armor's landing. The abused steel grating screeched in protest and gave way. At least some of the laser's energy leaked through. The tank's engine coughed and stuttered like a man struck a hard blow to the solar plexus. Einar spared it no more of his attention.

He turned on his knees. Grasping the tank commander's hatch with the suit's claw, Einar heaved. The thick armored plug remained in place. Einar gave a second pull and then a third and the hatch cover peeled away. Casting aside the mangled steel disk, Einar thrust his left arm into the Scimitar's fighting compartment and triggered the anti-personnel machine gun mounted behind the claw.

Steel-cored bullets caromed and whined off the inside of the tank's armor. The vehicle lurched again, but this time it was no mere flinch of mechanical pain. It was the thrashing of a living, but wounded, beast whose brain had died.

Einar leapt from the Scimitar's turret and turned in time to see the tank, its crew dead at their stations, crash into a rock outcropping and flip onto its side. The hover tank's unseen lift fans still spun at nearly full power, blowing dirt and small stones outward in a coarse expanding cloud, but they would never again drive the combat vehicle. Not in the service of the Rasalhague Republic.

Einar scanned the battlefield and spotted a pair of unarmored infantrymen hunkered in a shallow trench. They were struggling to replace the bulky twin-chambered launch cartridge of a portable missile launcher. The enhanced vision of his Elemental suit's visor revealed the noses of the stubby projectiles to be red.

Infernos.

Einar again brought his machine gun into play. Tracers tore into the dirt along the rim of the foxhole and walked up the body of the soldier holding the missile launcher. Before the loader could snatch up the weapon and unleash the incendiary warheads on his tormenter, Einar's laser blew him in half.

Before the dead man hit the ground Einar was scanning for another target. He found none. The bodies of conventional infantrymen were scattered all across the rocky slope. About two-hundred meters from where he stood, the Saracen rested on its collapsed skirts, smoke pouring from its open hatches. A pair of tracked APCs sat undamaged in a shallow defile, abandoned by their crews.

"Report," he barked into his commlink.

One by one, his warriors responded with variations on the same message: the enemy had been destroyed.

"Very well." Einar looked again at the dead missile team. After the fight with the Scimitar, destroying the unarmored infantrymen had been anti-climactic. Not every battle culminated in a grand duel between commanders. Most often they petered out as attrition took its toll.

Unfortunately for Einar, the ambush had cost his Point. No warrior had been lost, but a few more than half of the Point's anti-armor missiles had been expended. With no way to replace them in the field, the Point would be hampered in its effectiveness if they encountered heavier armor or BattleMechs. Still, it never occurred to Einar to turn back for new supplies. He had been given an assignment, and he would not return until he had fulfilled his mission. If that meant shedding his armor and fighting with tooth and claw, as does the Bear, he would do so.

"Fan out." Einar pointed at the APCs. "The enemy infantry arrived in those two tracked carriers. They must have left signs we can follow. I want to locate these *surats* before nightfall. I want to destroy them as soon as we can. I want to end this *stravag* mission and get back to fighting worthy of a real warrior, not chasing honorless guerrillas across these cursed hills."

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The trail left by the cleated steel tracks of the armored personnel carriers was indeed easy to find. That did not mean that it was easy to follow. At first, the signs led southward away from the battle area. After a dozen kilometers, the trail curved wide around a burnt-out village and resumed the east-by-north heading the Elementals had followed away from their base.

"Point Commander Einar," Elemental Carlo said, surveying the wrecked homes and charred shops of the settlement. "I had not realized our operations had extended this far into the hills."

"They have not, Elemental Carlo, not until now. These barbarians, like lower caste children, believe if they cannot possess something, no one shall." Einar's anger flared at the wastefulness of burning villages in the wake of a retreat. "It is a useless tradition stemming back to ancient Terran history. If you cannot take it with you, put it to the torch. Now we see how willing these *savashri* barbarians are to destroy what they cannot hold. We see again that they cannot hold to a *batchall*. Our bid was for the whole planet and everything it held. And again, they have broken the terms of the *batchall*.

"The sooner the children of Kerensky crush these cowards, and drive them from Terra, the better it will be for all."

"Point Commander Einar." Jurusk's voice. Einar had sent him out ahead to pick up the trail. "There are several trails leading to and from this village. I had to follow each of them a distance in an effort to sort them out. I believe I have isolated the correct tracks. We may proceed whenever you are ready." "Very well, Jurusk. Well done." Satisfaction was plain in Einar's voice. "Hold your position, the rest of us will join you soon."

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"You see here, Point Commander, this set of tracks. These were made by one of the armored personnel carriers we saw back there. One of them has a large chip out of one of the cleats on its right side." Jurusk pointed to an indentation left in the half frozen soil by one of the APCs treads. Where all of the other impressions were relatively clear, this one had a long jagged ridge running from center left to upper right. The ridge had been formed when a cleat with a matching void space was pressed into the ground by the weight of the carrier. The marks were distinctive, making it certain that these tracks were the same ones the Elementals had been following since the ambush.

Einar nodded. "Well done Elemental Jurusk. I shall make note of your performance when I make my report to Star Captain Arden Vong."

Jurusk's armored head bobbed as he bowed his gratitude to his Commander. Einar was not stingy with acknowledgements when his troops performed well. If they won glory, there was glory for him as well as their Point Commander.

"We shall continue on," he said straightening from where he crouched over tracks. "Jurusk, you shall lead. Follow the signs and direct us how we should go. But remember, these warriors have no honor. Beware of traps. Beware of mines. I have no wish to lose any of you needlessly."

"*Aff*, Point Commander." There was a touch of almost un-Clanlike irony in Jurusk's voice. He did not say it, but every Elemental in Einar's point—Einar included—knew what Jurusk was thinking.

You are perfectly willing to lose us if the needs of the Clan so dictate.

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"There, Point Commander Einar, do you see them?"

"I see them, Elemental Jurusk." The pair of unarmored infantrymen were barely visible in the gathering darkness, but a flick of a control turned the world seen through the viewscreen of his Elemental armor into an otherworldly vista of false colors. The thermal viewer let Einar see the men clearly where they were standing sentry at the point of a long, high spur of rock which projected from the side of a ridge, like a buttress from a cathedral.

Behind them, almost masked by the three-meter-high spur, Einar could just make out the head and shoulders of an Inner Sphere BattleMech. Lacking the space for some of the luxuries of its larger cousins, Elemental armor did not boast the detailed "warbook" database available to those warriors who piloted OmniMechs. Elementals were forced by necessity to memorize the details of the

ARTIST: MATT WILSON
PUBLICATION: FIELD MANUAL: WARDEN CLANS
YEAR: 1998

enemy machines they expected to face. It took Einar a moment, but he recognized the high-combed, boxy head of a *Centurion*.

"Elemental Jurusk, you and Elemental Ranulf will move in as close as you feel practical to the enemy camp. You will gather information and report back to me. I do not want you to engage the enemy at this time. There is at least one BattleMech down there. If it is alone, we might be able to engage and destroy these *surats*. If there are more 'Mechs, it would wasteful to throw ourselves into this fight. As much as I would like to destroy these cowardly murderers ourselves, if they are too strong, we will have to call for Star Captain Arden Vong and our own 'Mech forces."

"Understood, Point Commander Einar." The disappointment may not have been plain in Jurusk's voice, but there was an underlying tone of that emotion. Briefly, Einar wondered if he should speak to his subordinate when they returned to their base at Thule City. Perhaps in studying the enemy and his culture, as Jurusk was wont to do, the Elemental was becoming contaminated by the weaknesses of the Inner Sphere.

Einar shook his head. The movement, though invisible behind his visor, was betrayed by a slight swaying of the Elemental armor. Jurusk was an experienced warrior, descended from a proud bloodline. He could no more be contaminated by the weak and hedonistic culture of the Inner Sphere than could the Khan herself.

"Very well, Elemental, proceed."

Jurusk motioned to Ranulf, and the pair slipped away into the descending gloom.

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Less than an hour later, the pair returned from the reconnaissance. Their report was not good.

"Point Commander, the enemy camp is laid out thus." Jurusk grasped a heavy stick in his armor's clawed hand. With it, he sketched out a crude diagram of the guerrillas' laager.

"They are protected to the east and the south by the ridge, and by that spur there. The ground to the north and west is broken but passable, with the roughest terrain being to the north. There are six armored vehicles of various types drawn up here." Jurusk indicated the northwest corner of the camp. "The heaviest of

ARTIST: JEFF LAUBENSTEIN
PUBLICATION: WOLF CLAN SOURCEBOOK
YEAR: 1991

them is an old Goblin. We estimate there to be approximately fifty unarmored infantry in the camp."

"How did you arrive at that estimate, Elemental Jurusk?"

"Because, Point Commander Einar, that is the usual infantry support complement for four BattleMechs." Ranulf answered for his comrade.

Jurusk confirmed Ranulf's statement.

"Yes, Point Commander, I saw a full Star … or lance, as they call them … of BattleMechs, here." Jurusk drew a handful of small circles in the center of the enemy camp. "I believe the Rasalhague troops wish to protect their 'Mechs, those being the most valuable assets they have."

"*Aff*." Einar agreed. "We cannot effectively attack this encampment. We must therefore hold our position and observe the enemy, and call for heavy 'Mech forces to deal with these barbarians.

"Elemental Thea, you will have first watch. Find a good spot to observe, but do your best to stay out of sight. Jurusk, Ranulf, you have done well. Take your rest. I will contact Star Captain Arden Vong."

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Vong's answer to Einar's report was curt, and merely confirmed her earlier orders. "Hold position, observe, do not allow the enemy to escape. We will come up as quickly as we may."

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The weak sunlight of evening had failed completely, plunging the enemy camp into complete darkness. The guerrillas might as well have been walking about in broad daylight for all difference it made to the Elementals. Their visors were equipped with the finest night vision equipment the Ghost Bears' scientist caste could design. They could watch the enemy using thermal or light amplification viewers while remaining hidden in the shadows of a moonless night. The Elementals' weapons were vastly superior to anything the Inner Sphere could field, and man-for-man, the genetically engineered, selectively-bred Clan warriors were superior in every way to their enemy.

But, every soldier knows that Dame Fortune will always play a role in any battle. On this night, her inconstant favors preferred Rasalhague to Clan Ghost Bear.

"Freebirth!" The oath cutting across the commlink was punctuated by a ripping bust of machine gun fire. Einar and his troops jolted from their rest. A second burst of fire was answered by a weaker, lighter third.

"Report!" Einar roared.

"Point Commander," Carlo answered. "A *stravag* patrol all but tripped over me. I tried to eliminate them quietly, but they fired on me. I have eliminated the patrol, but am now taking automatic rifle fire from inside the enemy camp.

"I am afraid, Point Commander, we no longer have the option of waiting for Star Commander Arden Vong."

"Understood." Einar's voice dropped into a snarl. A glance at the chronometer built into the heads-up display of his helmet read thirty-five minutes past local midnight. According to Arden Vong's estimate the 'Mech forces should be arriving at Einar's position within the hour.

"Attention to orders. We have been discovered. We cannot allow the enemy to escape. We will make every effort to pin him here until our comrades arrive. Every warrior will push forward into the enemy camp. We will kill as many of his warriors, and destroy as many of his machines as we are able. Our primary target is those BattleMechs.

"I realize we have depleted our missiles, but we are *still* Ghost Bears. We are strong. We are fearless. We shall maul these barbarians, and we shall have victory.

"Attack!"

At Einar's roared order, the Elementals leapt into action.

Einar saw a trio of soldiers running trough the camp towards the parked tanks. A long burst of tracers from the machine gun mounted on his left arm chopped them down before they'd gone halfway. To make sure the tanks were out of commission, Einar blasted each of the armored vehicles with several bolts from his suit's laser. Though no one vehicle suffered fatal damage it was enough to make any tank crew think twice before mounting up.

Second thoughts on a battlefield were often fatal.

Turning his attention away from the tanks, Einar waded into the enemy camp. Twice infantrymen sought to bar his way. Twice they fell to Einar's weapons.

Now, let the full fury of the Ghost Bear run wild.
Now, let his fangs bite, and his talons rend.
Now, let him feast on the bodies of those who would hunt him.

Never before had the words of *The Remembrance* rung so true in Einar's heart as on this night.

The shape of the Rasalhague *Centurion* rose up in Einar's viewscreen. Einar's laser-targeting reticle came up over the 'Mech's heart. A second later, the nearly-invisible bolt of amplified light burned across the darkened battlefield to slash into the *Centurion's* left breast. Einar added a second bolt of laser fire to the damage he'd already inflicted on the enemy machine. Armor slagged and ran like thick syrup under the beam's caress.

Einar threw himself into a run and, three long bounding strides later, triggered his jump jets. The Elemental rose high into the night air, giving him a brief aerial view of the battlefield. Tracers and laser fire crisscrossed the enemy camp. One of the Rasalhague 'Mechs, possibly an old-model *Assassin*, was already active and moving.

Perhaps these barbarians are not so stupid after all. It seems they have had the sense to keep at least one of their 'Mech powered up and ready for battle.

There was no time for more observation. Einar's leap had carried him clear of the *Centurion* and into that 'Mech's rear. Whirling with far more grace than would have been thought credible, given the sheer bulk of the Elemental suit, Einar savaged the *Centurion's* weaker back armor with both laser and machine gun. A single scarlet thread lanced out from the enemy 'Mech's spine, but Einar's small, agile Elemental armor was too fast for the 'Mech's pilot to track. The medium laser blasted into the frozen ground.

The Elemental Point Commander touched the control to bring his one remaining missile salvo into play. As the targeting sight drifted across the dark bulk of the *Centurion's* back, a flicker of movement caught Einar's eye.

The Ghost Bear warrior saw a lone Rasalhague infantryman rise up from behind a boulder. The man dropped to one knee and aimed a twin-barreled short-range missile launcher at Einar. With the clarity that sometimes accompanies such moments the Clan warrior noticed that the noses of the rockets were painted a dark color. Not the light red of incendiary rounds.

The infantryman fired.

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Why is my face cold and wet?

The thought puzzled Einar mightily, and for a long moment, he could not furnish the answer.

The stravag *missile.*

With a jerk, the Elemental pushed himself to his knees. It took an effort of his will to force back the gray clouds, and even more to clamber to his feet. Icy wind whipped across the left side of Einar's face, driving thin snow through the hole where half of his helmet visor should have been. It felt as though his cheek and scalp on that side had been severely lacerated.

"The *stravag* missile." Fortune had smiled on him. The guerilla's missile must have struck his armor only a glancing blow. The shaped-charge warhead had ripped open his visor from just above his left eye back to near the mid-point. His heads-up display was dead. Indicator lights told Einar that his laser and machine gun were still functional, but his missile launcher was dead.

"Point Commander! You are alive!"

"*Aff*," Einar barked. "Can you see how badly I may be hurt?"

"Your helmet and visor are destroyed, as is your left-side missile launcher. There is a gash in the armor on your right thigh." Thea, like any good warrior, first reported on his capability to continue the fight. "Your face is streaked with mud, blood and HarJel. You are very lucky, Point Commander, that the blast did not take your eye."

"*Aff*. I am alive, and can still fight. Now, let us return to the battle."

"Are we included in your battle plan, Point Commander Einar?"

"Of course, Star Captain Arden Vong," Einar replied, turning to face the tall, hunched forward *Timber Wolf* piloted by his immediate superior. "It is good to have you with us."

"Report."

"The enemy is there," Einar said, gesturing with his armor's clawed hand. "They are drawn up in laager below that ridge. Four BattleMechs, a few damaged vehicles and unarmored infantry. Our attack scattered them. You should be able to attack straight into the heart of their camp."

"*Aff*, Point Commander Einar." Vong paused for a moment, and Einar had the distinct feeling she was peering closely at the damage to his Elemental armor.

"Point Commander, your armor is too badly damaged for you to rejoin the fight, and you have won honor enough on this mission. Stay here. Keep watch, and do not allow any of the enemy to break out, *quiaff*?"

For a moment Einar's spirit rebelled at being assigned to the role of perimeter guard. But he quickly understood that Vong was correct. If he fought now, he would risk his life in a fight that was already all-but-won.

"*Aff*, Star Captain."

Sparing no more words for her subordinate, Vong pointed her *Timber Wolf* straight into the heart of the Rasalhague camp. Four heavy OmniMechs followed her into the fight.

"Thus perish all who seek to challenge the Ghost Bear," Einar nodded.

But the guerrillas seemed determined not to perish easily. Just at the edge of his no-longer-amplified vision, Einar spotted a handful of figures slipping from shadow to shadow—fugitives seeking to escape from the battlefield rather than face an honorable death, or being taken as *isorla* by the victors.

With a roar, Einar launched himself at the enemy. His left arm swung up, its machine gun chattering. A few of the shadowy forms tumbled to the ground. The rest turned, panic showing in their actions, and attacked their attacker.

Automatic rifle fire clawed at him to pock his armored arms and legs. A faint green thread burned through the smoke-laden air to scorch the dark gray paint on his breastplate.

Still the Elemental charged forward. A small object hurtled at him. Grenade fragments clattered off his armor. Some found their way through the gaping tear in Einar's helmet. Metal gouged the flesh of his face and neck, cracked three teeth, and ruined the cartilage of his left ear.

Then, Einar was among them, and the foes of the Ghost Bear perished.

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"Well, Point Commander Einar, you are resting comfortably?"

"I am too comfortable, Star Captain Arden Vong." Einar replied, looking up at his commander from the hard steel and plastic chair he occupied while a field surgeon sealed up the last of his wounds. His wounds were more severe than Einar had initially thought. One piece of shrapnel had penetrated the thick muscles of his neck, stopping only half a centimeter from his carotid artery.

But it *had* stopped, and he had killed every one of the guerrillas who challenged him.

"*Huh*," Vong snorted. "You did well, Point Commander. Take time to heal, then return to duty."

She spun on her heel and was gone.

Elemental Thea stepped up to take Vong's place.

"So, Point Commander, when will you return to Strana Mechty?"

"Why should I return to the homeworlds?" Einar asked.

"You must." A thin smile creased Thea's craggy face. "You must undergo The Clawing. If you do not, those facial scars may give people cause to think you have. And deceit is not Clanlike."

Thea turned to go, leaving a bark of laughter in her wake.

ARTIST: DAVID MARTIN
PUBLICATION: INVADING CLANS
YEAR: 1994

ARTIST: JEFF LAUBENSTEIN
PUBLICATION: WOLF CLAN SOURCEBOOK
YEAR: 1991

ARTIST: MATT PLOG/CHRIS LEWIS
PUBLICATION: TECHMANUAL
YEAR: 2007

THE TOADS

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: RICK HARRIS/MECHWARRIOR SECOND EDITION/1991 • JOEL BISKE/WOLF CLAN SOURCEBOOK/1991 • EARL GEIER/THE BATTLETECH COMPENDIUM/1990 • JEFF LAUBENSTEIN/WOLF CLAN SOURCEBOOK/1991 • WILL NICHOLS/A TIME OF WAR: THE BATTLETECH RPG/2009

ARTIST: KEVIN MCCANN
PUBLICATION: A GUIDE TO COVERT OPS
YEAR: 2004

REMAINING UNPERCEIVED

ROBERT CHARRETTE

HIAKRU-WELLER TRAINING FACILITY
HOFF
DRACONIS MARCH, FEDERATED SUNS
28 NOVEMBER 3021

"If anyone mentions effing ninjas to me again, I will effing kill him."

"Mickey," Sol chuckled, slapping me on the back as we shuffled out of the briefing room. "You're taking this stuff way too seriously."

"No, I'm not. We just lost three hours of our lives that we're never getting back. Three effing hours of *ninja might*, *ninja are said to*, and *it is believed that ninja . . .* Blah, blah, and effing blah. Not a definite word about threat potential in the here and now. Just a lot of holovid nonsense tarted up to make the intel boys look like they're earning their salaries.

"Why can't they brief us on the real covert ops threats, eh? What about some data on the effing Death Commandos that old man Liao uses, or Marik's Eagle Corps. And if they've got to bleat about the Kuritan threat, what about giving us the skinny on the effing DEST troopers? Why do we get briefed on fairy-tale assassins and saboteur refugees from Kuritan costume dramas?"

Sol shrugged. "Forewarned is fore-armed?"

"It only matters if it's real. Our own black ops boys are plenty good and can do half those so-called *ninjutsu* tricks themselves. Give our guys in the Foxes the right equipment, and they can do most of the rest. Everything else is just dramavid, know-nothing outgassing. If the brass want us forewarned, why ain't they warning us about what the real bad guys can do?"

"We got that brief last year. Remember?" Sol put an arm around my shoulder and whispered conspiratorially. "You know, we didn't start hearing about black-clad bad guy stuff till them NAIS big shots showed up. I think this bunch of domeheads has got some kinda paranoidal delusional thing going and all this stuff is just ta keep them happy. Them domeheads from the Institute get a little weird sometimes, and this bunch is weirder than most. You seen the headband their boss wears, right? It's one of them Kuritan haki-maki things. They say his dad was Kuritan, too. So maybe he got told bedtime stories about ninjas, you know? Scarred him for life kinda thing."

Sol was right about the timing. "Maybe you got something there," I admitted.

"Sure I am. Anyway, it don't matter. You and I been working security here for long enough to know that nobody's spooks are getting in here. Not with us on the job, right? You know I'm right, old buddy. The only ninja we're ever gonna see are the ones in that briefing."

"You are a dead man." He didn't know I was speaking prophetically. "You said that word."

Sol smirked. He was sure I wouldn't fulfill my vow and ace him, what with us having been partners since I got to base three years ago. He shouldn't have been so sure.

"I'll postpone your demise for the moment, but only because I've got a date this weekend that I don't want to miss on account of being in the guardhouse."

Sol laughed, long and hard. He kept chuckling the whole way back to barracks. We had the night shift, so we needed to catch some sleep while we could. I lay in my bunk, thinking about what he'd said.

There really hadn't been any talk about ninja before the Institute domeheads showed up. Maybe they knew something we didn't. Well, it was for effing sure they *did*, being genius scientists and all, but I'm talking about something practical, the sort of thing that might affect the life of poor schlumps like Sol and me, who had to guard the high and mighty domeheads and their toys. Or maybe it was what Sol was talking about—one of the eccentricities they were famous for. I have to tell you, my money was on the eccentricity horse in this race. Ninja. I mean, who could look at modern societies and really believe such fossils from Earth's Middle Ages still existed?

But the brass was worried about something, because they had doubled staffing since the Institute guys had showed up with that hammer-headed prototype BattleMech they were running on the test courses. You know, that medium chassis with the big old hatchet for a right arm. An effing hatchet. What were they thinking?

HOFF

World Name: Hoff
Star Type (Recharge Time): G4III (185 hours)
Position in System: 4
Time to Jump Point: 7.96 days
Number of Satellites: 1 (Spad)
Surface Gravity: 0.95
Atm. Pressure: Standard (Breathable)
Equatorial Temperature: 25° C (Temperate)
Surface Water Coverage: 73 percent
Recharging Station: Zenith
HPG Class Type: B
Highest Native Life: Mammals
Population Size (3021): 117,438,201
Socio-Industrial Levels: F (Primitive)-B-B-C-E

Hoff was originally settled for its agricultural potential, though it subsequently industrialized and became a center for advanced technology research. The Succession Wars wrecked the planet's industrial base and drove it to an unusually primitive state (analogous to Terra's early 19th century) centuries behind its neighbors, leaving it as a sleepy, agrarian world traded between Houses Davion and Kurita until the last years of the Third Succession War.

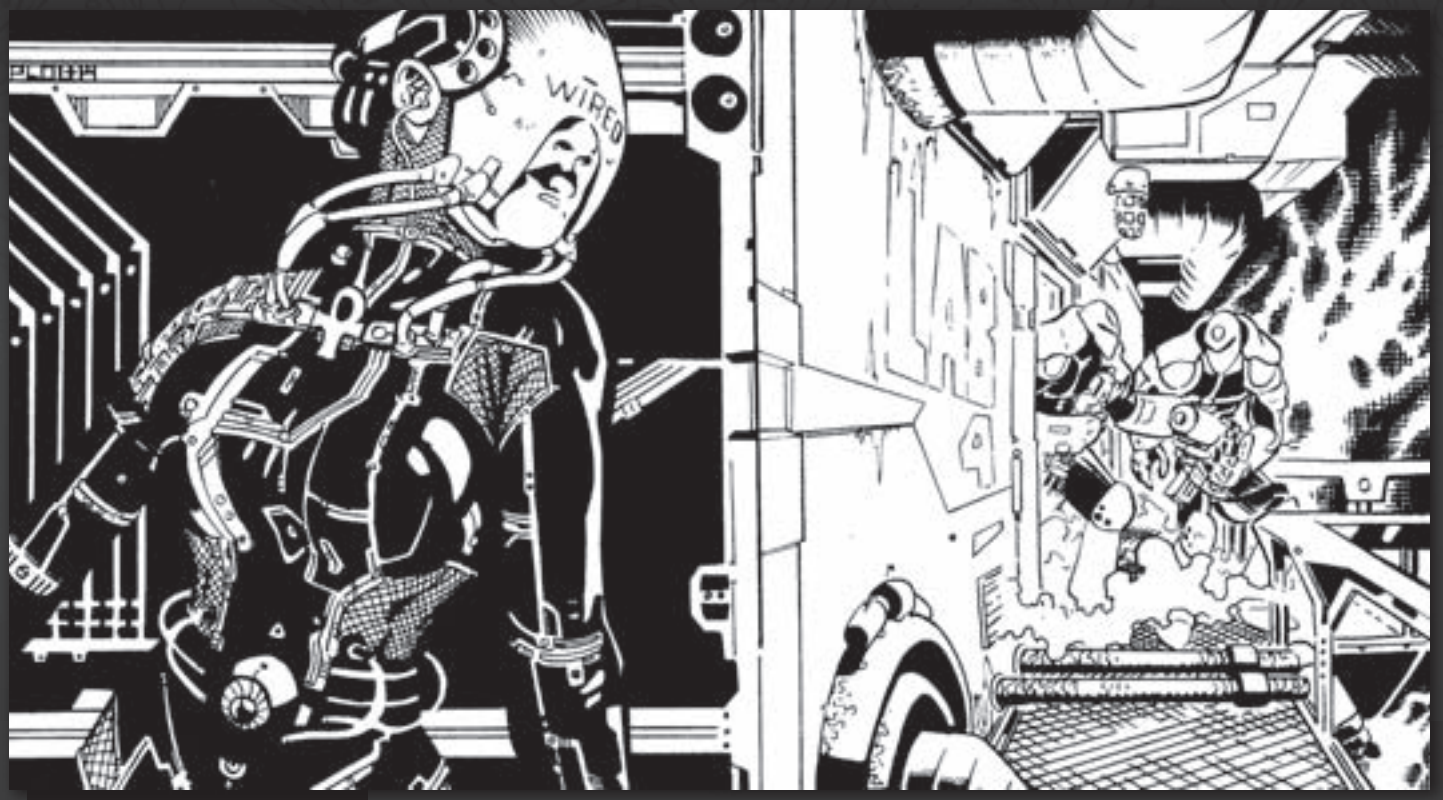
In 3019, the NAIS selected Hoff to host several advanced technology facilities, starting with the revival of the abandoned Friden Aerospace Park. This small spaceport has been turned into a test facility where NAIS scientists—including members of the famed Team Banzai—are rumored to be working on a number of new technologies.

While Hoff is unusually backward, Duke Bradley Cheel has not missed the possibilities presented by all the educated, brilliant personnel stationed at Friden and other NAIS-run facilities. Cheel has been bartering avidly with Hoff's assets—land, labor, and good food—to train a new crop of teachers, invest in infrastructure and spin-off light industries supporting the research centers.

Eccentric? More like crazy.

Even armed with something as weird as a hatchet, a new BattleMech design is a serious military secret, though. It's fair cop to be worried about word getting out about it, or anything associated with it. Like that new gizmo that came in two weeks ago, the one that's supposed to improve BattleMech function. I don't suppose I'll ever know what it does. Guards like Sol and me just don't got no need to know.

And you know what else? I don't really care. That's not my job. I just keep important stuff safe. And whatever that gizmo is, it's important. How do I know that when I don't know what it is? I'm not stupid, you know. The brass stepped up



ARTIST: MATT PLOG
PUBLICATION: MECHWARRIOR THIRD EDITION
YEAR: 1999

their alertness spot checks the day it arrived. They don't do that for unimportant stuff; it's too much work for them.

So what's the big deal with this thing? Of course that's not for us bottom-rung guys to know. They don't even tell us what it's called. Not that we don't know. You can't work security and not overhear stuff. So I know the domeheads call it an "oscillation overcompensator." Which tells me exactly nothing. I'm a footslogger, just a regular PBI, and not a lordly MechJock. Those 'Jocks, they're all overcompensating, if you ask me. You know what I mean?

Anyway, that's what we were guarding. Every morning a full squad of armed guards would watch the domeheads collect their little toy from the equipment bunker and escort it over to the 'Mech bunker. After the big tin man did his day's trials, another squad would escort it and the domeheads back to the equipment bunker and watch as they laid the gizmo into its storage crate for the night. I pulled that duty slot more than once.

And every night, turn on turn, we'd babysit it.

It was a very well-guarded storage crate in a very well-guarded equipment bunker on a very well-guarded base. It wasn't the sort of place that ninja or any other covert ops type got into. And if they did, getting out would have been even harder, once the alarm went up. And it would have gone up, if you know what I mean. We proved that a dozen times over when the Foxes tested us. Caught them every time. Sure there was that one time they got into the bunker, but they didn't get out, did they?

Like I said, Sol and me were on night shift, running the dead man's watch. As usual, we were on a randomized schedule, taking different patrol routes across the base and mixing up the outside patrols with building sweeps. Patrols with fixed schedules make it too easy for the bad guys. Even so, all the hoofing around the base was just a supplement to the real security, all the locks, alarm triggers, and vid surveillance. That's what really makes it hard on the bad guys. The extra patrols are just icing on the cake. It's the thing to do, I suppose, especially if you're babysitting something as supposedly-valuable as this overcompensator. Not that anybody asked my opinion.

I gotta tell you, those extra patrols were more work than we were used to, but what are you going to do? It's the job. And I know randomized start times and sweep orders are the way to go. I understand why it's got to be that way, but you have no idea what it does to the card games in the guardroom. I mean, shouldn't that be taken into account, you know, as a morale factor or something? Those unscheduled calls to duty were playing hob with my concentration. And as for how easy it made it for Sol to slip a few extra cards up his sleeve ...

But you don't want to hear that, do you?

Anyway, Sol had cheated his way through three card sessions and we were well into a fourth when the randomizer called us to duty. It was our fourth for the night. There were two other sweep teams already out on their own runs, so I didn't see the point of sending us out as well. Ours was not to reason why, so the cards went down. We did the usual cussing as we pulled on our armor and got our weapons from the locker. I mean, who really wants to go walkabout at o-dark-hundred on a cold winter night?

I checked the com panel to see what we'd drawn.

"Geez, we got an effing full perimeter sweep."

"Again?" Sol whined. It was the second of the night. The rest of the guys waiting for their calls made the usual bad jokes about us enjoying ourselves on our little stroll.

Sol leaned over my shoulder to check the panel for himself. "At least we've only got the one building check this time around."

I saw he was right. Just one. And it was the equipment bunker. I smiled.

"What are you grinning about?" Sol asked as he fastened his helmet's chinstrap.

"It's end-of-sweep," I told him. "You know I hate the way the sweat you build up when you're inside chills you out as soon as you hit the outside air. I only get to have that fun once this time."

Multiple buildings checks, with the constant in and out, are the worst on cold nights.

It was 03:02 when we clocked out of the guardroom. It had been effing cold outside—it had gotten effing colder. We shivered our way through the compound. The most notable thing was that there was nothing to note. The place was as still as always. We didn't even see any of the other two teams on their rounds. Other than the scuff of our boot soles and the rustle of our belt loads against our body armor, there was nothing to hear. We kept it that way as long as we were outside, not so much to follow the book but because Sol likes it that way. He even waxes poetical about the blessed quiet of the night when you get him drunk enough.

We weren't drunk enough, though. Not even a little. Though I got to say I wouldn't have minded a little alcoholic blood warmer at that point. Like I said, it was effing cold.

Sol's odd fascination with night's quiet aside, it does get really quiet in the deep night, quiet in a way that sometimes seems more than normal. It's not something that only happens when trouble is about to come stomping in on you and ruin your day, like in the dramavids. It's a natural thing. And this night was quiet, very

quiet. It was the kind of quiet that, if I was a character in a holonovel, I'd be saying it was too quiet.

And you know what happened next?

Nothing.

We finished the perimeter walk and reached the equipment bunker at 03:45. I watched Sol's back as he punched in his code and ran the biometric scans. The door slid aside and a blast of blessedly warm air hit us. He stepped inside and turned to cover me as I took my turn at the keypad. I fumbled it, and I cussed. My hands were numb from the cold. I bet the guys monitoring the vid surveillance on the door were amused, sitting there all nice and warm at their monitor station. I blew the second try, too. I got it right on the third try, did my biometrics, and joined Sol inside. We both watched until the door closed. Nobody came through with us. There were no shadows, barely glimpsed, rushing toward the door to slide something into place to hold it open. It was another quiet night, just like every night since the pumped-up security routine got dumped on us.

As the door lock light came on Sol observed, "Warmer in here."

Master of observation, that Sol. Rubbing my hands together, I agreed. I'm a master, too.

The bunker's lighting was low, per AFFS regs on power conservation. The gloomy ceiling wasn't that far over our heads, but we couldn't see the structural beams without using our night goggles. Which we didn't. Quartermaster Sergeant Zerbinski was unpleasant to us working stiffs when we brought back depleted batteries, so we used them only when it made sense to use them. The subdued glow panels scattered along the walls spilled separate pools of light that were bright enough to navigate by. Still, it was gloomy and there were shadows everywhere. If you were the sort to get easily spooked, you might have found the atmosphere perfect for your paranoia, but we were used to it.

The ferrocrete walls echoed our steps as we walked down the access ramp. At the first turn, Sol stopped and put a hand on my arm. I stopped, too.

"Did you hear something?" he asked.

I told him I hadn't. The only people authorized for the bunker this time of day were us guards and the Institute honchos. None of the domeheads had been logged in as present, and we were the only security team in the building. We looked back the

ARTIST: JIM HOLLOWAY
PUBLICATION: INTELLIGENCE OPERATIONS HANDBOOK
YEAR: 1993

way we had come and saw nothing. He shrugged, and we moved on.

He stopped me again at the third turn. There was still nothing to be seen.

"You're jumpy tonight," I told him.

He huffed out a sigh. "Must be all that ninja talk."

I did not kill him at that point. It wasn't the right time.

We checked the first locker at 03:55 and moved on through the others in sequence. Sol didn't hear any more phantom sounds. We reached the last chamber at 04:15. The oscillation overcompensator was sitting in its charging cradle, just like it had been when the last team had checked through a half hour before. I walked across to check the settings on the storage crate, because the domeheads wanted a log of its environmental status. I called in the numbers then clicked off the com and turned, ready to make some witty remark to Sol about getting back to his cheating.

Dropping down from the ceiling behind Sol was a dark figure with its hands folded across its chest. As those hands passed Sol's head, they moved apart. I couldn't see the cord but I could see the line of blood that sprang up across Sol's neck, just above the collar of his flak jacket.

It was over before I could move.

Sol was down, his neck pumping blood as his head rolled away.

I have to admit I froze for a moment. I was the effing one who was supposed to kill him, not somebody else.

I took in a lot in that moment, the way you do when time seems to freeze. I saw that the assassin was dressed in some kind of mottled, dark gray body suit, a perfect match for the facility's ferroconcrete. I noted the style of that suit. If it had been black, it could have come out of the morning briefing. An effing ninja suit. But there was a holstered pistol on one hip, modern web gear, and heavy goggles covering the eyes. This was no fairy tale.

In that moment I also realized I was facing a woman. I've never much liked killing women, but I've done it when I had to. Better them than me, you know? She had killed Sol in less time than it takes to tell it. I was next on her list.

My weapon was slung. I went for it, fast as I could.

She took a step towards me, holding her right hand out to the side. I swear, an unsheathed sword flew out of the darkness and into her hand like she was some kind of mystic space knight. It spooked me, I gotta tell you it did.

That blackened blade was coming for my head. I didn't have time to do much. Not enough to bring my weapon's muzzle into line. But I did get the barrel up against the outside of her sword, deflecting it. That sword didn't cleave through my helmet and into my skull as she intended. Instead, it slithered down my shoulder armor. In my peripheral vision, I saw a wafer-thin slice of metal flutter away. The Davion sword-and-sun flashed in the light as the slice tumbled like a wind-caught autumn leaf.

I think that's when I pissed my pants.

The effing sword had to be an old Star League monomolecular-edged blade. I knew I was lucky I hadn't caught the blade's edge during the deflection. I also knew my plan to catch the next cut against my weapon barrel and magazine to trap it was in the crapper. That thing was more than sharp enough to cut through anything I was wearing or holding. I had to dodge her shots.

I figured that if I could get outside her reach far enough to bring my weapon into play, I'd drill her. But I had already seen how fast she was and didn't fancy my chances of that. That left me only one option. I had to get inside her reach where the sword couldn't play. I was bigger than her, probably stronger. In close was where I wanted to be.

Somehow I managed to dodge her next strike, and the one after that. Then my back slammed up against the wall. I felt conduit against my neck and my shoulders pressed against support arches. She paused. Maybe she was savoring the moment of the kill. I don't effing know.

The sword came for my neck. I ducked. There was a shock and a sudden coolness against my scalp. I figure her stroke took off a slice of my helmet. That sword was too effing sharp.

Which, it turns out, was good for me. Her stroke went on to hit the arch on my right and burrow into it. It went deep. Too deep for her to pull it out quickly.

I didn't give her time to free it. I jammed my weapon between us, trying to get the muzzle under her chin. I fired. My shots killed the ceiling real good. I felt my index finger snap as she twisted the weapon out of my hands.

I tried to fight through the pain. She caught my left wrist as I grabbed at her. Slipping under my arm, she went for the arm break. Like I said, she was smaller than me so that move wasn't going to be easy for her. But she was good. As she spun, her foot brushed against the back of my knee. The tendon folded. My own body had betrayed me into her play.

Clinically, I know what happened. Both my elbow and shoulder joints were dislocated, but I never felt that through the explosion of pain that came with the shattering of my humerus.

Somewhere in that inferno of pain, our positions shifted. I guess I got a grip on her with my good arm and shoved her against the wall. I felt something shift as we hit. The effing sword. Our combined weight levered it free and started spinning its monomolecular point right at me. I got my elbow up and got lucky; I caught it on the flat. The blade flipped over, still spinning. I think it kissed her throat and touched her jugular, because there was a sudden spray of red.

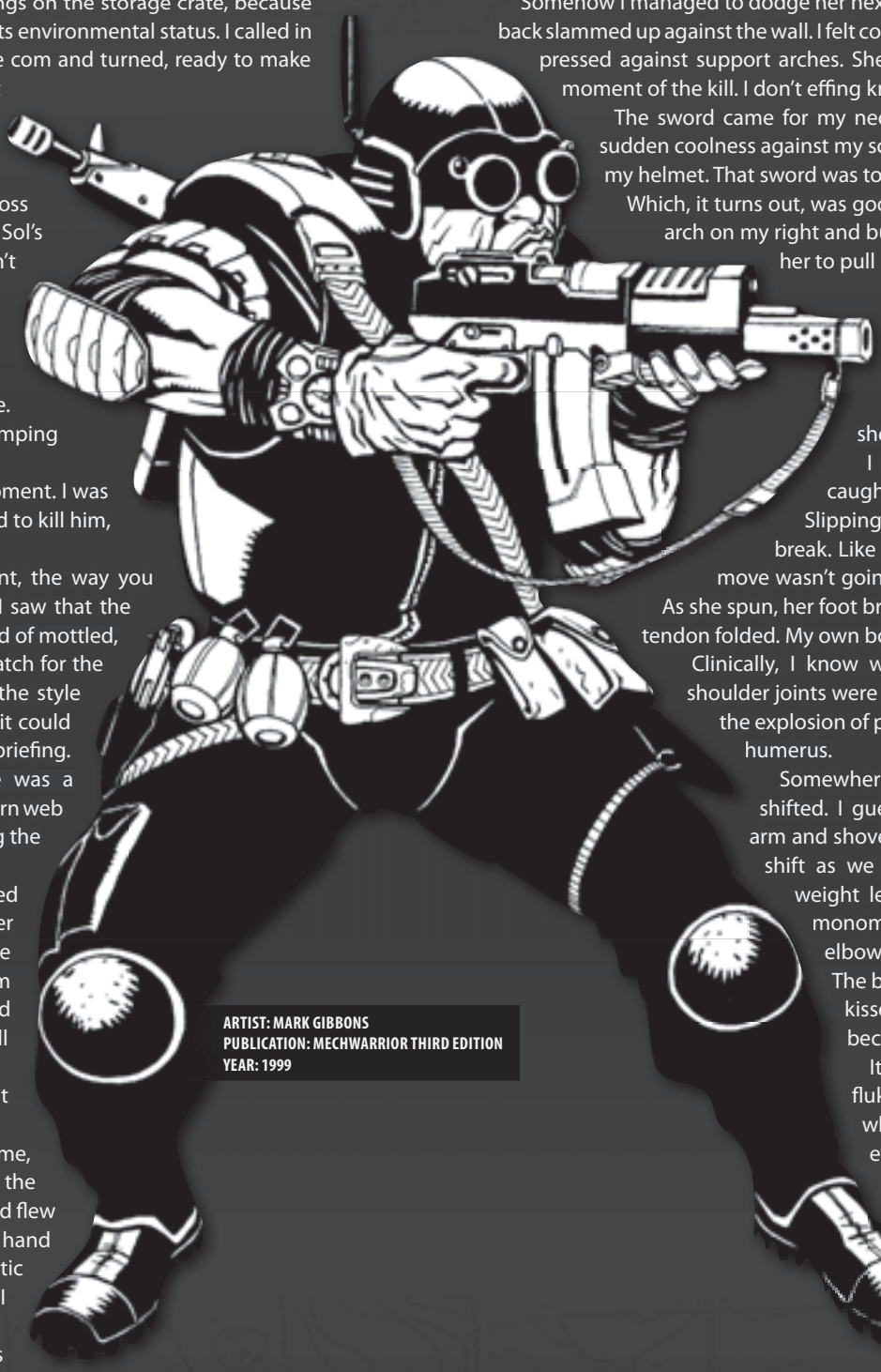
It was a fluke. I know it was an effing fluke, but in a situation like that, you take what you can get and are thankful. I was effing thankful.

I felt the life go out of her.

She crumpled to the floor as I stepped back. Me? I was puking out my guts.

I know, I know. I should have called in then and there. *You* try being rational and thinking clearly with parts of you broken and pain screaming in your head. Anyway, when her sword cut my helmet, it trashed my helmet's com-link.

I stared at her. Her goggles were gone now, and I saw her almond eyes, brown and lifeless. There was a cloth band around her brow, like that *hachimachi* thing the lead domehead wears. This one had a unit flash, gray on gray and nearly invisible against the fabric. I didn't recognize the design, but it was a Kuritan motif. I wasn't surprised by that.



ARTIST: MARK GIBBONS
PUBLICATION: MECHWARRIOR THIRD EDITION
YEAR: 1999

ARTIST: LIAM CURTNER
PUBLICATION: A TIME OF WAR: THE BATTLETECH RPG
YEAR: 2009

No, my surprise came when I stumbled to the com console to call for back-up and a new voice spoke.

"You can call no one. It is disabled."

I turned to see another effing ninja. This one was a man, as big as me but leaner. There were wisps of red hair peeking out from beneath his cowl. The effing monomole sword was in his hands. He must have picked it up when I turned my back. Where he'd been before that, I have no effing idea.

"Kill with the sword, die by the sword. It's not just poetic, it's an honor." He flourished the blade, flicking the last few drops of his fellow ninja's blood to spatter the wall, before bringing the point in line with my eyes. "Now, my troublesome Fedrat, it is your honor."

He blurred into motion.

I didn't feel the strike that took off my right arm at the shoulder. I *did* feel the elbow that smashed into my mouth. I lost teeth. His leg swept my feet from beneath me and I went down, cracking my head against the floor.

I passed out.

The rest is hazy at best. I was fading back and forth, but I remember images like frozen moments in a strobe light.

Feet in front of my face. Those effing split-toed *tabi* boots walking away from me.

A shadow man hefting the overcompensator in his hand. But it's in the storage crate, too.

Blood pooling. Mine. Bright red.

A hand fumbling with a wound sealer spray. My hand? Hell, it had to be my hand. Would the effing ninja bandage me?

The alarm. Loud, but very, very far away.

Medics bending over me. Shouting.

Pain. Universes of it.

More feet. Boots running everywhere.

Blackness. Lots of long, deep blackness.

My memories don't get coherent until the second or third time I woke up in the base hospital.

Anyway, that's what happened. I don't remember anything else about the incident. I don't know how they got in. I don't know what happened to the intruder's body. That's it.

▲▼▲

"Recorded and sealed by Corporal Mickey Rearden," stated a synthesized voice. "1 February 3022. 13:45. Filed at Hiak—"

I shut it up, flopping the leaden lump that had been my left hand before the ripping away of my weapon had broken fingers and ripped nerves and tendons beyond repair on to the effing off switch.

The man sitting across the table let silence fill in the shadow-filled room. I couldn't see his expression. He might have been pondering the report, or he might have been asleep, bored by it all. After several minutes of silence that grew ever more annoying, he asked a question.

"They accepted the report at face value?"

"Yeah. All the way up the chain. They gave me these." Thumping the shiny bits of metal on my chest. "The Badge of Valor and the effing Medal of Valor. Aaron Sandoval himself put them around my neck and offered me the thanks of a grateful star nation. In place of my right arm, I've got a promotion and pension from the crown."

"And what of the overcompensator that the intruder left behind?"

"A fake, of course. A ruse to fool the monitors until morning. It was supposed to buy time for the infiltration team to escape."

"Which they did handily."

I didn't like his choice of phrase, but I kept my mouth shut and let him continue.

"Other sources confirm that the shell was a perfect copy while inside was nothing but sand, measured to match the proper weight. That sand was an interesting touch, as it was green silica with a chemical signature unique to the beaches of the Weyyan island chain on the Marik world of Bordon. A clever use of misdirection, somewhat devalued by your report and the identification of the operatives' unit flash as Kuritan."

His teeth glinted as he smiled. I don't know which he appreciated more, the Kuritan attempt at misdirection or that fact that the misdirection had been unmasked. I know which part I liked best.

"And what about your fumbling at the access point? It raised no concerns?"

"Nobody questioned it. The codes you supplied were good, so they never registered the entry of our agent. I hope he got out okay. I wouldn't be here if he hadn't sealed my wound before I bled out."

"His fate is not your concern. You did all that was asked of you. It is not your fault that our plans were preempted by the actions of the Kuritans. The important matter is that the overcompensator is removed from Davion hands. There may be future opportunities for it to come into our hands. For the moment all is well."

Well? Who did he think he was kidding? *I am an effing one-armed cripple, you bastard!* I wanted to shout it at him, but you don't shout at a special operative of Max Liao's Maskirovka, and you most certainly don't call him a bastard to his face. Not if you want to leave a room alive.

He shifted slightly in his seat. Could he feel my rage? His voice didn't waver in the least.

"You shall continue in your role. Gather intelligence for us. You current circumstances should offer some unique opportunities." He rose, still in the shadows, and stepped to the door that I couldn't see in the darkness. I heard it open. "You have your orders. And you have the thanks of a grateful star nation."

Then he was gone.

I didn't curse him to burn in seven different hells until I was sure he was out of effing earshot.

I haven't seen him since that meeting. I've made a life for myself, as much as an effing crippled Davion pensioner can. I go to the veterans' hospitals and I hang around the bases. People talk to me about a lot of stuff, and some of it would probably be of interest to certain parties. I haven't told anyone anything. But I will tell you one thing. And you better believe it.

If anyone mentions effing ninja to me again, I will effing kill him.

ARTIST: ALEX IGLESIAS
PUBLICATION: BATTLETECH INTRODUCTORY BOX SET (25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION)
YEAR: 2009

ARTIST: TODD LOCKWOOD
PUBLICATION: BATTLETECH FOURTH EDITION
YEAR: 1996

ARTIST: FRANZ VOHWINKEL
PUBLICATION: COMBAT EQUIPMENT
YEAR: 2005

ARTIST: FRANZ VOHWINKEL
PUBLICATION: CLASSIC BATTLETECH: THE GAME OF ARMORED COMBAT
YEAR: 2002

ARTIST: FRANZ VOHWINKEL
PUBLICATION: TECHMANUAL
YEAR: 2007

MARSH OWL

KEVIN KILLIANY

KENNEBUNKPORT AIRFIELD
ORLEANS PROVINCE, PROSERPINA
BENJAMIN MILITARY DISTRICT, DRACONIS COMBINE
2 FEBRUARY 3066

Locals swore the Orleans marsh owl was mostly harmless, despite its appearance. Petty Officer Technician Terry Ohn was not so sure. The nocturnal hunter had a stout, muscular body, a wingspan of more than a meter, and a heavy, sharply curved beak; everything it needed to be very dangerous. Though he'd been assured the powerful beak was designed for cracking the shells of the armored newts that made up the bulk of its diet, not tear human flesh, Terry was certain the bird could improvise if it wanted to.

Which is why he gave the Orleans marsh owl sleeping on the bandstand at the rear of the observation lounge a wide birth. It had appeared, nest and all, a week ago. At first he'd though its presence meant an end to his daily retreats, but for seven days it had done nothing but sleep soundly during his visits. Today the bird seemed to be sleeping more on its nest than in it; he suspected there was a new clutch of eggs beneath it—her.

The VIP observation lounge of the *Zephyr*-class luxury airship was half an oval of opulence framed by a curving row of viewports—though Terry doubted floor-to-ceiling expanses of clear crystalline could properly be called "ports." A circular skylight above the half-oval's focus illuminated the central bar. Watery sunlight infused the ivory leather—not neoleather—and exotic woods with radiance; brass and crystal glittered. Terry skirted the island of light, staying in the cool shadows as he wove between tables and lounge chairs to his accustomed seat.

He knew if he looked up through the skylight, he'd see Proserpina's great arc of its planetary ring, visible from this latitude as a ghostly fan of silver above the blue-white sky. When he'd arrived on-planet—was it only two weeks ago?—he thought he'd never grow tired of staring at the spectacular arc. Now….

Finding his place—a loveseat at the left end of the long row of couches, loveseats, and divans that faced the great wall of viewports—Terry unslung his shoulderbag and set it on the low table. He noted, not for the first time, how its square, utilitarian lines clashed with the elegant opulence of his surroundings as he unpacked his water bottle, noteputer, and thermal bowl of stew.

Fingers of breeze wafted across the observation lounge from the gaping frame that had held the starboard viewports and tugged at his thinning hair. Terry smoothed his transparent comb-over out of habit, well aware the gesture was futile, and settled into his loveseat. The air forced from the leather—not neoleather, he could not stop marveling—upholstery seemed to echo his contented sigh as he sank into the cushion's depths.

He glanced to his left, but neither sound seemed to have disturbed the new mother in her sleep.

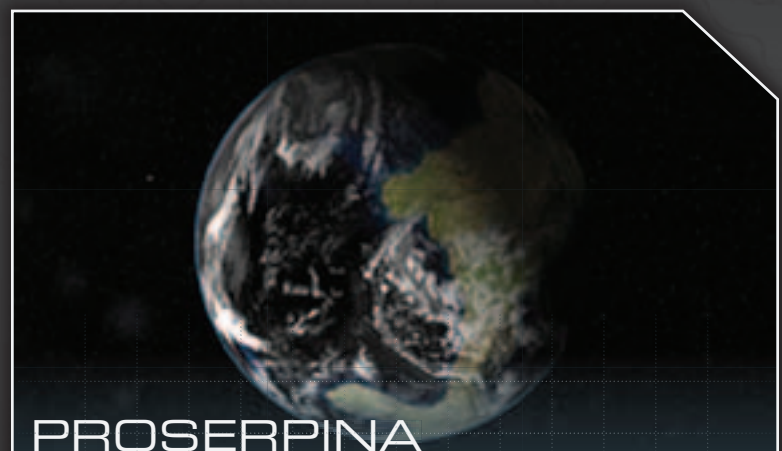
Terry surveyed the swarming activity of the salvage yard spread below his vantage like a tabletop game. The silver rings of Proserpina could not compare to the bustling activity surrounding the dozen BattleMechs that stood or lay on the tarmac; humanoid giants among the mechanical corpses of land tugs and harvesters, shuttles and airliners. But these latest arrivals to Kennebunkport Airfield weren't corpses. They were wounded warriors, waiting amongst the sensor-confounding masses of refined and rusting metal for the fabled salvage and repair techs of the Twelfth Dieron Regulars to restore them to life.

And central among then was his current pride, only the fourth BLR-K3 *BattleMaster* to step out of the assembly bays at Luthien. It was at once a venerated design whose very antiquity demanded respect, and a variant so new that repair templates were not available to frontline units. The latter aspect was a problem, given the amount of damage the war machine had taken, but that obstacle only added to the honor of having his crew chosen to effect its restoration.

Terry had heard *Tai-shu* Isoroku Kurita himself had offered the *BattleMaster* to *Tai-sa* Katherine Stavrakos in recognition for her leading the Twelfth in their brilliant rescue of the Forty-sixth Dieron on Ashio, then assuming command of the combined force to drive the Davions from the planet. In one week, she had ended a battle that had dragged on for months. The way the story came to Terry, *Tai-sa* Stavarkos had graciously deferred the gift, citing her desire to continue to serve the Coordinator as her father had—at the helm of Stavrakos family's *Katana*. Instead, his *Tai-sa* had humbly requested her *Tai-shu* award the *BattleMaster* to *Chu-sa* Isoguri. His family's *Hatamoto-Chi*, in which Isoguri had fought valiantly against the Ghost Bear Clan on Kiesen, had been destroyed by a Davion DropShip's heavy guns even as the cowardly enemy had scrambled to escape his rightful wrath.

Terry had seen none of that. Nor had he witnessed the battle—or series of battles—on Proserpina that had reduced the magnificent machine below him to a walking ruin. None of that mattered. What mattered was the *BattleMaster* was now all his. Or, more properly, his responsibility until he and his crew restored it to combat readiness.

If pressed, Terry would admit the MechWarriors of the Twelfth Dieron Regulars were probably better known than the techs who kept their war machines in



PROSERPINA

World Name: Proserpina
Star Type (Recharge Time): K2V (193 hours)
Position in System: 4
Time to Jump Point: 4.85 days
Number of Satellites: 1 (Taikata)
Surface Gravity: 0.98
Atm. Pressure: Standard (Tainted)
Equatorial Temp: 25° C (Temperate)
Surface Water: 67 percent
Recharging Station: Zenith, Nadir
HPG Class Type: A
Highest Native Life: Reptiles
Population (3066): 2,173,050,000
Socio-Industrial Levels: A-B-B-A-B

Proserpina is the archetypical core world of the Inner Sphere: a world that thrived under Terran management and has suffered almost three centuries of abuse and violence at the hands of the Inner Sphere and Periphery. Stephen Amaris started Proserpina's fall, but it was the unmitigated violence wrought by the Great Houses that truly ravaged the world. Two of its five continents are uninhabitable thanks to the Succession Wars, and nerve and biological agents continue to taint the air and water across the planet.

Despite its battered state, Proserpina continues to demonstrate the industrial might of a core world. Its rich mineral veins and thriving industries give its inhabitants (in their sealed and filtered homes) an enviable standard of living and enable it to export critical military goods to whichever House rules it in a given year.

fighting trim, but that improbable factoid did not concern him. The people who understood the nature of war knew that while battles were won through valor and blazing guns, it was determined techs delivering solid maintenance that enabled victory. And among those who understood this truth, the Grease Monkeys of Unswervable Power were legend.

Terry wedged a fragment of broken ashtray under the downhill edge of his noteputer, adjusting until he found a comfortable reading angle. His eyes flickered from the diagnostic assessment of the BattleMech's damage to the machine itself as he ate his lamb stew. Someday he would marry a woman who cooked as well as the new petty officer of the mess.

Chu-sa Isoguri's *BattleMaster*—temporarily Petty Officer Terry Ohn's *BattleMaster*—had died of a thousand cuts. More than five tons of armor had been pared away, exposing snaking myomer muscles along its left arm and both legs. And four of its eighteen heat sinks had been destroyed. Both of these were simple enough repairs. Routine. Except that without repair templates, his people were having to fabricate armor plates from scratch. And, though Luthien Armor Works had brought almost everything else up to Draconis standards, the cooling system was still completely Lyran. His people were having to hand-machine adapter couplings for each new heat sink; they were lucky the Lyran models used a refrigerant similar to what he had in stock.

More problematic were the weapons. Unlike other K3 variants, this 'Mech retained the paired extended range medium lasers in the left torso, instead of mounting them to the rear. One of the lasers was a loss—its capacitor bank fatally fractured by the impact that had shattered its external tube. That was another quick fix: remove the Lyran RAMTech 1500Z and modify the mounts to accept a good Diverse Optics model. The second was more of a problem. It was salvageable, which meant the quartermaster wouldn't let Terry simply swap it out—resources were scarce, even for the *Chu-sa*. It would have to be repaired, modifying Draconis parts to fit a Lyran weapon. Labor intensive, but doable. The second pair of ER medium lasers—which the Luthien designers had moved from the right torso to the left arm—field-tested operational. But Terry wouldn't trust that testimony until their heat sinks were online and he squeezed the trigger himself. Of course, the brace of Diverse Optics Sunbeam ER large lasers Luthien had mounted high on the *BattleMaster*'s chest were in perfect working order. He wasn't aware of a more rugged design. The big problem—

Terry's handset sounded, its nerve-jarring buzz scattering his thoughts.

He silenced it, but not quickly enough.

A nails-on-chalkboard screech of outrage brought him to his feet. Facing the new mother, he spread his hands in what he hoped was a placating gesture.

"It's okay…."

The marsh owl was having none of it. Glaring balefully, she advanced to the edge of the bandstand and spread her wings wide, shielding her nest.

"Your eggs are inedible," Terry explained, trying to keep his voice light and tension-free. "And note the brown coveralls; I'm a technician, not a fighter."

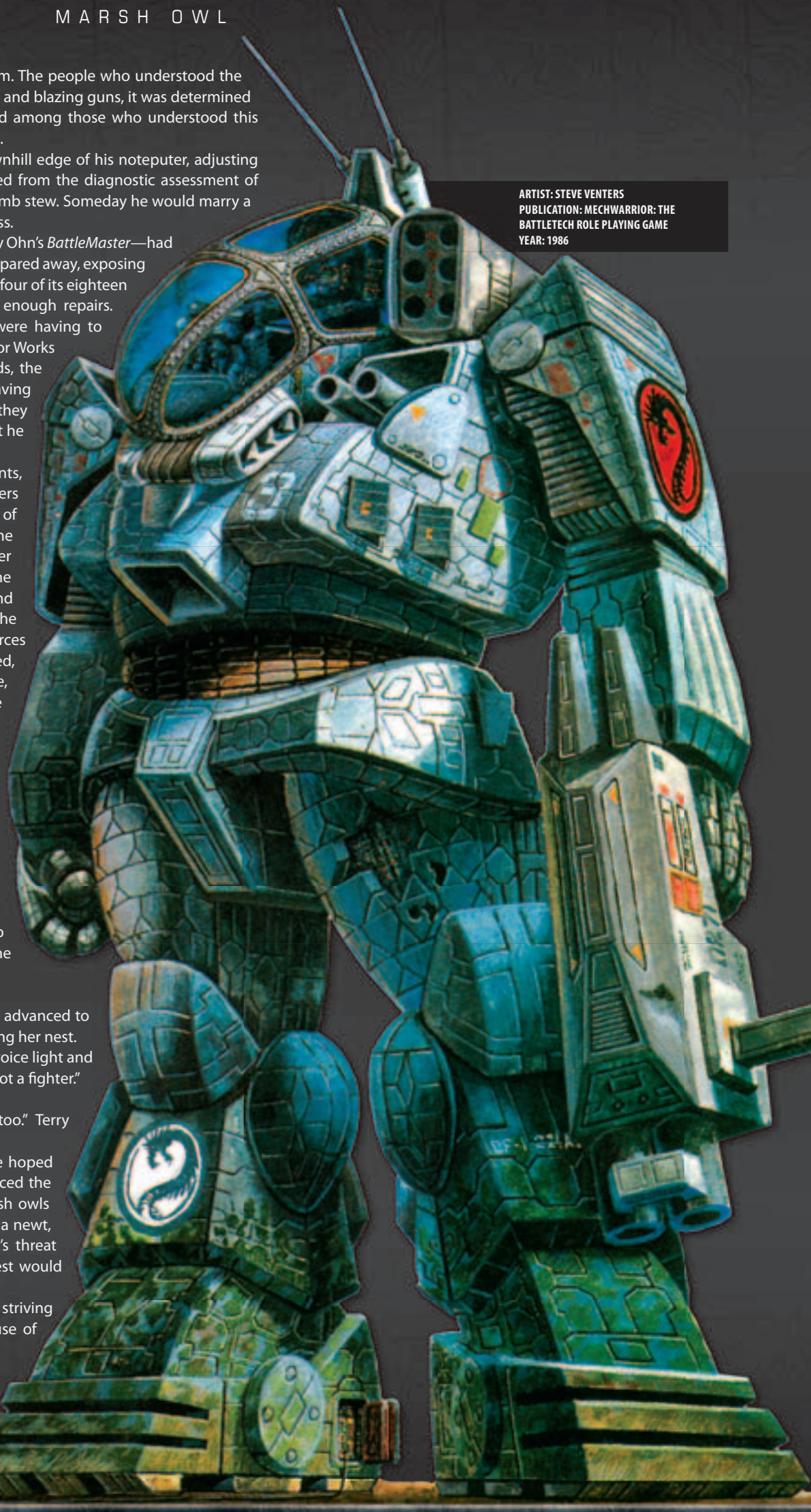
The owl screeched again.

"I'm irritable when I'm woken out of a sound sleep, too." Terry sympathized.

He kept his movements slow, continuing to make what he hoped were soothing sounds as he collected his noteputer and policed the remains of his lunch. He reminded himself that Orleans marsh owls were officially harmless, never attacking anything larger than a newt, but the argument wasn't convincing in the face of Mother's threat display. Terry was certain any attempt to get close to her nest would end badly.

"Very clever repurposing of that speaker housing," Terry said, striving for placating sincerity as he eased toward the exit. "Good use of found materials, too. That's a lot like what I do on my job."

Whether or not the owl agreed was not clear. The bird shifted position as he moved, keeping herself between Terry and her clutch. She did not screech again, but her gimlet gaze never wavered.



ARTIST: STEVE VENTERS
PUBLICATION: MECHWARRIOR: THE BATTLETECH ROLE PLAYING GAME
YEAR: 1986

"In fact, I think I'll be getting back to work now."

He shut the door gently and hurried down the dark corridor. Fishing his handset from its belt holster, he keyed the recall.

"Go," he said when Technician Petrocelli acknowledged.

"New conduit and juncture assembly for the right arm weapons array just arrived," she answered. "If we pull the crew off the leg armor, we can get the linkage installed and snake the myomer before the housing arrives."

"Get started. I'm on my way."

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EIGHTH CRUCIS LANCERS OPERATIONS HQ
ORLEANS, PROSERPINA
DRACONIS MARCH, FEDERATED SUNS

Leftenant Eunice "Mike" Michelson studied the map on the wall screen, aware it was identical to her noteputer's display, as she half-listened to the Major briefing the recon company.

The Davion green doughnut toward the right was Orleans, Michelson and the MechWarriors around her; the blue covering the lower right corner the ocean at their backs; the tan to the south the Orleans Fen, a blend of marsh, plain and prairie stretching flat as a pool table from the Great Dismal Swamp until it abruptly became an alkali desert. To the upper left, amid the grey that depicted mountains, was the gold sunburst of the Goddard Dropport; once the Lancers' base of operations, now the heart of the Draconis occupation.

"Morally, Proserpina is a member world of the Federated Suns," Major Huxtable was saying. "Strategically, a strongly garrisoned Proserpina is vital to the security of the Draconis March. But tactically our position on Proserpina has become problematic. Whether we hold this world now or must launch a costly campaign to retake it later will depend on our next action. Quite frankly, we no longer have the resources nor the support of the locals to win a war of attrition. Victory will depend on bold and decisive action."

Mike tuned him back out, studying the tacsit as she waited for him to get to the meat of the mission.

Between the doughnut of Orleans and the golden sunburst was a mottled expanse of greens and browns denoting a variety of terrains, several black lines representing roads, and two large red crescents marking the location of their enemies. Or as near the locations as their limited intel could place them. The First Ghost to the north, the First Sword of Light to the east of the Ghosts. Neither force matched the Eighth Crucis Lancers, even in their depleted state, but the two combined presented a serious obstacle.

A much less defined shape, an area of red to the west and south so diffused it appeared pink, indicated the suspected range of operations for the Twelfth and Forty-fifth Dieron Regulars—the Drac units tasked with mopping up tertiary targets while the big boys faced off against the Islamabad Sluggers of the Eighth. Even less was known about these units beyond the fact that they had Clan experience and that the relatively fresh Twelfth, which usually fielded relatively fast medium 'Mechs, had surprised First Battalion with a company of heavies and assaults. Including at least one *BattleMaster* among the *Naginatas* and *O-Bakemonos*. Where the Dieron Regulars were now was the stuff of speculation—with some credible theories placing them as far away as Conqueror's Pride.

"—How far will depend on what we find," Major Huxtable was saying. "While it would be tempting to hope the alkali flats would make perfect DropShip pads, they are as unstable as the fens bordering the swamps. Where one is barely solid wetland, the other has pockets of dust in fine sand concealing pits, spires and God knows what else. A deathtrap for heavy BattleMechs, much less a DropShip."

Mike blinked. How had they gotten to DropShips? She tried to replay what Huxtable had been saying while she studied the map. No go; her brain was not a recorder.

"The Dracs believe the terrain west and south is effectively impassable to us; they're not covering that route," Huxtable smiled. "We could very well use their complacency to our advantage."

A curving line appeared on the wall screen, tracing a path from the doughnut down to the left before cutting sharply back up to the golden sunburst.

"This route keeps the Rhone River and the Dismal Swamp between us and the Dracs. There's a lot they can do to cut us off, but little they're likely to try. From their perspective, it will look as though we're letting the terrain defeat us."

From Mike's perspective, too, but she kept her face impassive, waiting for the Major to make his point.

"Our engineers have established a ford *here*," the point of the sudden up-turn glowed blue, "which will remain undetectable until we use it. And by the time we cross, we will have flanked the bulk of the Dracs."

"Sir?" Captain Forbes interrupted.

Mike sat up a bit and felt the other recon jockeys shift with her. Huxtable liked to talk and did not appreciate anyone interrupting his briefings with questions. But the Major nodded to Forbes with no sign of censure.

"Isn't that going too far around for too little advantage? Why not a broken field run, breaking west of the Rhone?"

"It may come to that," the Major agreed. "This probe could end up a feint, the vanguard of our breakout, or the first step towards something else entirely. It all depends on what we find.

Michelson frowned, first at the wall screen, then at her noteputer. The map was sketchy, lacking in detail. Small towns and large farms were denoted by dots without submaps. There could be a lot out there they didn't know about

"In many ways, the worst case scenario would be discovering we had a clear shot," the Major said. "Taking it would turn into a foot race over open terrain with no defensible place to go to ground between us and our objective. However, that apparent tactical suicide might make it our best strategic choice.

"Of particular interest is this facility," a gold ring appeared around one of the featureless dots. "Kennebunkport Airfield."

"Airfield?"

Michelson tried to look as though as if she had not blurted the question.

"Airfield," Major Huxtable confirmed. "Concrete and/or asphalt landing surface, completely unsuitable for DropShip use. *Repeated* DropShip use. It's our hope the Dracs have overlooked that qualifier. Because what it is is a flat and stable piece of land—with none of the sand traps or soup pits that make the plains useless to us—outside the umbrella the Dracs have thrown over Orleans."

Huxtable paused, looking over the map. "And that is the crux of the 'something else entirely' I just mentioned. Commodore Richardson has assembled a DropShip taskforce. They are prepared to touch down just long enough to take us aboard. I don't need to tell you the process will take several hours, but during that time our tactical airwaves will be filled with chatter about abandoning Proserpina unconditionally. Disinformation which we hope will slow the Dracs' hand.

"Because we are *not* leaving."

A line of gold dashes connected Kennebunkport Airfield to Goddard Dropport.

"What we will do is make a ballistic jump," Huxtable said. "It will be a rough trip, because our 'Mechs will travel unsecured—ready for rapid deployment. We will hit the ground at Goddard shooting. Break the back of the Drac occupation with all their combat assets out of position."

Mike nodded. It would reverse the tactical situation on Proserpina in a single action. Provided it worked.

"Our intel is old—Kennebunkport was not a point of interest until today," the Major smiled grimly. "The airfield was abandoned by commercial lines decades ago. It is—or was, last we knew—used by several local cargo concerns and has an extensive junkyard. It's something of a graveyard for transport vehicles.

"Now is the time for decisive action," Huxtable said. "We must carve out the heart of the Drac occupation. And we are presented with three choices on how to do that: Punch directly north, through the Drac lines. Head south of west along the fen, flanking the Dracs before turning north. Or head due south to Kennebunkport Airfield and jump over their forces to strike directly at their heart.

"We know what lies to our north. Your mission is to scout the fen and the airfield. Bring back the information we need to make the right choice."

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KENNEBUNKPORT AIRFIELD
ORLEANS PROVINCE, PROSERPINA
BENJAMIN MILITARY DISTRICT, DRACONIS COMBINE
03 FEBRUARY 3066

"Our own parts, *fabricated* to order."

Terry grinned at the wonder in Petroccelli's voice as he stood beside her, watching the flatbed truck back carefully into position. He knew her amazement was only half in jest.

The Ghost Bears had pounded the Twelfth Dieron mercilessly on Kiesen. Not because they had made it easy for the invaders. Quite the opposite. The warriors

of the Twelfth had fought valiantly, their courage had honored their forbearers and the Coordinator. But theirs was a rapid combat and deep recon regiment; over sixty percent of the BattleMechs they threw at the Clanners were light-mediums or lights. Ton for ton, the Twelfth was a match for any unit in the Inner Sphere or beyond; but such a light regiment simply could not stand up against a Galaxy of heavy and assault OmniMechs and win.

Simple survival—holding out until they could be extracted—had been a victory few of the Twelfth had hoped to see. But it was a victory that brought them neither honor nor respect. Indeed, many outsiders believed the Twelfth defeated and dishonored—out of combat for the duration of the war, if not out of the DCMS permanently. Pulled to a backwater world for refit and repair, the Twelfth had been forced to argue, beg, cajole, wheedle, and threaten for every scrap of armor, every piece of equipment, every round of ammo they received. There were those in the Quartermaster's Office who made no secret of their conviction the "late" Twelfth should be scavenged for parts, not allowed to siphon away materiel that should have gone to viable units. Units actually trading blows with the enemy.

MechWarriors transferred to the Twelfth had not wanted to come, but they had no choice. Their BattleMechs, scarred and battered by Clan Ghost Bear or the Federated Suns, bore testimony to the defeats they had suffered to warrant their transfers. But the determination, the heart, of the Arm of Unswervable Strength had been undimmed by Kiesen. *Chu-sa* Ambassa, Daily, and Isoguri had integrated the unwilling warriors into their ranks, forging each battalion into a new and stronger whole. Even as Warrant Officer Technician Terry Ohn and a dozen other crew chiefs rebuilt their battered 'Mechs into war machines worthy of any battle.

It had not been lost on Terry that every BattleMech transferred to the Twelfth was a heavy or an assault. *Tai-shu* Kurita still had faith in the wounded command, and was redressing the unfair imbalance that had given victory to the Clan. But from the daily campaigns necessary to wrest even the most basic of supplies from the Quartermaster's Office, Terry knew this trust was not apparent to everyone.

It had taken Ashio and a victory over the Robinson Rangers as decisive as their defeat at the hands of the Clan to reestablish the honor of the Twelfth. And to make possible this moment, the prompt delivery of a particle projection canon housing custom built to their specifications.

"Very pretty," drawled a voice from behind. "But the *Chu-sa* will require a working PPC, not a cosmetic prosthetic."

Terence grinned at Petty Officer Technician Lia Firenze, letting her know her legendary sour mood had no power to harm him.

"Observe the wisdom of her insight, Technician," he said to Petrocelli. "She has discerned a fatal flaw in our humble plan."

Firenze ignored him, her eyes only for the *BattleMaster*.

She had once been a candidate for a MechWarrior academy. Which one and how close she had come to piloting a BattleMech varied from telling to telling, but the fact remained she regarded herself as a MechWarrior temporarily Dispossessed, not a leader of a grease monkey crew. As Terry's social better, she bitterly resented his crew being awarded the mighty *BattleMaster* while her crew was relegated to restoring the *Grand Dragon* of *Chu-i* Dolan. That the young MechWarrior had nearly destroyed his 'Mech by recklessly outrunning his slower lancemates in his eagerness to engage the enemy seemed to add insult to the injury she felt her status had suffered.

"What goes in the housing?" she asked.

"Eventually a Lord's Light 2 Extended Range Particle Projection Cannon," Terry answered, always happy to talk shop. "Our challenge has been the design of the housing assembly. With the arm completely gone and no templates, we have had to extrapolate from what remained of the anchors and earlier recordings of the intact assembly.

"We thought it prudent to test our design for fit and finish before installing the weapon system."

"Prudent," agreed Firenze, her tone revealing nothing.

Without another word, she turned on her heel and was gone.

"Well," Petrocelli said, watching the muscular woman's broad back as she strode to her own work area and her crew swarming over their *Grand Dragon*, "It's good to know we have at least one MechWarrior to protect us."

"You think we need protection?"

"We are in the middle of nowhere. Just us, a dozen broken BattleMechs, an ad hoc machine shop and four thousand dead airplanes," Petrocelli replied. "If the Fedrats come our way we will be helpless."

"If the Fedrats try to cross the flats to reach the greater Kennebunkport metropolitan area and wildlife reserve, they'll show up like a roach on a wedding cake," Terence countered. "The Twelfth—those of us piloting working BattleMechs—would pound them to spare parts before they were halfway here."

Petrocelli looked doubtful.

Shielding her eyes from the watery sunlight, she peered to the north and west where she imagined the Davion forces lurked.

"If the Twelfth were really anywhere near us, our MechWarriors would be here, watching over every rivet and weld of their beloved 'Mechs," she said. "We are alone in a place our *Tai-sa* hopes the enemy will not look while every BattleMech that can fight is engaging an enemy somewhere too far away."

Terry's bantering reply died in the face of the young woman's obvious distress.

"Come, Technician," he said soberly, "Let us restore *Chu-sa* Isoguri's *BattleMaster* that he may complete the task of ridding Proserpina of our enemies."

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ORLEANS FEN
ORLEANS PROVINCE, PROSERPINA
DRACONIS MARCH, FEDERATED SUNS

Mike crouched in her command couch, willing her *Dart* to present the smallest possible aspect. Who knew what sensors and eyes swept the night, alert for audacious scouts? She kept her pace down, hoping the twenty-five ton machine wouldn't build up enough heat to trip a thermal alarm.

Though heat wasn't usually a problem for her 'Mech. Like most *Dart* jockeys, after her first brush with an enemy she'd traded out the three small pulse lasers for standard medium lasers. But where most MechWarriors traded three for three, she had opted for only two. Three medium lasers generated more heat than the *Dart*'s cooling system was designed to handle and to her the extra punch wasn't worth the risk of thermal shutdown. Or a scout 'Mech that glowed like an infrared beacon on a cool night. Mike had invested the ton freed up by the sacrificed laser in additional armor protecting key components. Like her cockpit.

She'd met pilots who sneered at her *Dart*'s anemic armament, but Mike never argued with them. The way she saw it, her job was not to fight; her job was to get in, get the information, and get out again without anyone knowing she was there. In her heart she suspected knowing her 'Mech couldn't shoot its way out of any trap she stumbled into had made her a better scout.

Above and behind her, the great silver arch of Proserpina's ring dominated the sky. No trouble finding north with the planet's equator so gloriously labeled.

Of course, the shimmering ring also lit up the marshy plain her lance was traversing like a half-dozen full moons. It did not cheer Mike at all that she could

easily pick out Thomlinson's *Javelin* chasing its inky shadow across the silver plain to her right.

Mike had reduced the recon of Kennebunkport Airfield to two scouts—she'd loaned Iverson and Twofeathers to Balanchine's lance to speed up mapping the edge of the marsh. Knowing how closely Lancer BattleMechs could skirt the impenetrable swamp might make all the difference if the brass went with the southwestern end-run.

As if on cue, her comm panel blipped an incoming signal on the lance leader frequency. Never a good sign when they were supposed to be running dark. She keyed her radio.

"Recon Two Alpha to Recon One Alpha."

"Go Two," Mike answered. The Cyclops 14 comm system recorded her words, compressed the component sound, then transmitted a micro-second pop easily lost in the hiss of background noise, too quick for human ears to hear.

"River road is a no-go," Balanchine answered, the compression-and-squirt of her words so rapid there was no pause. "Swamp runs too far south. We'd lose a day working around it before we made the ford."

Mike swore softly. Of the three plans, the river run would have been her pick. But she was honest enough to admit she favored it because her *Dart* was probably the lightest and fastest 'Mech on the planet. She could probably skate across the wetlands Balanchine was giving up on.

But the Eighth Crucis Lancers hadn't earned the title "Islamabad Sluggers" for fielding ultra-light recon 'Mechs. The regiment was thick with heavyweights; Fourth Battalion was all *Longbows* and *Salamanders*. The soupy mud would swallow Major-General Marshall's *Devastator* to its armpits.

The southern Orleans Fen—more properly a plain at this point—was soft, but firm enough to support even the heaviest 'Mechs. If she were piloting an assault 'Mech, the all-out punch north on rock solid ground would be her plan of choice. But if the airport gamble paid off….

Mike's eyes flickered between the map and the chronometer computing positions and travel time. Ten minutes to midnight.

"Form on me, Recon Two," she ordered. "Vector to rendezvous grid four-tango-seven."

An affirmative double click in response, then radio silence resumed.

One eye on the passive sensors, Mike settled in to watching the silvery landscape scroll by outside her canopy. An hour before dawn the Lancers would be in a position to see what there was to see in Kennebunkport.

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KENNEBUNKPORT AIRFIELD
ORLEANS PROVINCE, PROSERPINA
BENJAMIN MILITARY DISTRICT, DRACONIS COMBINE
04 FEBRUARY 3066

Terry felt himself flying; then he was falling; then his arm was being broken while he stumbled to keep his feet. It took him a dozen steps to piece together Lia Firenze had yanked him out of a sound sleep and was hauling him along the barracks corridor by one arm.

"Pants," he said.

"What?"

"Pants."

Firenze turned her head to look at him, then snorted in disgust.

"We're in a combat zone," she snapped. "You sleep dressed and ready for action."

Terry considered retorting he slept stripped for action, but the truth was he hadn't expected action of any type in quite a while. Besides, the fact Firenze had jerked him out of his bunk at oh-ungodly-in-the-morning implied the situation didn't lend itself to clever quips.

Released from her bruising grip, Terry mustered what dignity he could scurrying back to his quarters.

"Out front, stat," she called after him.

"—may or may not be radio traffic," *Shujin* Klaus, commander of the infantry platoon tasked with the defense of Kennebunkport Airfield, was saying less than a minute later as Terry joined the disorderly knot of Petty Officer Technicians in the quad. "But definite 'Mech-type heat signatures moving south."

ARTIST: KLAUS SCHERWINKSI
PUBLICATION: TOTAL WARFARE
YEAR: 2006

ARTIST: DOUG CHAFFEE
PUBLICATION: FIELD MANUAL: DRACONIS COMBINE
YEAR: 1996

Trucks were moving in the predawn dark, the diesels growling with effort. Somewhere a heavy winch whined under strain.

Terry craned his head to see one of the noteputers being passed around as the *Shujin* spoke. The screen looked blank until Terry realized the silver-grey nothing was an orbital scan of the Fen. With eight red points of light moving south.

"Roaches on a wedding cake," he murmured.

"The *Wolf Trap* and *Strider* are being loaded on transports," Klaus said, explaining at least some of the equipment noises. "All ambulatory BattleMechs are to be moved to the hold of the *Zephyr* immediately."

"Why?" Firenze demanded in the tone of one who assumed social superiority superseded military rank.

"Sufficient space for all BattleMechs wrapped in a dozen layers of metal," Klaus stated the obvious. "Four hundred tons of titanium, aluminum, and steel could fog their scanners. It's our best chance for concealing them from scans."

"These are Dieron BattleMechs," Firenze countered. "More than a match for two lances of Fedrat scouts."

"Ordnance, Lia," Terry spoke up, earning himself a glare. "Even if we had protocols to access the combat programs; even if our tech helmets magically gave us the finesse—and the skills—to pilot these BattleMechs in battle: we don't have any ammo.

"And energy weapons? *Chu-sa* Isoguri's *BattleMaster* is a thing of beauty, but the PPC housing is empty and with the thermal systems offline, I don't dare fire even the smallest laser," Terry shook his head. "No machine here is ready for battle, even against Fedrat scouts."

Some of the fire left Firenze's eyes, but her jaw and her fists remained clenched.

"So we just sit in there and hope the Fedrats go away?"

"No." Terry marveled at the complete lack of annoyance or hurry in the *Shujin*'s voice. "We wait in hover transports and APCs concealed south of the airfield. If the Federation forces seem bent on securing their position here, we make best speed to intercept the Forty-fifth Dieron, already responding."

"How far?" someone asked.

"ETA sixteen hours."

"We run?" Firenze demanded. "And just abandon a company of BattleMechs to the Fedrats?"

"Demolition crews are placing charges throughout the *Zephyr* now," Klaus said. "If the Federals discover the cache of BattleMechs, they will be detonated."

"No!" Terry blurted.

Firenze glanced his way, perhaps with a sketch of a nod.

"You cannot destroy a dozen BattleMechs out of hand."

"Right," Terry agreed hastily.

"Of course not," Klaus looked genuinely shocked at the suggestion. "The objective is to deny them to the enemy. We will collapse the airliner around them. There will be minor damage, but nothing significant. The Federals lack the time and resources required to excavate the buried BattleMechs."

Terry's mouth twisted. He half listened as Klaus told off details for the evacuation. The plan had merit—if the objective was making sure the Fedrats didn't capture the Twelfth's BattleMechs. He would never admit his shout of protest had not been for their potential destruction, but against the certain death of the marsh owl and her nest of eggs. The "mostly harmless" predator had made the *Zephyr* her home. Surely her valiant defense of her nest had earned her….

"Wait." Terry didn't shout, but something in his voice must have registered. Klaus stopped issuing instructions mid-sentence, and even Firenze looked at him expectantly. "I have a plan."

▲▼▲

KENNEBUNKPORT AIRFIELD
ORLEANS PROVINCE, PROSERPINA
DRACONIS MARCH, FEDERATED SUNS

Ping.

"Hold."

Mike followed her own command and froze.

"Did you get a spike?"

"More like a pimple," Balanchine answered. "But yes. There was something."

Beyond Mike's canopy, the graveyard of Kennebunkport Airport closed around her. Ghostly structures illuminated by ring light and swathed in inky shadow. The giant airship—big as most DropShips—dominated like a giant's mausoleum rising out of a boneyard. They had found no Drac pickets on their approach and no signs of life in the hangars and warehouses of the airport proper. And here in the graveyard more of the same nothing.

Maybe too much nothing.

The other seven 'Mechs of her double lance were spread out to her right and behind her, their icons clear on her screens even as they stood dark and silent. Protocol was for passive sensors. Hear, look, feel for heat. No scans, no signal to give away their positions. But there had been an active scan. A trickle, mere percentages of power. If Balanchine hadn't seen it, too, she might have dismissed it as a phantom; but it was no ghost. Someone in the darkness ahead had scanned *them*.

"One Recon Gamma."

"Go, Danny."

"I think I have a heat source. Not close, behind a row of transport corpses. But something is definitely a few degrees above ambient."

A few degrees here, a trickle of power there. A suspicion became a certainty.

"Recon One, Recon Two, full sweep," she ordered, slapping her own Cyclops system alive. "We got snakes in the rocks."

"Sweet mother!" shouted someone.

"Tally one *O-Bakemono*," said another voice crisply. "Powering up now."

"Heat source is a *Grand Dragon*," Daniels reported more professionally. "It's going hot now."

"Recon Two Alpha," Balanchine transmitted from the far end of the line "I have eyes on a *Naginata*. Cold starting."

"Bug out!" Mike ordered. Scissoring her yokes, she spun her tiny *Dart* away from the *BattleMaster* that had materialized out of black shadow a hundred meters ahead. "Recon One, Recon Two, open formation, pace to slowest, best speed. Move."

Behind her the Drac MechWarrior was slow in firing up his fusion reactor, and Mike thanked whatever gods watched over her that he didn't think to launch his missiles. Her sensors reported ten massive fusion reactors coming to life in the junkyard behind her. Heavies or assaults, every one of them. And…was that more firing up inside the belly of the airliner?

The icons of her command swarmed north, tight enough to stay eyes-on, loose enough to screw up targeting solutions.

"Thank God for nervous 'Mech jockeys," Balanchine said.

Mike grunted.

Kennebunkport was a damn Drac stronghold. At least one of the Dieron brigades staking out the back door in case the Lancers broke south out of Orleans. It had taken nerve to sit in dead-cold 'Mechs watching the scouts walk into the trap. Mike knew her scouts would have gotten a couple of licks in before the assaults powered up, but they would have been scrap metal in minutes. She thanked Balanchine's god at least one of the Dracs had been short on nerve. Without his premature scan and start-up, Mike and company would have disappeared without a trace.

South was not the way out. If the Eighth Crucis Lancers were to win their way free of Orleans, it was going to have to be a head-on charge north into the teeth of the waiting dragons.

▲▼▲

HOME

The big thing left the food and went away.

When she was sure the big thing was gone, she lifted her protecting body from her struggling young. Their mewing and squeaks filled the air. Moving from the nest to the hollow thing, she cocked her head as she examined the bog newts. There were…. many. Healthy and strong and fighting each other to escape. Satisfied, she selected one. Avoiding its claws with practiced ease, she flipped it on its back. Grasping the edge of its carapace with one talon, she ripped the soft under flesh in her curving beak. Her daughters fought over the strips she tossed into the nest. She harvested and fed until even the runt was sated, and then she ate her fill.

Settling back into her nest, the marsh owl considered her world and was content.

ARTIST: LES DORSCHEID
PUBLICATION: BATTLETECH MANUAL
YEAR: 1987

ARTIST: DOUG CHAFFEE
PUBLICATION: TECHNICAL READOUT: VEHICLE ANNEX
YEAR: 2006

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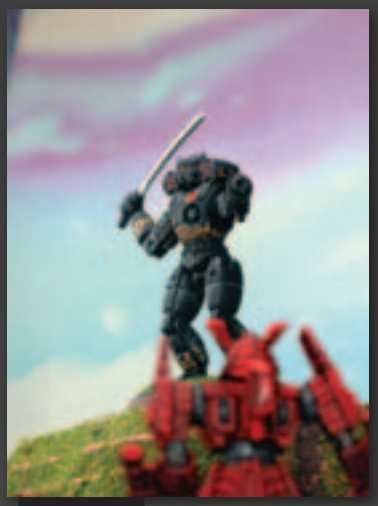
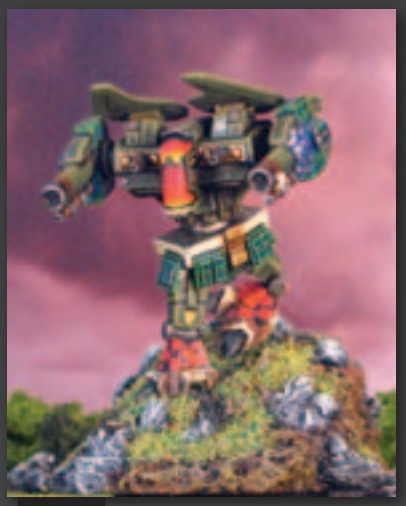
RAY ARRASTIA

CHRIS DOLEGA



MARK MAESTAS



ED SMITH

DAVID KERBER

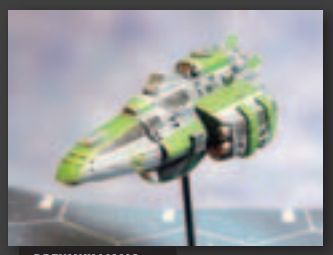
JOEL HARDWICK

DAVE FANJOY

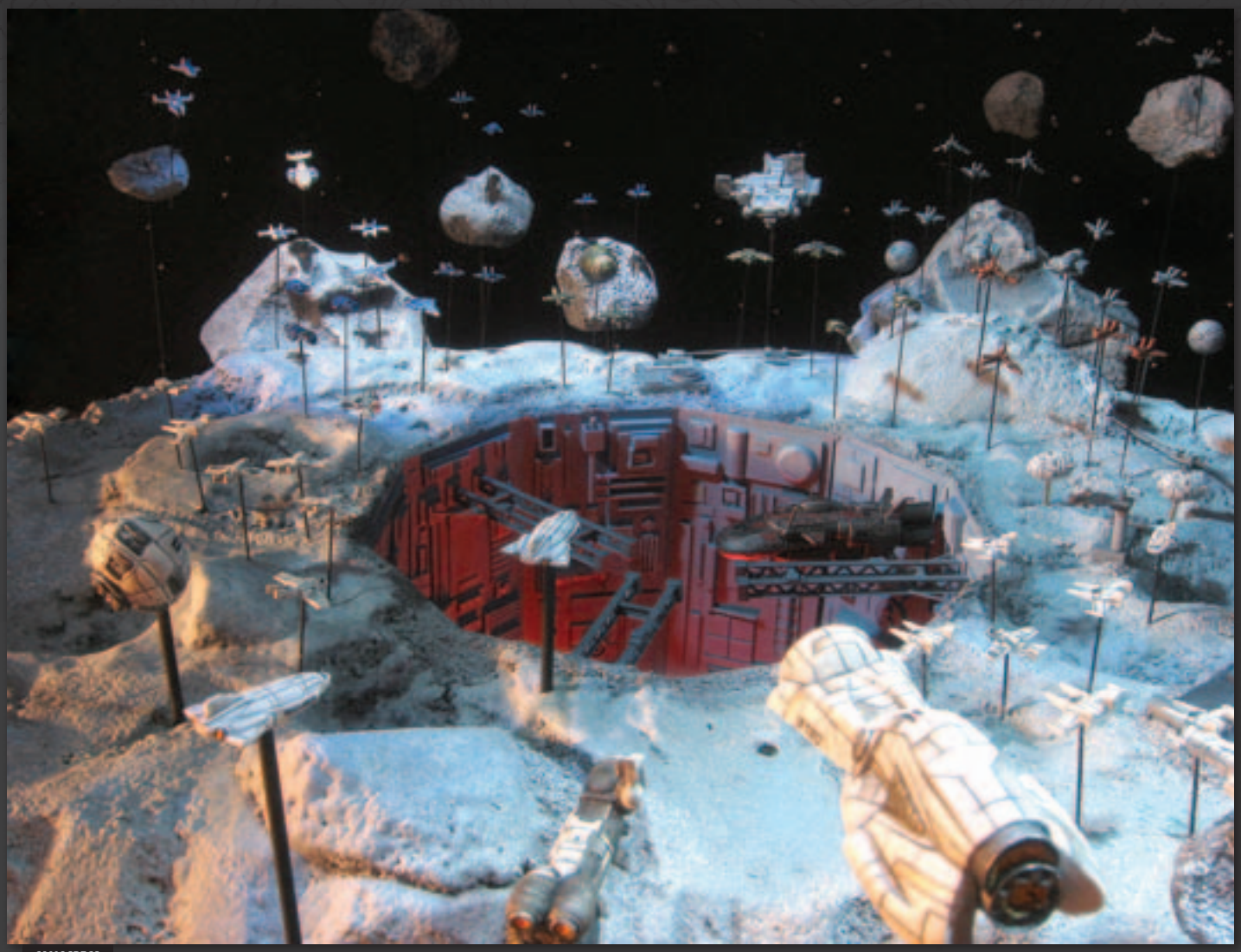
ROSS HINES

LANCE SCARINCI

WILLIAM S. BURT



DREW WILLIAMS



CAMOSPECS

RYAN PETERSON

DAVID KERBER

ARTIST: JIM HOLLOWAY
PUBLICATION: MECHWARRIOR: THE BATTLETECH ROLE PLAYING GAME
YEAR: 1986

TACTICS OF BETRAYAL

DAVID L. MCCULLOCH

SATAN'S GARDEN
MILTON
TERRAN HEGEMONY
18 NOVEMBER 2774

The azure particle beam punched squarely into heavy chest armor, rocking the *Warhammer* back on its heels. Electronics shrieking from the ionization discharge, Captain Paul Rice fought to maintain his BattleMech's balance as missiles from two more *Manticore* Heavy Tanks gouged into its armored hide.

"Damn! Captain!" Brian Mahone's thick Coventry accent crackled in Rice's ears. "I told you to watch the flank!" The bulbous shape of Mahone's *Stalker* moved alongside the *Warhammer* and planted its feet on the rocky ground, kicking red dust into the afternoon air. Where the *Warhammer* sported regulation olive drab colors, Mahone had embraced the more relaxed standards of the Eighteenth Volunteer Regiment. Rice felt the flesh tone paint scheme was inappropriate, but he was no longer serving in one of the Star League Defense Force's line regiments. The *Stalker* unleashed its own storm of missiles at the Rim Worlds Republic armor before continuing its implacable advance.

"Sorry, Brian. A little distracted there for a moment." Rice pivoted his *Warhammer* to snap off a few shots at the nearest tank with his PPCs and medium lasers. Then he felt the kick of the SRM launcher's ripple fire pattern as he followed up with a well-placed salvo. The missiles scoured the blue and red shark emblem from the vehicle's turret armor. Trailing smoke, it scuttled away like a tracked crab, seeking temporary cover in the rocks of Satan's Garden. "Thanks for the save." Rice advanced his heavy 'Mech to join the *Stalker* in menacing the the enemy armor, forcing them to pull back and join their wounded comrade.

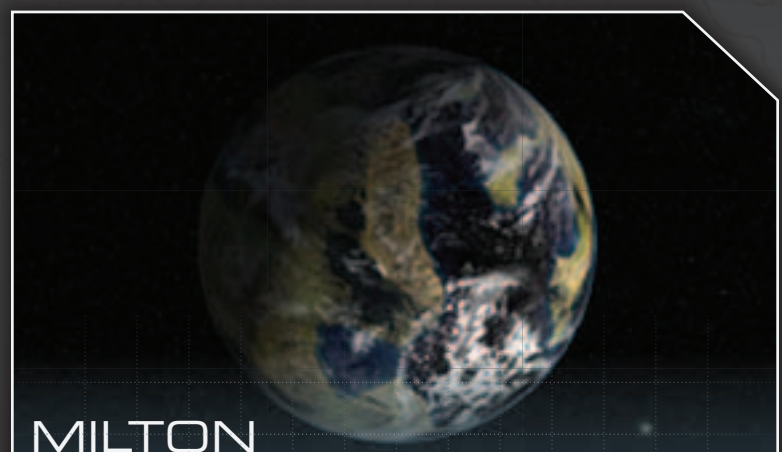
With the field momentarily clear, Rice paused to listen to the company tacnet as it came alive with reports of an enemy in full retreat. The probing attack on the Eighteenth's position had been decisively blunted as the lead Republican armor units had blundered into Rice's position. Finding themselves outgunned by his Company's Heavy and Assault 'Mechs, the spearhead had settled for exchanging halfhearted shots with the Star League Loyalists. Now they were running back to the heights defending the eastern approaches to Paradise Foundation and the safety of the Republican lines that had halted the Loyalist advance on the planetary capital for the past week.

Rice saw Hammond's company moving up. She signaled Rice as her lighter 'Mechs and hover tanks swept through the field of house-sized boulders, looking for stragglers. Smoothed by glaciation uncounted millennia ago, in the fading light the massive rocks gave this place a surreal resemblance to the busy spaceports of New Earth, like row upon row of silent stone DropShips ready to launch at a moment notice.

At the thought of home, he glanced at the trid picture secured above the bank of secondary displays. Smiling faces from another time. Almost from another universe.

"People, let's pull back and rearm and take a break. Hammond's unit has the line now." Turning his ponderous *Warhammer*, Rice led the way back through the field fortifications. Thrown up by the engineers around the dry river bed, this had been home to the Second Battalion for the last week. A cat's cradle of cables were strung between the larger boulders to support camouflage netting, looking like a red and brown stained glass ceiling concealing field repair gantries, orderly piles of drab grey shipping cases, and all the equipment needed to keep a small army running. Huddling between this martial paraphernalia—almost as an afterthought—were the tents. Identical in the beginning, each now bore a unique and indelible fingerprint of dirt and wear from the long campaign on Alioth and three months of fighting here on Milton.

Rice backed his seventy-ton 'Mech into the waiting arms of the nearest repair gantry with care, and the waiting tech crew swarmed over it to attach thick pipes snaking to a coolant vehicle. Fresh coolant flushed the excess heat from the chassis before the men and women could go to work on the battle scarred armor. Rice shut down his 'Mech and released his restraints before easing the heavy neurohelmet off his head and into the rack behind his command couch. He unclipped the Solid from its place on the bulkhead, the transplex smooth under his fingers. Trapped like flies in amber, the five familiar faces were sandwiched between two thin layers of material almost as hard as 'Mech armor, eternally caught in that moment in time. His own trid image was younger. Sandy hair and brown eyes set in a narrow face that had yet to be etched with the lines of experience and responsibility. Fresh from the War Academy on Mars and wearing the dress uniform that would now be a poor fit for a body hardened by the last seven years of hard fighting. Graduation day. His parents had been so proud. "Our son, the MechWarrior."



MILTON

World Name: Milton
Star Type (Recharge Time): G3V (184 hours)
Position in System: 2
Time to Jump Point: 8.54 days
Number of Satellites: 2 (Faxon, Paramesh)
Surface Gravity: 1.04
Atm. Pressure: Standard (Breathable)
Equatorial Temperature: 41° C (Tropical)
Surface Water Coverage: 66 percent
Recharging Station: Nadir
HPG Class Type: A
Highest Native Life: Birds
Population Size (2774): 5,091,000,000
Socio-Industrial Levels: B-B-A-B-B

Milton, by all accounts an early paradise colony with rapidly growing population and industry, suffered a catastrophic economic collapse when its primary trading partner—Terra—cut off all trade and communication to worlds more than one jump away. Subsequently, Milton was easy prey for the expanding Terran Hegemony. The planet thrived under the Hegemony banner until Amaris's usurpation ran into Kerensky's army. In a vain attempt to deny Milton's industry to the advancing Loyalist forces, Amaris's troops ransacked the planet's industrial centers. The battles between Free Worlds and Lyran forces in the early Succession Wars added insult to injury, reducing much of the interior of two of Milton's four continents, Phronx and Selajia, to wastelands of chemical and biological poisons.

This devastation helped Milton somewhat in later centuries. The planet was largely overlooked during the Federated Commonwealth Civil War and the Jihad, aside from a desultory orbital bombardment by retreating Blakist pocket WarShips, which lacked the firepower and ammunition to significantly harm the population or infrastructure. Consequently, Milton was one of the few core planets to spring back to its feet after the Jihad ended.

He pushed the cold picture slab into a belt pouch and cracked open the hatch. The familiar, acrid smells of burned coolant and of cooked armor wafted in on the evening breeze, masking the dry, dusty air. Negotiating the narrow hatch on the top of the *Warhammer's* sunken head was complicated by his bulky cooling suit. Rice counted himself lucky to still havetheHegemony-manufactured suit. Many of the Eighteenth's MechWarriors had to make do with inferior cooling vests like those used in the armies of the Star League member states. Indeed most of the equipment available to the Volunteer Regiments—like their personnel—originated from one of the so-called Great Houses. Many of the shipping crates here bore markings indicating their points of origin in the Free Worlds League or Lyran Commonwealth. Stepping onto the repair gantry, Rice nodded to the technician waiting to enter the cockpit to perform the routine systems checks.

His thoughts were on the Solid at his belt as he slowly descended the access ladder. The other MechWarriors had been impatient to dismount, and most headed for the mess tent in a tight knot of noise. But Mahone hung back, worried blue eyes peering out from under the bushy dark eyebrows that dominated his tanned face. "Captain? Got a minute?" It was never a good sign when he used Rice's rank in place of the more informal "Boss".

Rice nodded. "Sure. What's on your mind?" He waved the other man towards the mess tent, and they walked slowly across a riverbed pounded flat by the passage of 'Mechs.

"I think that's my line." Mahone brushed aside the braided hair trailing past his left cheek. It had been three years since he had gone AWOL from the Second Tamar Jaegers to join the fight against the Usurper, but he still wore his coarse, black hair in the style of a Lyran MechWarrior. "Look Boss, you haven't been on the ball ever since we hit dirt. And you waltzed right into those *Manticores* today—you know that, right?"

"I guess I have been a little preoccupied since Alioth." It wasn't a lie. Not exactly.

"Having your home overrun by a psychotic, tin-pot dictator would do that, I guess." Mahone shrugged. "But as my old drill sergeant liked to say, there's no time for woolgathering when the depleted uranium is flying. If you get yourself killed, I'll have to run the whole goddammed company." Brian Mahone was one of the few members of the Eighteenth with prior combat experience when the regiment was formed over two years ago. Of course they were all blooded veterans now. The ones who actually survived the bloodbath on Alioth at least. "Or you might get some of these jokers killed." Mahone nodded at the noisy crowd entering the mess tent. "Even worse, you could get me killed. I'd really appreciate it if you didn't do that."

"I hear you, Lieutenant." Of course Mahone wasn't really a Lieutenant, no more than Rice was really a Captain. But the Volunteer Regiments were desperately short of officers, and those they had were typically called on to "wear a bigger hat," as it were. Unlike the Regular Army, brevet promotions and field commissions were the rule rather than the exception. "I'll try to pay attention in the future." He glanced at his subordinate. "I'm sure you'll give me another poke if you see me slipping?"

A nod from Mahone. "Dammed straight I will." The Lyran pulled back the flap covering the entrance to the mess tent. "Any word from your folks?"

Rice shook his head. "Nothing." He felt the weight of the lie tug at his belt as he ducked into the tent.

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He made his choice from the limited selection of ration packs, and was adding boiling water to what the label optimistically claimed was Chicken Fajita when Benedict Clancy caught his attention by waving wildly over the rest of the people packed into the busy mess tent. Sure that Rice had seen him, Clancy indicated the empty space at the end of his table. Rice glanced at Mahone, who was just collecting a sachet of what the SLDF Quartermasters Corps guaranteed was almost like Beef Risotto, and saw a shrug of silent resignation. His nose was assaulted by the aromas of field rations and too many bodies crammed too close together as he weaved his way through the throng to reach Clancy's corner table.

"Paul! My main man! Sit you down. Take a load off." A wide grin threatened to split Clancy's handsome face from ear to ear as Rice and Mahone slipped onto the end of the long benches. All the time his long, clever fingers toyed with a deck of cards. "I hear the Sharks gave you a little excitement out there?" He negligently flipped cards from the deck, creating four fans on the smooth plastic.

Rice watched as Clancy briefly examined the contents of each hand, sighed, and returned the cards to the deck, shuffling it with quick, economical precision. "Nothing to write home about, Ben. Just some of their armor feeling us out again. Don't think they were that serious about it—they didn't even bother to send any of their 'Mechs."

"A shame." Clancy shrugged and dealt another phantom round of cards. "I guess we just keep sitting here until our lords and masters pull their collective fingers out and send us up that damned hill." Unlike Rice and Mahone, Clancy didn't hail from a military background, and his grasp of military decorum was limited at best. He was one of the thousands of Star League citizens who had offered their services to General Aleksandr Kerensky when their own governments had done nothing after Stefan Amaris and his Rim Worlds Republic had seized control of the Terran Hegemony. Personally, Rice doubted that patriotic fervor alone had driven Clancy all the way across the Inner Sphere from his native Federated Suns. The man had acquired quite a reputation of a card sharp in the Circinus boot camps, and his insistence on being assigned to one of the Volunteer Regiments attached to Admiral Brandt's Task Force Commonwealth, rather than General DeChevilier's Task Force Sun, suggested Clancy had strong reasons for not returning home. But in spite of this dubious reputation, he'd proven himself both a capable MechWarrior and a leader. True, his approach was unconventional, and he ran risks with the steel nerves of a professional gambler, but the results spoke for themselves. After Waycliff Ridge, nobody had been surprised when Clancy had been given a Captain's field commission. "I don't suppose you'd care for a quick game? Four-Card Drax perhaps?" The usual thinly-veiled predatory glint shone in Clancy's eyes.

Rice shook his head. "No thanks. I think I'd like to enjoy the company of what little money I have a bit longer."

"Where's your sense of adventure, Captain?" It was impossible to tell if Clancy's look of disappointment was feigned or real.

"I wasn't issued one." The traditional soldier's reply was rewarded with resurgence of that face-splitting grin.

"Paul? Have you heard anything about tomorrow?" Further down the table Elena Silverford examined a packet of crackers dubiously. Her petite build accentuated the alien appearance imbued by the decision to shave her scalp for better contact with the neurohelmet sensors. Formally an employee of the Pleasure Gardens on Eaton in the Lyran Commonwealth, she piloted a *Spider* in Clancy's Company.

"Ira—" she pointed at Ira Eltsina, one of the handful of SLDF regulars assigned to the Eighteenth. "—was saying there's a lot of activity over at HQ."

"No." He noticed Ira had abandoned her regulation field uniform tunic for a sweatshirt emblazoned with the red Cameron Star and crossed rifles that the Eighteenth had adopted as its unit emblem. "I've not been told anything new. Just standing orders. Hold the line for now."

"General Dallas was here earlier," Ira added from her side of the table.

Rice looked up sharply, then glanced at Mahone shoveling Beef Risotto into his mouth. The Lyran wiped a hand over his lips and nodded. The Eighteenth had been attached to 413th BattleMech Division, and it was no secret that Major General Elvis Dallas had been less than enthusiastic about having one of the thirty-six Volunteer Regiments under his command. If Dallas had been seen around camp, it was a good sign that the push toward the capital city was about to resume. And the Eighteenth Volunteer Regiment would find itself on the sharp end once again.

Rice took an unenthusiastic bite from his Chicken Fajita. It didn't taste like chicken. He didn't know what it did taste like, but it wasn't chicken. He wondered if he would derive more pleasure from eating the meal's packaging. Abandoning all pretense of an appetite, he pushed the almost untouched meal away and scanned the crowded tent, wondering who was watching. He listened to the flow of conversation while his left hand felt for the sharp edges of the Solid safely stowed way in the belt pouch. He'd been through a lot with these people. Enough for them to earn his respect. Even if they were not Regular Army.

And now the time had come for him to betray them all.

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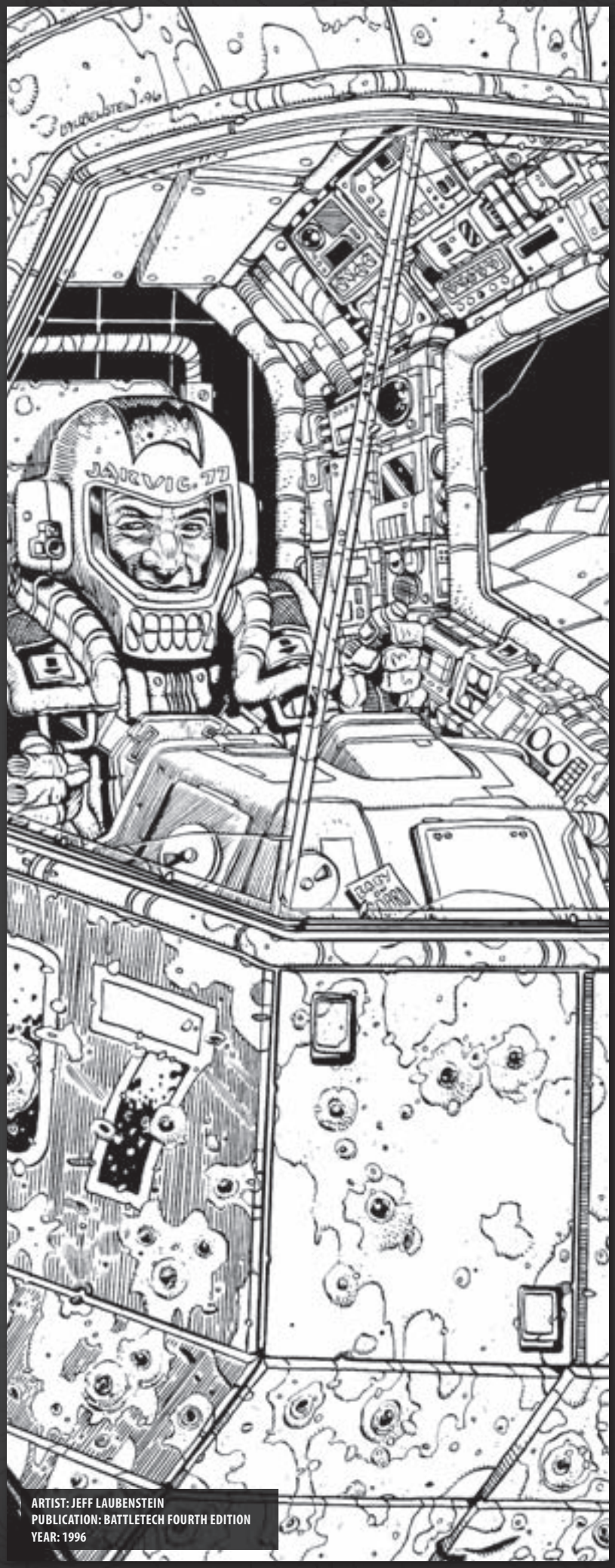
The call came just after midnight. All Company commanders to assemble aboard the regimental mobile headquarters. Paramesh, Milton's second moon, was just clawing its way above the horizon to join its distant brother, Faxon. The night sky was clear and the air had a cold bite. Rice walked quickly through the encampment under those widely-spaced moons, casting double shadows with each step—one reassuringly solid, the other a grotesquely elongated wraith. He entered the slab-sided vehicle that served at the Eighteenth's headquarters. Nodding to his fellow officers, he squeezed past them down the length of the vehicle to a spot where he could view the map table. The narrow space was alive with anticipation. The very walls, festooned with electronics and displays, seemed to strain outwards under the weight of it. Captain Hammond was the last to arrive, out of breath and giving Colonel Jacob Goldstein an apologetic shrug as she entered the rear hatch and pulled it closed.

"Now that we're all here," Goldstein began with a typical lack of preamble. "I can confirm that the scuttlebutt you've doubtless been picking up is correct. We're looking at a large scale operation. It's goal—to crack open the Republic lines and get us up onto that plateau and out of this dust." Dark-skinned and almost too tall to qualify as a MechWarrior, Goldstein was another of the Regular Army officers assigned to the Eighteenth, and he looked far too young to be a Colonel. "Our part is to assist in clearing the Sharks off the Eastern Heights." The Colonel paused as muted groans and curses rippled though the assembly. It wouldn't be the first time the Eighteenth had served as shock troops, but that didn't mean they had to like it. "Mission specifics are on your data cards," he waved to a lanky-looking Corporal who looked completely out of place in uniform as she moved through the compartment, distributing memory cards packed with the maps, images, and plans for the assault. Rice took the small square of yellow plastic from the young Corporal. It felt too light to contain such important information. It certainly didn't look like an instrument of treachery. "Study them. Get your people briefed." Goldstein's voice drew Rice's attention back from the data card. "I'll let Major Block give you an overview of the operation.



ARTIST: JEFF LAUBENSTEIN
PUBLICATION: BATTLETECH FOURTH EDITION
YEAR: 1996

Anthony Block was waiting silently at the head of the map table, gazing down at a map grid with that imperturbable air that Rice had come to know well. The man's compact build gave a sense of solidity that was emphasized by his rough-hewn features. There was an ageless but unfinished look to his face. Rice was struck with the fanciful notion that he might have been carved out of solid rock by a sculptor who had abandoned the work before adding the fine details. Only the pure silver hair hinted at his true age. Block, formally Brother Anthony, came from Gibraltar in the Free World's League. He had left the Brotherhood of the Rock when that sect of Warrior-Monks had refused to involve itself in the struggle for the Terran Hegemony and control of the Star League. Nobody made an issue of it, but everyone in the Eighteenth Volunteer Regiment knew that it had been Block's tactical genius that had steered them through seven months of brutal fighting on Alioth. Goldstein knew it too, and thankfully had been smart enough to let his second-in-command deal with strategy and tactics while he concentrated on leading his troops into battle.

"Current troop dispositions, to the best of our knowledge, are as follows." Block spoke with the perfect pronunciation of someone for which English was a second language. Expert hands manipulated the map controls to highlight features. "We are here. On the far left of Satan's Garden. General Salvador's 515th Brigade is to our right, and General Smith's 81st Brigade is in reserve." Each of the friendly regiments were outlined in turn with pulsing blue. "Our opponents consist of elements of the Twenty-third Republican Division. As you will remember, we faced a couple of their regiments on Alioth."

An almost imperceptible shudder of shared pain ran through the assembly. The Fourteenth Amaris Dragoons and Twenty-third Battle Regiment had dropped right into the rear of the 413th Division, threatening to catch the Loyalist forces in a vice. Major General Dallas had thrown the Eighteenth Volunteer Regiment into the line in a desperate bid to buy time to consolidate his forces. For Rice, the battle had dissolved into a maelstrom of smoke, fire, and blood as the Eighteenth had held the enemy off. Just.

Block continued, his tone low and measured, as always. "On the ridge is the Forty-third Amaris Hussars, the heavy armor of the 212th Amaris Cuirassiers, two Battalions from the Twenty-second Amaris Dragoons, and a Brigade of mechanized infantry. They have also concentrated the bulk of their air power to hold the city, and they still have a battalion of artillery that has been hampering our attempts to dislodge them from this line."

Clancy frowned at the red line pulsing malevolently on the map table. "We're going to have a hard time cracking that ridge with that lot up there waiting for us."

Block nodded. "Indeed. Neither side possesses air supremacy, and their umbrella of massed artillery is formidable. Our attempts to entice the enemy out from beneath it have been unsuccessful. However, they have made a mistake in the siting of their positions. A classic one, in fact." Clancy murmured something about land wars and Asia under his breath, but Block ignored him. "They have adhered slavishly to the concept of holding the high ground, and as a result they have created a salient in their lines. Here."

Under Block's direction the map table zoomed in on the Republican right flank. Here, the ridge bowed outwards and the red line obediently followed. "The plan is simple. While General Salvador mounts a demonstration on our right—their left flank—we can advance through Satan's Garden. The broken terrain will help mask our approach. That salient is the weak point. We can hit it from both sides and break their line. General Smith can then bring his Brigade up to exploit the breakthrough."

Rice lent forwards with the others to study the map table. It was a good plan. Normally he would have given it an excellent chance of achieving all of its objectives. Normally.

"Thank you, Major." Colonel Goldstein nodded his thanks as he returned to the map table. "The 515th will begin their demonstration at dawn." He glanced at the master clock on the mobile, HQ's forward bulkhead. "That is five Standard hours from now. We step off just before mid-day. Get some sleep while you can. I want your people briefed, buttoned up, and ready to go by H hour minus one." He turned to Block. "Who has the watch for the graveyard shift?"

Block glanced at a data pad. "Captain Rice will have the watch until oh-five-hundred Colonel."

Goldstein gazed over the map table at Rice. "Very well. You have the watch, Captain. Everyone else, dismissed."

The interior of the mobile headquarters felt almost spacious after the other officers had departed. Block had lingered for nearly an hour—manipulating the map table controls with economical movements punctuating long minutes of silent contemplation. A Grand Master studying a chessboard formed by the grid of the map table. Moving pieces with deadly precision in a game with an invisible opponent. But Block was gone now, and the vehicle would have been silent except for the quiet hum of equipment grinding through monotonous tasks with mindless devotion to duty. The only other sound was an occasional murmur from the lone communication technician as he broke his silent vigil to deal with routine communications. Despite the best efforts of a filtration system that could defeat any know biological or chemical agent, the air still smelt of a curious mix of old coffee, oil and sweat.

Unless there was an emergency, Rice really had nothing to do but sit and wait.

He reached for the Solid, stared at Peter grinning wildly. He'd been a Mechhead from the day he could talk. Rice remember the ten-year-old's joy at the news that his older sibling had been accepted to the War Academy. How he had been enthused about getting a chance of his own in another six years. About how he was going to be a MechWarrior, just like his big brother. It had been a crushing blow when he'd failed the dreaded Skull Cap test. Rice himself had experienced only mild discomfort as he sat in an SLDF recruiting office and willed the tiny BattleMech to stay upright as it walked. But the neural feedback had Peter heaving his guts out while the model promptly fell over. The Recruiting Sergeant had been nice enough about the uniform. He'd probably seen hundreds of teenager's dreams crash and burn in the feedback loop. But Peter's plans of following his brother were over. Secretly Rice had been glad, and a bit guilty. The academy and his experiences on the battlefield has uncovered the harsh reality lurking beneath the gilded title MechWarrior. He'd told himself Peter would at least be safe in some civilian career back on New Earth with the rest of the family.

But that was not how things had turned out.

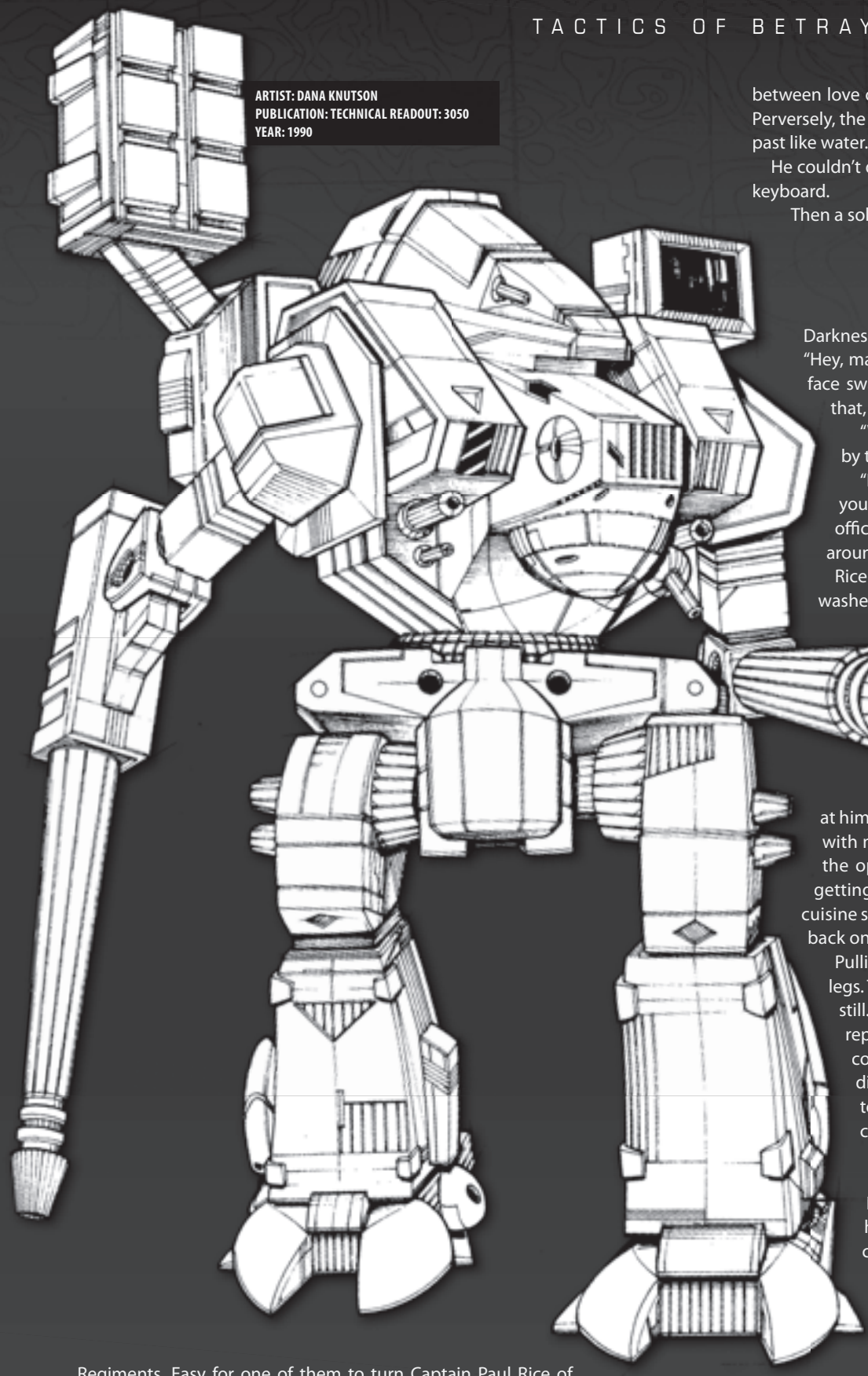
The chronometer on Rice's wrist vibrated its silent reminder. It was almost time. Stretching, he stood and walked to the metal coffee pot clamped to a hot plate beside the rear hatch. Lifting the pot, he shook it experimentally. It was empty. No surprise there. As on other nights, he'd surreptitiously dumped the contents out the rear hatch over an hour earlier. Rice turned to wave the pot at the technician. "Looks like we're out of coffee again. I don't think those Beta shift slackers ever fill this thing up!" This last evoked a snort from Sergeant Cosworth. "Why don't you take a break? Get over to the mess tent and get this thing filled?"

"You sure, Captain?" Cosworth frowned slightly.

"I've got the watch, so I can't go anywhere." Rice shrugged. "But I can mind the store for ten minutes. I think I can remember enough from basic training to handle an incoming message if I have to." He waved the empty coffee pot towards the hatch. "Get moving. And take this thing with you. The sooner you go, the sooner you can bring me back some fresh coffee. Consider that an order."

"Yes Sir! Captain!" Cosworth flipped Rice a ragged salute and took the pot with him. Rice slid into a vacant chair at the communications station. He listened as the Sergeant's footsteps faded into the night, then pulled the data card from his pocket. The interface was standard. Slot it in and a handful of keystrokes later its digital contents were spilling onto the screen before him. It was all here. Block's mission outline. Force deployments. Routes. Timetables. A few more commands, and the data was copied to the transmission data buffer. Now all it would take was a single keystroke at the prearranged time to send the message and its deadly attachments on its way. One press of a key to save his family. One press of a key to make him a traitor.

Traitor. That was the first time Rice had confronted the word since the trid Solid had appeared on his bunk three weeks ago. Instructions had followed. What kind of information he was to gather. When and how to transmit it so that it would be lost in the background noise of routine communications. The promise of what would happen if he did not cooperate. He hadn't thought of himself as a traitor. He had been too wrapped up worrying about his mother and father, his brother, and his sister. Too busy fixing the duty roster so he would be in position at the appointed time. He had tried to identify his faceless tormentor, but with no luck. The instructions kept coming. Fearing for his family and not knowing who he could trust, he had said nothing. The Republicans must have somebody close. Somebody who could move through the camp and leave that package. Somebody who could be watching him right now. With people coming from all over the Inner Sphere, it would have been easy to slip agents into the Volunteer



ARTIST: DANA KNUTSON
PUBLICATION: TECHNICAL READOUT: 3050
YEAR: 1990

Regiments. Easy for one of them to turn Captain Paul Rice of the Star League Defense Force into a traitor. So far, he had done little damage. The meager scraps of information he'd transmitted on previous nights had been of no real tactical value. At best, they would have only confirmed intelligence gathered by other means. Until now, the acts of betrayal had been such little things.

Rice glanced at the master chronometer. The seconds marched past, each one taking longer then the last. He wasn't a traitor. He was a Star League Officer who knew his duty. How could he do this?

How could he not?

Each second was a lifetime now. Rice's index finger edged closer towards that final key. He was into the transmission window now, but he sat hunched at the communications station. He was locked into immobility by the internal battle between love of family and duty, training, and pride of who he once had been. Perversely, the time, which had been content to drag on ponderously, now raced past like water.

He couldn't do it. He just couldn't. Rice started to pull his hands back from the keyboard.

Then a solid blow slammed into the base of his skull.

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Darkness.

"Hey, man! You sleeping on duty?" The blurry outline of Benedict Clancy's face swam into focus as he shook Rice's shoulders. "They shoot you for that, don't they?"

"Whaa?" The hideous throbbing in Rice's head was not helped at all by the movement.

"I stopped by to keep you company in the gloomy hours and find you catching Zs in here. Hardly what I've come to expect from an officer and a gentleman like yourself." Clancy let go of him and glanced around. "Where is everybody anyway?"

Rice started upright, but clutched the comms desk as wave of dizziness washed over him. The master chronometer told him he'd only been out for a few minutes, but he'd missed the transmission window. "Err...They're taking a break. Should be back any minute." He turned carefully, not wanting to aggravate his headache with more sudden movements. "You didn't see anyone else around when you came in?" The rear hatch was open, but there were no signs of anything out of place.

"No mate, just you, dead to the world." Clancy looked at him quizzically. "You expecting company? Fear not! Your secret is safe with me. At least until I need a loan." He winked as he started towards the open hatch. "Guess I'd better go find your crew—tell 'em you're getting lonely stuck in here all by yourself while they enjoy the excellent cuisine served up by the army boys. Don't go falling asleep again. I'll check back on you later." Clancy strode into the night with a casual wave.

Pulling himself to his feet, Rice followed Clancy to the hatch on rubbery legs. The cool night air revived him fully. Outside, the encampment was still. The night silence was disturbed only by distant sounds from the repair gantries as technicians worked to prepare the 'Mechs and combat vehicles by morning. Rice watched Clancy stride off in the direction of the mess tent, then closed the hatch and returned to the chair. His head throbbed wickedly as he slumped at the communications station.

Who had hit him? And why? To stop him from transmitting? That didn't make any sense. If somebody had caught him betraying the Eighteenth to the Republicans, they wouldn't have just slugged him and walked off. He'd be in the stockade by now, awaiting a court martial to decide how he was going to die. Not sitting here with a splitting headache trying guess who had given it to him. Clancy? That didn't fit for the same reason. If he had decided to sneak up on Rice and slug him, why hang around to wake him up again and then say nothing? And now what was he supposed to do? He'd missed his transmission window for tonight. How would his secret masters interpret that lapse? Was a message already speeding towards New Earth? Was his family about to suffer terrible retribution for his failure? Rice glanced at the transmission logs. That wasn't right. He hadn't initiated the transmission. He was sure of it. But according to the records, a transmission had been made from this station on the prearranged frequency at the correct time. Had he been attacked because somebody thought he *wasn't* going to transmit the battle plans? Had his faceless tormentor been watching, and had chosen to take more direct action when they had seen him locked in indecision? But why had he just been knocked out and not killed? Was Republican Intelligence really so sure of their hold over him that they knew he wouldn't raise the alarm. Had it been Clancy after all? Was he the one who had turned Rice into a traitor?

With shaking hands, Rice erased all traces of his activity and pocketed the data card.

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Rice pushed hard to lead the attack up the ridge. He had betrayed his comrades. Nothing could change that now. All he could do was stay silent and hope for was that the Republicans would be satisfied and would spare his family. And that he would die in the first charge. But Colonel Goldstein had been adamant. The assignments had already been made. It was far to late to change them now. His Company would anchor the left flank and act as the reserve. It would be a perfect position from which to watch the destruction of the Eighteenth Volunteer Regiment.

His head still throbbing, Rice sat in his *Warhammer* and listened to the distant rumbles from General Salvador's diversion on the right. The Solid was back in place above the secondary displays. He'd knew he had made an awful mess of things. If only he could speak with Susan. She smiled at him out of the Solid. Always ready with quick joke and sound advice. What would she say now?

The Eighteenth was staring their advance now. Colonel Goldstein's *Black Knight* marched in the vanguard, leading a mix of 'Mechs, combat vehicles, and infantry through Satan's Garden to land the first blow on the exposed salient.

The rumbling on the right intensified—the sound of a long-range missile duel between the diversionary force and the Republican defenders. No artillery yet. The Republicans wouldn't waste it on a diversion. They'd wait until the Eighteenth's advance brought them into range.

"Boss. This is Mahone. I'm picking up seismic readings from the north." Rice glanced down at his own sensors to see that Mahone was correct. The readings were still some distance off and intermittent, but they told of a significant mass in motion. Or a lot of masses in motion.

"What the devil were you doing monitoring your seismic?" BattleMechs were extravagantly equipped with a bewildering array of sensors, but MechWarriors concentrated on IR, radar, and visible light primarily.

"Block suggested I might want to keep an eye on them. You know how that goes." Rice could almost hear Mahone shrug over the comms channel. Pawns seldom got to ask the chess master questions.

"Right." Rice bit his lower lip in thought as he consulted the charts for this part of Satan's Garden. "All units! Shift five hundred meters north and take a position at the head of the dry creek bed." Rice's *Warhammer* lumbered into motion as his command swung about and followed him through the rocks. "Command One, this is Baker One Actual. Be advised I'm redeploying to meet a possible flank attack."

"This is Command One." That was Block—presumably aboard the HQ vehicle. "Acknowledged. Identify targets and report."

Rice brought the *Warhammer* to a halt between Mahone's *Stalker* and Shelly Sung's *Orion*. Further down the draw, he saw great clouds of dust churned up into the air. Dark shapes moved in the haze. Towering, humanoid shapes with an occasional glint of reflected sunlight from weapons or armor. Rice pulled up a magnified image on his primary display and studied it briefly before opening the command channel again. "Command One, this is Baker One Actual. I've got a positive visual on a third Battalion of the Twenty-second Amaris Dragoons. They are about to hit the left flank. Contact in three minutes. Please advise?" Rice knew his single Company wouldn't stop this flank attack. It would roll right over his command and slam into the First Battalion from behind.

It looked like Rice was going to get his wish after all and die at the forefront for this battle.

"Command One to Baker One. Hold position." Rice had been expecting it, but hearing the order that sentenced him and his people to death issued so calmly left a cold lead weight in his stomach. "Delta One." That was Clancy's Company. They were supposed to be advancing with Colonel Goldstein! "Zulu Fifteen is waiting on Tac Freq Four. Call the ball."

"Got it, Command One." Rice heard the big grin on Clancy's face.

Of to the west Rice caught a glimpse of swiftly moving BattleMechs, Elena Silverford's *Spider* in the lead. Confused, he opened the inter-company channel. "Delta One. What in God's name are you doing here?'

"Hi there Baker One." Clancy's adherence to communications protocols were just a little... loose. "Slight change of plan. Looks like we ain't getting to storm the parapets today. Scuse me. I've got to take care of your new friends." There was a pop of static as Clancy switched channels." Zulu Fifteen! You out there, my good buddy?"

There was a slightly offended silence. "This is Zulu Fifteen Actual. You have business for us Delta One?"

"Sure thing. Your coordinates are grid twelve, square seventeen. Send the mail at your discretion." Clancy switched back to the Regimental network. "Hey, Rice. Better hunker down real small now."

The sky was suddenly split asunder at the Eighty-seventh Artillery regiment threw everything they had at the closely packed Republican BattleMechs that had strayed out from beneath the protection of their own artillery support.

It was as if a giant had reached down to wrench the ground out from beneath the *Warhammer*'s feet. Rice fought to keep the BattleMech upright as a storm of destruction scythed through the densely packed Republican machines. Smoke and debris filled the creek bed, obscuring his view of the enemy. Clancy was calling in a second barrage now, and Rice braced himself for another typhoon of destruction.

And then there was silence.

Out of the smoke and dust a single form emerged. It was one of the new RFL-3N *Riflemen*. Ravaged by the awful barrage, its armor was battered and broken. The right arm autocannon had been ripped away, and a ferocious fire blazed in the ammunition feed track. But wounded horribly as it was, the *Rifleman* was still full of fight. Laser and autocannon fire lashed out from its undamaged left arm to flay Mahone's *Stalker* as other battered forms stumbled into view. "All units! Engage! Take 'em down!" Rice targeted the *Rifleman* and fired his PPCs in one smooth action as more fire tore into the Republican survivors.

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Block found him sitting at the edge of the draw overlooking the blasted course left by that devastating barrage of massed artillery. Pieces of BattleMechs littered the ground, and the air was thick with the stench of missile exhaust, charred insulation and myomers, and spilled coolant. The few Dragoons who'd survived the follow-up salvo had been in no shape to stand up to the combined firepower of Rice's and Clancy's Companies. The fight had been brutal and short. Rice was studying the Solid as Block approached. "You used me." His voice was almost toneless. Too much had happened over the past day for him to fuel it with any passion.

Block studied him for a moment. "Yes." The bluntness of the answer surprised Rice. "It's what I'm supposed to do."

"How?" Rice looked up. "How did you know it was me? Was I that..." He searched for the right word.

"Clumsy?" Block asked.

A stab of pride made Rice grimace. "Obvious. Was I really that obvious?"

"No. Not really." Block shook his head. "It was inevitable that Republican Intelligence would see the Volunteer regiments as an opportunity. Anticipating that provided us with an opportunity of our own. Intelligence Command manufactured little tid-bits of information. Think of them as breadcrumbs. By monitoring Republican responses, they followed one such trail back to you. It wasn't hard to guess what they had on you to ensure your cooperation. It was just a question of how we could exploit the leak."

The image of chess pieces moving with orchestrated precision across a game board flashed in Rice's mind. "So what happens now?"

"To you?" Block absently rubbed a balled right fist with his left hand. "You make a very poor traitor. Perhaps you should be a MechWarrior?"

"You hit me?" Rice felt a memory of pain stabbed the back of his head.

"A little bit." Block shrugged. "I had my most excellent deception in place, and your sudden attack of conscience threatened to ruin everything."

Rice held up the Solid. "What about them?"

"I, unlike you, made a choice. The consequences for your family could be grave." Block spread his hands. "I can make no promises. We have contacts. People who may be able to get them out, or at least hide them."

Rice felt a glimmer of hope for his family for the first time in weeks. "What about the spy? Somebody in the Eighteenth is a Republican agent. For a while there I thought it was Clancy, but if it was you who hit me..."

Block's lips twitched with a faint smile. "Ah. I have an idea on how to deal with that particular problem. If you would be willing to assist me?"

ARTIST: ALAN GUITIERREZ
PUBLICATION: BATTLETECH SECOND EDITION
YEAR: 1985

ARTIST: FRANZ VOHWINKEL
PUBLICATION: CLASSIC BATTLETECH: A GAME OF ARMORED COMBAT
YEAR: 2002

ARTIST: FRANZ VOHWINKEL
PUBLICATION: CLASSIC BATTLETECH: A GAME OF ARMORED COMBAT
YEAR: 2002

ARTIST: LES DORSCHEID
PUBLICATION: BLOODRIGHT
YEAR: 1992

ARTIST: MICHAEL KORMARCK
PUBLICATION: A BONFIRE OF WORLDS (NOVEL)
YEAR: 2009

ARTIST: DOUG CHAFFEE
PUBLICATION: TECHNICAL READOUT: 3050 UPGRADE
YEAR: 2007

THE WALKING DEAD

BLAINE LEE PARDOE

OUTSKIRTS OF MUNICH
RADSTADT
GHOST BEAR DOMINION
7 MARCH 3074

Star Captain Anjo Bekker stared into the valley where the capital city of Munich was nestled and gritted his teeth. He was frustrated—no. He was mad as hell. Clan Ghost Bear was moving in for the kill and he was being used to cover the right flank.

The fighting on Radstadt had been a far cry from the battle the Khan had predicted. A group of mercenaries hired by the Word of Blake—Karver's Korps—had been terrorizing the citizens of Radstadt. When the Ghost Bears attacked, the Korps withdrew to several key cities in the northern reaches. Looking back, it was easy for Bekker to see that the Word of Blake had left them to their own designs. Facing the fury of the Ghost Bears, Karver's Korps had opted to slug it out. For a while they fought, laying waste to two cities in the process. Then, deprived of the support of their benefactors, they broke and fled. The Ghost Bears took it for a rout—they were simply mercenaries after all—but in reality the Korps led them into a trap. Anjo firmly believed that his leaders knew it was a trap but had faith in the capabilities of their warriors to break any trap that was sprung.

The trap was the Word of Blake's Forty-third Shadow Division—Haborym's Legion. Hidden on Radstadt and dug in, they were waiting for the Ghost Bears. Star Captain Bekker had been one of the warriors who had first stumbled onto them. They were concealed everywhere in the hills, hiding in little bolt-holes that held a squad or two of troopers, or a few 'Mechs or vehicles. The bolt-holes were heavily camouflaged and often the Shadow Division troops emerged behind the Ghost Bears.

These were not normal troops, as if the word "normal" could be applied to the Word of Blake. These were more machine than men. The Ghost Bears referred to them as "abominations" and Star Captain Bekker thought that description was apt. Cybernetic warriors, these Manei Domini troops flew in the face of everything the Ghost Bears stood for. Some were in battle armor that was more a part of their bodies than worn—others were in "conventional" squads. They were vicious fighters—that, at least, he respected. They struck like cowardly freebirths though, striking from behind or underneath.

They did not display honor but instead behaved more like homicidal maniacs. He had seen the result of their fighting: the cockpit of a *Kit Fox* that had been breached by the abominations in battle armor. The MechWarrior's blood had painted the inside of the cockpit. The Manei Domini BattleMechs fought with ferocity that bordered on insanity. They had ganged up on several Ghost Bears, overwhelming them before ripping apart the Clan 'Mechs for the apparent thrill of it.

The fighting had been brutal but the fierceness of the Ghost Bears' assault had eventually driven the Word into a steady withdrawal. Now, all that remained was to push through Munich to the spaceport beyond. It was there that the Word of Blake would make a stand. Assaulting Munich was a military necessity. Anjo Bekker, and several other Ghost Bears were assigned to the cover the flank of the main drive. He wanted to be where the heavy fighting was but instead he was poised along the edge of the assault. "Be prepared to engage if needed," the Star Colonel had said. Elements of the Third Claw and the Fifth Bear Regulars started their drive into the outskirts of Munich while Anjo and his Star were refitted and repaired.

His eyes were looking low and to the left when the flash came. At first he thought he had been hit by a particle projector cannon. It was a brilliant white flash, bright as the sun. His armored cockpit glass reacted to protect his eyes from the brilliance but even so he saw that it was not natural. Warning alarms blared the instant the light hit him. A moment later his BattleMech rocked in place. A hot wind swamped his BattleMech, as if a hurricane had suddenly arrived.

A few moments later he felt hot—no, boiling. A ripple of nausea came over him. He managed to open the visor of his neurohelmet in time to avoid filling his helmet with vomit. The alarm beeped for his attention. Looking over to his secondary he saw it was not a damage warning. It was far worse. The NBC—nuclear, biological,

RADSTADT

World Name: Radstadt
Star Type (Recharge Time): G5III (186 hours)
Position in System: 3
Time to Jump Point: 7.5 days
Number of Satellites: 1 (Taurach)
Surface Gravity: 0.93
Atm. Pressure: Standard (Breathable)
Equatorial Temperature: 23° C (Temperate)
Surface Water: 55 percent
Recharging Station: Nadir
HPG Class Type: A
Highest Native Life: Reptiles
Population (3074): 893,000,000
Socio-Industrial Levels: A-C-B-C-B

Once part of the Principality of Rasalhague, Radstadt fell to the Draconis Combine in the 24th century. The fierce resistance of the people of Rasalhague could be seen on Radstadt, which was noted for hosting the largest prison complex in the Draconis Combine (a title not easily obtained). The Lotus Flower Correctional Institution was maintained by the Free Rasalhague Republic as a museum and reminder of what the people of Radstadt fought to free themselves from, but after Radstadt's conquest, Clan Ghost Bear returned parts of the prison—notably, the Black Tower—to their original use. (Because the Clans are inclined to execute rebels and dangerous criminals, the facility remains largely empty.)

The rest of the planet is nondescript, if thinly populated by Inner Sphere standards. Bountiful oceans and the local fishing industry supply much of the population's protein, and the timber industry is noted for Radstadt pine, which produces wood that, when treated, shimmers as if flecked with gold. The decentralized population and sympathetic merchant caste administrators have prevented Radstadt from suffering unduly under Clan Ghost Bear's efforts to install a Clan-style economy that suppresses the planet's free-form capitalism and "unnecessary" economic activities (most of the service and industrial sectors) as wasteful. Despite their efforts and the Clan vow to house and feed anyone willing to work their quotas, however, unemployment has climbed to more than a quarter of the population.

chemical—warning flashed. Looking toward Munich, where the advancing Ghost Bears had been, he saw a plume rising in the sky. A tower of smoke.

The Word of Blake had used a nuclear weapon.

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Something was wrong. Star Captain Bekker could tell that much from his own illness. After the nuking of Munich he and the surviving Ghost Bears had pulled back. The survivors were treated like plague carriers. Each was stripped naked and washed down. The medical team wore heavy yellow environmental gear and seemed to be wary of being near them. Plastic barriers lined the tent walls, sealing in (or out?) the air. Anjo saw a number of Ghost Bear troops in the tent where they were being kept. They were sunburned, their skin bright red. Two warriors died a few minutes after arriving in the hospital. *A sign of things to come*? Others had sores on their faces and torso, open pustules that were oozing already.

His nausea had gotten the best of him twice. He knew the signs of radiation poisoning. It was part of his training. What worried him was that it shouldn't have been so progressive so soon. BattleMechs were designed to provide protection, even from nuclear attack. They were not impervious but from what he saw and heard, the nuclear blast in Munich had been small and it was far enough away that he should have been protected. When he saw Galaxy Commander Jocelyn Vong approach in a heavy yellow environmental suit he realized more was wrong than he thought possible.

Galaxy Commander Vong was the Elemental commander of Zeta Galaxy and one of the ranking officers on Radstadt. She towered over his bed. Anjo stirred and tried to sit up but she held her hand off to hold him down. When she touched him, she looked down at the gloved hand as if it were tainted. "Star Captain Bekker, how do you feel?"

Could he tell her the truth? He felt weak. Just from trying to sit up his muscles seemed to ache. "Not well," he said. "What happened?"

"This Shadow Division set off a neutron bomb. The bomb itself did some damage to Munich but it sent out a high-yield pulse of radiation. Millions of people in the city are dead or will be shortly."

A neutron bomb. A heinous weapon. *A coward's weapon*. The last time he had heard of one being used against his bloodline was when the Usurper fought General Kerensky. Suddenly he understood. His 'Mech provided shielding from the fallout of traditional nuclear weapons but not the intense, penetrating radiation from the neutron bomb. He sank deeper into the cot. "They must be made to pay for this." The realization was upon his head—*I am dying.*

"We have lost a great number of warriors already. Many are going to die over the next day or so," Galaxy Commander Vong said slowly. Her voice was muffled by the clear plastic faceplate of her environmental suit. "We are still picking up the pieces."

"I am going to die, *quiaff*?" He needed to hear it from someone else, someone who would tell him the truth, not what he wanted to hear. Only a fellow warrior could do that.

The Galaxy Commander glanced over her shoulder to the doctors but the looks on their masked faces was grim. "*Aff*."

This was not a warrior's death. This was not how he had always envisioned his death. He had always imagined it would be a heroic death, one that would be spoken of by the survivors for years to come. Not now. His genes were tainted with radiation. He was dying slowly, painfully. This was not right, not for a Ghost Bear warrior. Anjo had lived his whole life to find death in battle. Now he was going to die in a bed like a wounded dog.

"I am a warrior too," the Elemental officer said. "And I know what you must be thinking."

"Do you, *quineg*?"

"I would not want to die in bed but rather face death in battle."

"This is not fair."

"That is why I came," she said. "The Word of Blake forces are concentrating around the spaceport, on the far side of the town. We believe they are going to flee the planet—this Forty-third Shadow Division did something similar on Arc-Royal two years ago." *They flee like cowards* … Anjo mulled what she was saying.

"Our primary attack force was killed in the blast. We could use our DropShips to shuttle troops over Munich, but the terrain near the spaceport does not give us the room to maneuver—especially with their DropShips there. If we try and flank the city there are high hills and we can anticipate that this Haborym's Legion will have the passes well-defended. They know we will come at them hard and are going to buy time to get in their DropShips and get off-world."

"I understand."

"Do you? Going through Munich would irradiate anyone from the blast residue. Our scientist caste has monitors that say there are signs of a bioweapon as well. While the city itself is only lightly defended, to enter it would be a death sentence. Even if someone were to survive, their genes would be ruined." The Galaxy Commander paused for a moment. Anjo understood what she was saying. While samples of their genes were stored from an early age, most Clan warriors felt that their most current genetic samples, those closest to their most heroic acts, were the most pure.

He drank her words. The path through Munich was the path of the dead. Clan warriors feared radiation because it would taint their genes. His genes were already saturated from the neutron bomb's pulse. "I already have a death sentence." *I have nothing to lose.*

"*Aff*. My thought is that you could attack through the city. The Word of Blake would never suspect an attack through that venue, not so soon after they set off that accursed bomb. You would take warriors with you that are facing the same fate as you. You can hit them quicker than the rest of us moving on the flanks of the city and through the hills. With speed, you can catch them at their DropShips. If nothing else, the attack will shatter their defense plans."

Anjo tried to sit up but his muscles strained, as if he was lifting three times his weight. "Forgive me, Galaxy Commander, but my body seems to be failing me."

Vong looked over at the doctors who brought with them several syringes. "Your entire force will be suffering from radiation sickness. Our scientists say they can give you drugs to suppress the pain and give you strength enough to complete your mission."

The scientist looked down at him and bit his lower lip before he spoke. "Star Captain, I must warn you these drugs are dangerous. They will give you energy and mask the pain, but they will shorten your life."

Anjo allowed himself a short chuckle. "I will be dead soon anyway."

"Affirmative," the scientist said. "With these drugs, your life will be measured not in days but hours."

A chance to die in battle rather than in bed … that was all that mattered. "How large would my force be?"

"We have about a Binary's worth of troops. You are the ranking officer that has

ARTIST: JIM NELSON
PUBLICATION: TECHNICAL READOUT: 3050, REVISED
YEAR: 1996

been … tainted … by the Word of Blake. If we are going to do this, we need to do it soon."

Anjo licked his parched lips. "I will not fail, Galaxy Commander."

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The doctor had given him a shot with a syringe the size of a long-range missile. Almost immediately his strength seemed to come back and the pain in his joints and muscles seemed muffled. Anjo knew it was a false feeling, that his senses were being tricked. The doctor had handed him another syringe of the same size. "When the time comes and you begin to feel weak again, use this. But once you do you only have about an hour left before your body will give out." Anjo didn't ask what he meant by 'give out.' With any luck he would be dead in battle. He had no intention of walking away from this fight alive.

The force Galaxy Commander Vong had assembled was small. There were five 'Mechs and eight Elementals. Assembled on what had been the ferrocrete of the street, well away from the assembled Ghost Bears. The Galaxy Commander had told him three aerospace warriors carried the same Mark of Cain that he did. They had been over the city when the bomb fired. They would be his reserves when he reached the spaceport.

The other—*non-contaminated*—Ghost Bears kept their distance. They seemed transfixed by him and his command. Anjo understood their reluctance. Radiation was the bane of Clansmen, it ruined DNA. While they were not radioactive, their equipment was, and the Ghost Bear warriors were not about to take any chances.

At the same time, these were kindred warriors … friends and more. When warriors went to battle there was always a chance that some would fall. In this case, none were going to return. That cast a somber note over the gathering.

The Elementals stood with their massive helmets off. One, a particularly tall warrior, was missing patches of his jet black hair, a mark of the illness they shared. Another, a female, though hard to tell in her armor, had a horrible oozing pock-mark on her face. The MechWarriors were like him, garbed in their coolant gear. One, Drysdale, was ghastly white, as if the blood had been drained from his body. Another, Chelsie, looked as if she were ready to drop from exhaustion. The three aerospace pilots were there as well, all marked with the pallor of death.

Chelsie had been part of his Star for two years. He had never seen her so weak, and it worried him. For a millisecond he wondered if his force would even make it to battle. *We are so close to death already…can we make it,* quiaff*?*

Then he saw their eyes. Drysdale, deathly white in body, had a face chiseled in anger and rage. Chelsie looked as if she were ready to pounce, her emerald eyes filled with rage. He knew them both and now he knew they would die with him. One Elemental flashed him a grin through gritted teeth, as if he were going to bite and claw the Word of Blake. Another MechWarrior, Parker, actually winked when he made eye contact with him. *No, they are not going to falter. Not now. Not until the bitter end.* Anjo smiled.

"I am Star Captain Anjo Bekker," he said with his best bravado and deep command voice. "I have been marked for death, as you have, by the cowards that have unleashed this horror on our Clan. Like you, I have no intention of dying in a hospital tent like an old member of the lower castes.

"Our mission is one that only we can perform. We are going to rush through the heart of this burning city, through the radiation that our bloodkin rightly fear. While the rest of our warriors move along the flanks, we shall strike at this Shadow Division where they are weakest. We will sweep the spaceport and destroy them and their hopes of escape.

"The Manei Domini are abominations. They have no soul, no sense of honor. We will give them none of ours. They are to be eradicated. To unleash weapons of terror, to doom millions of innocents to death, deserves no grace and dignity. We will *rend* them, tear at them like the Ghost Bear in each of us." Anjo stopped for a moment—not in dramatic pause, but to gather his thoughts and energy.

"We *will* die," he let those words sink in. "But it *will* be in battle. Go with me and you are assured honor. Fight at my side and they will sing of our deeds and sacrifice and bravery for years to come. Yes, you are the walking dead. That makes you the most dangerous thing the Word of Blake has ever faced. Will you fight with me?"

In unison the small band of warriors hoisted armored helmets, neurohelmets, or their bare hands into the air. They did not cheer. What emerged was a guttural roar which that shook him. "Then let us go!" He bent over and grabbed his own neurohelmet and headed to his *Timber Wolf*.

From the cockpit he saw that his force was almost ready. Beyond, he saw the assembled Ghost Bears. They had heard his words too, most of them. They said nothing, but watched as silent guardsmen to his last demonstration of honor. They were marching off to battle as well, the Fifth Bear Regulars and the Third Claw… those that had not been killed by the neutron bomb or the running fight with the Blakists and their mercenaries.

Anjo had just reached down to throttle the *Timber Wolf* up when he saw the entire force salute. No word was passed. Every gathered Ghost Bear who had stayed far away from them because of their radioactive taint now offered their respect.

ARTIST: FRANZ VOHWINKEL
PUBLICATION: BATTLECORPS
YEAR: 2004

The BattleMechs of the Fifth Bear Regulars raised their arms. The Elementals held their hands up as if to tip a visor on their armor. Even the technicians and the doctors seemed to pause.

One by one the members of his team turned and saw the gesture. Anjo's eyes stung from the salt of his tears. *We will not fail you.* He slid the throttle of his fusion reactor to full and smiled broadly as he headed towards what remained of the city of Munich.

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Munich had been a thriving city only a day before. Now fires burned unchecked everywhere. Neutron bombs, despite myth, still were nuclear bombs and wreacked a great deal of damage just from the nuclear blast. Neutron bombs released a much more lethal burst of radiation at detonation. The pulse killed people almost instantly. This bomb had been set off in the suburbs right in the middle of the Ghost Bears' assault force. Now as Anjo and his "walking dead," moved down the charred highway, they came across the burned out shells of BattleMechs of their Clan. Many were disfigured so badly they were hard to make out. Some were identifiable only by an arm or leg that somehow had survived the fury of the blast. All were blackened grave markers. Almost immediately his NBC warning system kicked in but he disabled it.

Anjo watched his secondary display which showed him how his unit was deployed. The Elementals were riding on the *Warhawk* of warrior Hastings, some of them doubling up so that all of them could fit, though this severely unbalanced the machine. Anjo had feared they might be too weakened to fight if they traveled on foot. The Elementals had sworn that was not going to happen, but none complained at using the 'Mech as a ride.

After another block they were past the point of "ground zero." Smoky haze filled the air and the rubble was difficult to traverse. Their formation wavered slightly as the 'Mechs fanned out, each seeking a path through the debris. Anjo watched carefully. They could encounter the Word of Blake and he wanted to be prepared.

Another mile of marching brought them to the heart of Munich. The bloated corpses of innocent civilians, dropped by the intense radiation pulse, lay on the sidewalks. Hovercars—having collided when their drivers instantly died—were jumbled into piles along the roadways. Oddly enough he saw a dog wandering along on the sidewalk, the only sign of life in the debris.

Another two blocks and he heard from Chelsie. "Star Captain, I have movement in front of me, 100 meters." Her voice was crisp and professional. Anjo licked his lips and was surprised they were dry and cracked. His body was deteriorating further.

"Numbers, type?"

"Unknown. It comes up as battle armor on my computer, then shifts to an infantry reading."

"Manei Domini."

"Affirmative."

He punched up the city map. Pulling in the sensor readings from Chelsie's *Timber Wolf*, he saw the area where the Word of Blake had been spotted. Neutron bombs killed quickly but left the structures intact. Had these Manei Domini been in Munich when the bomb went off, *quineg*? Were they just like his Ghost Bears, irradiated, already doomed? Or had they been sent into this dead city to stop him? It did not matter.

"Alright. Chelsie, move up slowly. Let them see you and keep their attention. I will move up Fifth Avenue with Drysdale and Parker. The rest of you fan out to the west of Chelsie and cut off their escape. We will flank them. Do not engage until I give the word. When we do, rip them apart."

A flurry of "*Aff's*" came in the earpiece of his neurohelmet as he, Parker and Drysdale moved along the side streets. At the last intersection before coming into line of sight he saw movement in a building across the way. It wasn't much, a shadow moving in front of a window on the second floor.

"On my mark—engage!" he said. He stepped into line of sight with the building and let loose with a single volley of long-range missiles at the floor and approximate location where he had seen the shadow. Drysdale stepped out further in his *Summoner* and fired a blast of PPC fire into the building right after the missiles hit. From up the street came a burst of large lasers sweeping the façade of the structure from Chelsie's *Timber Wolf*.

For a moment no one fired. Smoke billowed from the bank building as glass shards rained down on the street below. A glow deep in the bowels of the building indicated that fires were burning. Anjo moved his *Timber Wolf* out a step or two, waiting for any sign that there were enemy troops present.

Suddenly fire belched out of the structure. Several short-range missiles twisted in the air to hit both him and Drysdale. A dozen abominations emerged defiantly from the structure. Five were encased in battle armor, the rest conventional troops, all armed to take out 'Mechs. Those in battle armor seemed unique to him, as if they had configured their protection and weapons to fit their needs. All were firing, spraying laser fire down the street toward Chelsie, others firing at him and Drysdale. The Manei Domini armored infantry looked human at first glimpse but within a heartbeat of time, he saw them for what they were—more machine than men. Their dull gray, metallic bodies had some flesh-and-blood parts, but right down to their glowing red and green eyes, they were not men. Elementals had a certain degree of grace. These man/machines had none.

Anjo brought his machine guns onto target interlock two and used his thumb to fire at the two of the abominations. The machine guns hit one of the battle armored troopers so hard that he was knocked back as the bullets riddled his metallic torso. The other cyborg soldier was hit but held his ground, mocking the force of the attack. As soon as Anjo checked his fire the Manei Domini returned it, hitting his armored cockpit dead-on with a searing laser burst. The shot didn't penetrate but was a reminder that these troopers needed to be dealt with harshly.

Drysdale fired a blast from his autocannon at a group of the conventionally armed infantry who were firing down the street towards Chelsie's *Timber Wolf*. The autocannon rounds tore up the troopers and the pavement they stood on, tossing them around like dolls. Some didn't move after the blast. Others stirred in the smoke of the new craters and continued to fire. Those that lay there suddenly quaked, exploding from within. Anjo had heard of the self-destruct systems of these fighters and realized that as they died, they were exploding.

They want to fight to the death—that is a wish that I will grant them. Anjo moved forward with his *Timber Wolf* in a full run where Drysdale had fired. He maneuvered right on top of them, stomping the feet of his BattleMech down as if he was squishing bugs. The Manei Domini did not waver or run. They fired up at him until the end. Ultimately it didn't matter. Their shots did minor damage to his legs, but in a matter of minutes, he had killed them. Drysdale chased one up the street, finally killing him with a shot from his extended range particle projection cannon.

The brilliant flash of the PPC reminded Anjo of the nuclear blast that had doomed him, if only for a moment. He could not tell if Drysdale had taken down the cybernetic infantryman or not. All that remained was a blackened streak on the ferrocrete. For a moment he thought they were done with the fighting. That ended when a blast of Gauss rifle fire burst from within the building.

The abominations had smuggled a towed Gauss rifle into the structure, and despite the fire that the building had taken, they were still operative. The hypersonic shot had traced a path through the air and hit warrior Dimitri's *Nova*. It had come from two floors higher than where the Ghost Bears had fired before. Drysdale fired but missed. The heavy-gauge Gauss rifle fired again as he moved in closer, searching for the exact source of the shot. This time the rifle hit Chelsie's 'Mech.

We could play this game all day and never reach the spaceport. Anjo opened a channel to Drysdale, "Save your ammunition. Let us drop this building." He charged his *Timber Wolf* into the side of the bank and heard a grinding, crunching sound as Drysdale did the same with his *Summoner*. The building resisted but slowly, meter by meter, it gave way. All around him the building groaned and ground apart as he pushed his BattleMech through the structure. He saw flickers of flame pass his cockpit window as he leaned to the side and put the *Timber Wolf's* shoulder into it. He was losing armor in the push, but that did not scare Anjo.

A ripple of warmth came over him, followed by a chill. Those were the first real sensations he had felt since the doctor had injected him. His tasted copper. He glanced down and saw a new open sore on his hand, oozing white pus tinged with blood.

The pushing and grinding took long moments but he soon broke through the other side, followed shortly by Drysdale. Behind them the structure collapsed inward to fill the gaps that their 'Mechs had made. Dust and smoke rose from the rubble. Only one far corner of the back of the bank remained intact. Where the Gauss rifle had been was a pile of ruins.

"Form up on me—we need to continue to the spaceport." *Their infantry may have gotten word out, but even so that may draw defenders off from their flanks.*

ARTIST: DES HANLEY
PUBLICATION: INNER SPHERE
YEAR: 2000

It didn't matter to him. Either way, he was taking the walking dead up to that tarmac.

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The Munich spaceport was on a plateau to the east of the city, rising above the smoke-shrouded city. To the east were the outlines of low hills, barely visible over the spaceport structures and warehouses. To the north and south the hills were much more steep and dominating. It was there that the rest of the Ghost Bears would come. From the long sloping highway that led up to the spaceport, Star Captain Bekker could understand why he was going to lead the attack from the ruins. Striking through the remains of the city had put them at an objective that the rest of his Clan was going to have to slug their way to reach.

The fires from the city were spreading. Some had already reached the buildings on the edge of the spaceport. A haze of smoke made the spaceport appear ghost-like on the plateau.

His sensors showed his unit was far from alone. At the spaceport itself there were DropShips, several *Leopard*-class ships as well as three *Union*-class vessels. There were also Word of Blake BattleMechs there. Some were near the DropShips but it seemed as if they were forming a battle line near where the highway snaked around the spaceport perimeter.

A ripple of sweat ran down the inside of his neurohelmet and pooled near his cheek. He was hot when he shouldn't be. It was a sign, as clear as any on his tactical display. He eyed the compartment where he had stored the last syringe. *Not yet, but soon…*

The Manei Domini would array themselves to protect the DropShips. That's what he would do if he were them. They had not planned on the Ghost Bears coming through Munich. This would force them to pull resources from their flank defenses—which would only help Galaxy Commander Vong's efforts. The Manei Domini had a height advantage but were not poised forward enough to hit him. That was a mistake, an indication that he had indeed caught them off guard or they had a dangerous field of fire established…or was it possible they had something else in mind, something he hadn't considered?

Anjo Bekker's assult plan was simple: punch through those defenses and get to the DropShips. Once there, he would cut loose Hastings with his Elemental riders. That was the key, getting the Elementals through the defensive line. They would swarm some of the DropShips and disable or destroy them.

"The Word of Blake is waiting for us to crest this plateau," he said, trudging his *Timber Wolf* up the incline out of the city. "They will try and slow us down. These Shadow Division troops deserve no honor and none will be given them. We need to hit their DropShips, disrupt their defenses. Parker and Dimitri, you know what to do, *quiaff*?"

"*Aff*," they replied in unison.

"Good then. We do not slow down. We charge right into their lines. We make it impossible for them to concentrate their fire." He reached down to the throttle controls and slid them down all the way, bringing the fusion reactor to its peak. *It is time…* He broke his *Timber Wolf* into a trotting run.

As he came into line of sight of the defenders he was less surprised and more disappointed than he expected. Haborym's Legion was arrayed in a large arc on the edge of the tarmac, with the center of the arc being where the highway came up from the city. As soon as Anjo came into sight fire erupted from all angles of the arc at him. He was not alone. Chelsie appeared as well with her *Timber Wolf* only a step behind and to the side.

The Forty-third Shadow Division troops there were a mixed lot. There were seven BattleMechs, some designs he had never seen before. Infantry near the burning buildings fired. The Manei Domini conventional infantry troopers on the ground appeared very different and easy to spot. All of them fired. His *Timber Wolf* rocked under the concussions but he held his ground. He locked onto the nearest BattleMech, a *Black Knight*. Two milliseconds after he heard the lock-tone, he let go with his long-range missiles.

Thirty-eight of forty missiles hit the *Black Knight*. The Star League-era design staggered backward. Chelsie engaged one of the newer 'Mechs, something similar to a *Templar*. Her large lasers hit it on its right side, mangling the armor there. The mysterious new 'Mech drifted back, using one of the warehouses for cover.

The handful of standard infantry near Anjo opened up with small arms and a few shoulder-launched short-range missiles. He twisted his torso and sprayed them with his machine guns. In moments those that were not red smears on the tarmac retreated to the burning buildings rather than face him. He saw one of them melt into a puddle of ooze—another of their demonic self-destruct devices.

Drysdale's *Summoner* withered under a barrage from a *Bombardier* who found itself battered by the *Summoner*'s PPC and long-range missiles. Suddenly, from the lower stretch of the highway rose Dimitri's *Nova* and Parker's *Rifleman IIC*, landing just in front of the lines of the Word of Blake on their hot jump jets. Their sudden appearance stunned the Word of Blake forces. No one fired at them save a defiant squad of Manei Domini infantry who rushed the *Nova*, battering its legs. That surprise lasted for what seemed to be a minute, but was in reality only a few seconds. Then the Shadow Division troops opened up at the newly-arrived 'Mechs.

The *Warhawk* that Hastings piloted came up the highway ramp next and hit a light Word of Blake *Hitman*. The air was filled with lasers and missiles. The *Hitman* went down—not destroyed, but down. Anjo pivoted his torso again and locked onto the Blake *Tempest* nearest Hastings. He switched all of his weapons to the same target interlock circuit and the moment he heard the tone the Star Captain fired.

His heat rose sharply as the missiles and large lasers found their mark, tearing away at the armor on its left side. The arm-mounted large pulse laser looked badly pockmarked from his missiles and the 'Mech bore a nasty scar from one of his laser hits.

The heat in his cockpit suddenly felt worse than he had ever experienced before. Dizziness blanketed his head. Anjo understood immediately what was happening. The radiation and the medication were extracting their high toll from his body. He reached forward and groped for the syringe.

He held it in his right hand and it felt as if it were ten kilos heavy. His vision blurred as he removed the safety cap from the massive needle. His 'Mech rocked from an attack. He didn't see who and for a moment he didn't care. Anjo took the syringe and jabbed it hard into the bare skin of his thigh just below the coolant jacket. He drove the plunger down.

The sickness, the wave of heat, melted away. Control over his body and mind returned but he knew that control was limited, tempered by time and the battle around him. Angrily he tossed the empty medical device into the back of the cockpit.

Another rocking hit forced his senses clear and he focused on the enemy. The *Bombardier* was in the distance, sitting against a building, smoke billowing from its ruined missile racks. The *Tempest* moved forward, raking him with its medium lasers. He side-stepped to keep some distance and brought his lasers to bear. The large lasers hit near the cockpit of the Blakist 'Mech while the medium pulse laser stitched a series of blackened holes up the center torso. The *Tempest* backed off, probably to bring its Gauss rifle to bear. Anjo smiled. *Good, back up, let me bring my missiles into play*. He brought them to a single trigger on his joystick and continued to side-step and put distance in.

The weapons-lock tone was warm in his ears. The air filled with missiles aimed at the *Tempest*. Most found their mark and those that didn't blasted the tarmac and roadway. One Word infantryman was thrown in the air by an errant missile, going up as a monster and coming down in parts spread out on the ground. *Where are your precious self-destruct mechanisms now?* The *Tempest* tried to fire its Gauss rifle only to have the slug streak past Anjo's cockpit and out into Munich city.

A white-gray *Grim Reaper* shuffled forward towards Parker's *Rifleman IIC*. Hastings pivoted and unleashed a horrible barrage of pulse laser fire at perfect range. None of the lasers missed—they couldn't. The *Grim Reaper* sagged under the barrage, pieces of blasted and burned armor flying in the air and dancing across the roadway.

The movement of the *Grim Reaper* opened a hole in the defensive lines—a gap in the great arc. Into that hole Hastings rushed forward with his living cargo of Elemental warriors. Several of the Elementals did not miss the opportunity to spray out short-range missiles into the side of the *Reaper* as they passed.

Anjo saw the DropShips in the distance and saw a flurry of activity. The timing was perfect. He keyed in the coded signal for his aerospace fighter support. They were back somewhere over Munich, waiting for their chance for glory. Now it would come. They would go for the DropShips as Hastings was doing. Hopefully the rest of them would as well.

A blast tore into his *Timber Wolf's* left side and he had to fight to keep the 'Mech upright. He turned and saw the mangled *Tempest* still in the fight. He waited until

he was sure the reload cycle on his long-range missiles was done and fired. This time more missiles missed, but those that found their marks had less armor to slow them down. The *Tempest* disappeared into a gray smoky haze.

It emerged, stepping forward slowly, like a drunken man. The left side of the BattleMech was exposed and open. Myomer strands hung on the ground, some sparking slightly as the 'Mech moved. It was as if the enemy 'Mech was death itself lumbering on the battlefield.

It fired its medium lasers and two of them found their mark on his *Timber Wolf's* legs. He shrugged off those hits and brought his own large lasers back into play. He aimed carefully, zooming his view in on the holes ripped in the armor on the left side. He fired both weapons at the same time. One hit in the center torso, burrowing a deep black hole. The other shot hit where there was no armor on the *Tempest*. The Blakist BattleMech quaked and rocked violently in place, hard enough that one armored plate flew off its back. Ammunition was cooking off somewhere deep in the guts of this 'Mech. It was dying or dead already. Anjo turned his BattleMech to deal with the *Grim Reaper*.

The battle was horribly imbalanced. The *Grim Reaper* and three squads of Manei Domini were concentrating on Dimitri's *Nova*. The Manei Domini infantry were like an angry swarm of bugs, ripping the armor apart on the *Nova* as Dimitri rocked the 'Mech and kept firing wildly at the *Grim Reaper*. The *Reaper*, in turn, was pumping short-range missiles and its large laser into the squat *Nova,* carefully avoiding his own battle armored troops. Anjo knew Dimitri's time was limited. He activated a separate targeting reticule and brought his long-range missiles up for both targeting interlock circuits.

The first volley aimed at the rear of the *Grim Reaper*. The wave of missiles snaked in and hit the 'Mech in the back and nearly knocked it over. The *Reaper* turned slowly, methodically—angrily—to face him. The second wave of missiles flew past it by a space of five meters and rained down on Dimitri's *Nova*. The explosions hit the *Nova* but they did infinitely more damage to the Manei Domini infantry swarming on his 'Mech. Metallic legs and arms flew in every direction. He'd bought Dimitri at least another few moments of life, another few shots.

Drysdale's *Summoner* was in a tangle with two BattleMechs that Anjo's battle computer could not identify. He was flailing wildly at them, punching them with the mangled stumps of his *Summoner's* arms. His death was imminent, but he was devastating two of the enemies. Just as Anjo thought he would fall, Drysdale did something he did not expect.

He detonated his own fusion reactor.

There was no doubt in Anjo's mind that it was anything but a deliberate act, because fusion engines did not—could not—explode on their own. The blast ripped apart the two Manei Domini BattleMechs. Parts of them landed near his own 'Mech's feet. He was proud of Drysdale, more proud than he had been of any other warriors he had led in battle. He had found honor for himself and for them all. *I only hope my own death is as spectacular.*

Anjo did not waste time. He broke his *Timber Wolf* into a full run at the *Grim Reaper*. The Blakist BattleMech fired at him and he saw warning lights from the hits. He plowed straight into it, sending the *Reaper* onto its damaged back, grinding off more armor as it skidded a few meters on the tarmac. The hit left nasty holes on the left side of his 'Mech. His missile rack read loaded but damaged. It was the last volley he had anyway. Using the working rack on the right side he fired a wave of missiles at the *Black Knight*. Half of the missiles missed their mark. The others peppered the armor of the old 'Mech.

Beyond the *Black Knight* Anjo saw the fallen form of Parker's *Rifleman IIC*. It was splayed out like a freshly killed deer, arms and legs spread out where it had fallen. Just beyond it lurked the mysterious new 'Mech that the Shadow Division was fielding, badly mangled but still in the fight. He glanced over at Hastings' *Warhawk* as it poured fire into one of the *Union*-class DropShips. The ships' turrets were all locked onto it and brilliant crimson beams of laser energy surrounded the *Warhawk*. From what Anjo could see Hastings was nearing his end but was badly damaging one of the open bays of the DropShip.

Elementals were crawling on the *Leopard*-class ships. Some had gotten inside the closest ship and were firing wildly and indiscriminately into its guts. Smoke billowed from the bays of the other *Leopard*, the telltale mark of the damage his unit was inflicting.

He coughed and felt a salty taste in his mouth that he had never tasted before. It was not phlegm—it was thicker, bloodier. *It is my lungs coming apart*. Suddenly he felt a pain in his chest, as if someone were crushing his ribs. It was like getting in a bear-hug with an angry Elemental. The dizziness was creeping back and he found he no longer had the strength of will to suppress it. Death was closing in.

The fighting spurred him into action. He tried to form words, to order his Ghost Bears into the DropShips. What came out was a weak gurgle. Once again the heat of fever swept him and he stabbed at the communications board to send a text message. "Ghost Bears converge and attack the DropShips." His voice may have been gone but as he hit 'transmit' he knew that his orders were conveyed.

He charged forward, past the fallen *Grim Reaper* that was attempting to right itself, past the Word of Blake infantry that were firing to stop them. Chelsie rushed in with him, the only other functional 'Mech on the field. They charged forward toward Hastings' dying BattleMech, firing at the massive DropShips.

Anjo Bekker heard a rumble from above and looked at his sensors. The aerospace fighters were coming in, blazing away at the DropShips. Two of them broke off for another run but another roared over his head like a thunderclap and plowed straight into the side of a *Union*-class DropShip. Debris rained down as Dimitri's 'Mech crumbled from the fire of two turrets.

Anjo and Chelsie charged forward as the turrets of the surviving ships turned on them. Anjo felt warm, oh so warm, for just a second. Then everything went white. His last thought was of squeezing all of his triggers at once.

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An Hour Later…

Galaxy Commander Jocelyn Vong stood on the tarmac of the Munich spaceport and surveyed the damage there. Her troops had arrived thirty minutes after Star Captain Anjo Bekker's force had blasted their way through to the DropShips. Evidence of the savagery of the fighting was everywhere. As night fell on Munich and the distant glow of the fires in the city shimmered, the Galaxy Commander saw what the Ghost Bears had done.

Two *Leopard*-class DropShips were destroyed. The bodies of the Manei Domini infantry and the Ghost Bear Elementals were tangled together in and outside of those ships. The Manei Domini had rushed the Elementals and self-destructed to take them out. A *Union*-class ship was still ablaze in the distance, the victim of a ramming attack, while another had been burst open by internal explosions caused by a ground assault. Anjo Bekker's own *Timber Wolf* and that of warrior Chelsie were found in the shadows of the ship, near the charred remains of a *Warhawk*. Only a single *Union* DropShip had managed to get loaded and escape.

The smoky air stank of burned electrical wiring, burning garbage, and the odd smell of meat cooking—like bacon. *I did not think there was enough flesh on the Manei Domini to merit the smell.* She had smelled burned people before in battle, but here it was worse. *It may be my own people I smell.* That thought sobered her even more.

She stood on the littered tarmac and looked at where Anjo Bekker and his force had fallen. The Ghost Bears had taken to calling them "The Walking Dead," and it was a name she thought would stick. They had fought with honor and, in the end, given the Ghost Bears a victory.

As she stared at his crumbled *Timber Wolf*, Galaxy Commander Vong made a solemn promise. "You will be remembered Anjo Bekker, you and your Walking Dead. *The Remembrance* will add lines of your sacrifice and your honor. The names of those that died with you will serve as an inspiration for us all. The Walking Dead will be a new standing unit in the Ghost Bears, one whose history you began to write here."

Galaxy Commander Vong closed her eyes. In the darkness of her own thought she found herself hoping she would be able to live up to the measure of honor that Anjo Bekker had demonstrated.

For a Ghost Bear warrior, it was the closest thing to a prayer.

ARTIST: GERHARD MOZSI
PUBLICATION: JIHAD HOT SPOTS 3070
YEAR: 2005

ARTIST: BRYAN BARNARD
PUBLICATION: HOT SPOTS
YEAR: 1993

ARTIST: FRANZ VOHWINKEL
PUBLICATION: CLASSIC BATTLETECH: THE GAME OF ARMORED COMBAT
YEAR: 2002

ARTIST: JIM HOLLOWAY
PUBLICATION: CITYTECH
YEAR: 1986

HORNET'S NEST

CRAIG ERNE

VILLMAR RIVER PLAINS
DEMETER, FEDERATED SUNS
23 APRIL 3022

Twin flashes of blue-tinged artificial lightning slashed through the air with a telltale sizzling hiss as they slammed into the right side of the *Valkyrie.* Already listing and fighting to stay on its feet, the BattleMech's patchwork armor vaporized, allowing the particle beams to lash at the myomer bundles and internal components. With smoke and liquid flames gushing from the wound, it was forced into a sudden spin and then collapsed in a heap. The machine lost its left leg during the violent fall, and as Saul edged his *Archer* forward he dropped his crosshairs onto the hapless 'Mech and stabbed his trigger. He smiled with satisfaction as he felt the slight lurch of his 'Mech when both long-range missile racks let loose. The swarm of warheads left a lethal trail of rippling explosions across what little was left of the *Valkyrie.*

"He's not getting up from that, Dee," Saul called out over their combat channel, "Does anybody else got a moving target?"

To his right, in the distance, he saw a *Firestarter* racing away at top speed. To his left, he saw the infamous low-slung profile of Lieutenant Greshner's *Marauder.* The 'Mech's legendary twin derringer arms swung towards Saul's *Archer* and a moment later the man's easygoing drawl answered, "Well I did see a *Valkyrie* a second ago Captain, but I don't think he's gonna be waltzing anytime soon."

Cracking a smile inside the stifling heat of his cockpit, Saul hit the transmit button. "Bombers, are we clear? Does anybody have a moving target that isn't in full retreat?"

"No sir," a new voice chimed in, the voice of MechWarrior Reggie Horn in the lance's *Cyclops,* "But I do have a Federated Militia major itching to beg you for honors of war."

Satisfied that the battle was over, Saul nodded and surveyed the valley one last time. Seven of the defending BattleMechs lay in ruin or in piles of rubble across the valley floor. He saw the headless corpse of a *Centurion* and the shrapnel that had once been an *Enforcer*. All four of the Bombers' 'Mechs had checked in, and the enemy was in retreat. That was the expectation of the Bombers for every battle, and on this day the Demeter Militia had learned that the hard way.

"Yeah," Saul acknowledged. "Put him through. It's time to pack it in, pack it up, get our cash and drink until we're poor again. And Reggie, recall Scout and Strike lances back to the *Star* so we can get off this rock."

Saul turned his massive seventy-ton 'Mech almost 180 degrees to get it pointed to the path that would take it back to their DropShip, the *Wayward Star.* As the voice of the surviving CO of the Demeter Militia crackled in his ear Saul began to assess the damage his 'Mech had sustained during the fight.

"No worries, Charlotte," he told it. "It's nothing but a scratch and George can fix that in no time. We'll have you good as new before we make landfall back in Marik space."

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ESTATE OF COUNT EZRA DURRANT
ORIENTE, FREE WORLDS LEAGUE
21 JULY 3022

"Obviously," the Count's assistant smiled thinly, "His Highness is pleased with your work. He wished me to express his gratitude at the totality and professionalism with which you and your Northstar Irregulars achieved victory."

"Hell, son," 'Dry Roasted' Dave Greshner snorted, tossing back his scotch in one smooth motion and slapping the glass back down on the impossibly-expensive oak table, "That's what the Bombay Bombers do. We come, we see, we sure as hell conquer. Who'd he think he'd hired? The Waco Rangers?"

As Saul watched the assistant bristle, he cut a warning glance at his executive officer and spoke up, "My compatriot may be crude, sir, but the praise of the count is most appreciated and most welcome. We just want to get what we're owed and be on our way."

BITHINIA

World Name: Bithinia
Star Type (Recharge Time): F7V (178 hours)
Position in System: 2
Time to Jump Point: 12.93 days
Number of Satellites: 3 (Paludina, Valvata, Littorina)
Surface Gravity: 0.90
Atm. Pressure: Standard (Breathable)
Equatorial Temperature: 30° C (Warm-Temperate)
Surface Water Coverage: 55 percent
Recharging Station: Nadir
HPG Class Type: B
Highest Native Life: Reptiles
Population Size (3022): 3,298,000,000
Socio-Industrial Levels: BBBBB

Bithinia was once primarily a major tourist planet in the Confederation that catered to the few ultra-wealthy Capellans (and foreigners) who could travel to other star systems for their entertainment. The planet was well serviced by a network of high-speed maglev trains and aircraft to whisk the wealthy (but not local commoners, of course) from resort to resort in the wide range of environments offered by an entire planet. Bithinia always had somewhere sunny and tropical, while elsewhere some mountain was covered in the perfect skiing powder.

Though the extremely wealthy could reserve parts of Bithinia for their private playgrounds, they were few and far between, and the JumpShips to bring them to Bithinia were almost as rare. The 3.2 billion-plus people on the planet not involved in catering to the affluent had to find other jobs, and iron-rich Bithinia gave them steel mills. Much of this output stayed on Bithinia, of course, but the world also developed a specialty steel sector that supported the Confederation's aerospace and military industries.

The man set his glass down precisely, and leaned forward, placing his hands on his knees, creating a false sense of intimate conversation. His forced, thin smile reeked of politician, but Saul took it in stride. The man obviously had more to say before any payment would be forthcoming.

"You possess an entire assault lance, Captain, in good working order. You could benefit greatly from the patronage of a member of Free Worlds nobility. Have you thought of that?"

"Do you know what that lance gets us most of all, Mister Walters?"

"I wouldn't presume to know about military matters, Captain."

"Freedom," Saul said. "We get to pick our jobs, pick our situations, and control our own fate. Now, your boss pays well, and as long as he has good work for us to do, we're happy to do it. Just the same, we like things to stay as they are. Do thank

him for the kind offer, though." He sat back. "Now, not to beat a dead horse, but there is the matter of final payment?"

Walters tapped his fingertips together and leaned back in his chair thoughtfully. "I see. The payment is here." He slid an envelope from his jacket to the table and then reclined again. "The Count would like to hire you for another job. Transport provided. Triple the pay of your last job, and the support of other mercenaries who will screen regional defenses in order to open a path for you to conduct a very important raid."

"Sounds like Christmas," Dave broke in. "What's the catch?"

"It's a ballistics plant," Walters answered. "Inside a city, and it will mean that the Capellan Confederation will likely never want to hire you again."

Reaching out to grab the check, Saul cracked an amused smile. He tucked the money away inside his vest, near where he kept his hidden laser pistol. "So, like Lieutenant Greshner asked, what's the catch?"

The comment cracked the politician's stern façade and a smile appeared at once. "Very good," he nodded, "Let us have another round and discuss the terms of your continuing service to the Count."

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CIVIL DEFENSE CENTER
BITHINIA, CAPELLAN
CONFEDERATION
17 SEPTEMBER 3022

In his youth, the steps had been so much easier to climb.

The call to battle had set his heart afire and the boundless energy inside him made his steps effortless. How many times had he raced to his BattleMech from the comforts of a sound sleep in the barracks? How many times had he heard an alarm like the one shrieking through the CDC base even now? As he passed through the doors the guards snapped to crisp attention. He saw his face reflected in the smoky glass door and marveled at how old he had gotten in so short a time.

The Command Center personnel were moving at breakneck pace but with a controlled military precision. It was activity with purpose. No one was panicked, or rushed, and the hushed conversations around the room allowed only a soft din of noise to fill the air. The enormous trio of display screens flashed tracking information and various strategic maps. Major Xao Zhiyi strode up the ramp to the dais where the planetary garrison's commanding officer was watching the proceedings. The colonel was much younger, perhaps not even forty. His hair was shaved away but his facial features befit his occupation. He was hawkish, sharp and ready to spring into motion. He barely acknowledged Zhiyi's arrival. No less was expected. The colonel was the young lion, seeking glory and the thrill of the hunt. He had no time to amuse an old lion who had lost his teeth. Still, Xao snapped to attention and awaited his orders dutifully.

Motioning to the screen, the man spoke. "We have confirmed at least one company of BattleMechs making planetfall. They used a pirate point, allowing them to drop with almost no warning. They're moving towards the militia arsenals at Harwang and Zico. Second Battalion has moved to secure the spaceport and the Celestial Residence. I am going to take First Battalion into the landing zone and cut them off. Alas, Warrior House Ma-Tsu Kai is off world, or this threat would be trivial to crush."

Zhiyi nodded. Speaking would do little good now. The young lion was set on his course. The experience gained in Zhiyi's decades of command and BattleMechs would fall on deaf ears. Despite the obvious pitfalls of the colonel's plan, he remained quiet.

"I leave the reserves and the city proper to you, Major Xao Zhiyi. I trust this is an order you can fulfill?" The colonel arched an eyebrow, his tone mocking and dismissive.

"With pride and honor, Colonel." Zhiyi bowed, crisply and formally. "I wish you and the other lions good hunting. Do you have any standing orders?"

The colonel paused. He studied the old officer carefully. "Yes, defend the city at all costs," he said. "Although I believe you have little to fear. We will cut these raiders off long before they reach the city itself. If something unexpected happens, notify me immediately."

With a shake of his head, he grabbed his gloves and motioned for his aide to follow him. The deck officer announced loudly, "Attention all stations! The colonel has passed control to Reserve Commander Xao Zhiyi!" Below him, every man and woman snapped to attention and held their line as the colonel exited the room. Only after he left did the same men and women turn to look up at the dais. Xao Zhiyi scratched his chin a moment and then spoke.

"Activate all the reserves. Have all company commanders report to their bases and activate all combat units. A civil evacuation order should go out at once and I need every map possible of the city ready to be loaded onto the main screens."

There was a noticeable pause as young soldiers looked to one another for confirmation of the barrage of orders. Their training soon won out and they scrambled to do as they were told. Satisfied, Zhiyi looked down at the deck officer and said in a more level voice, "Commander Shu, assemble any militia or reserve BattleMechs at the Glorious Defenders' Barracks and tell them to await further orders. Also, contact any reserve units we have in Harwang or Zico and tell them to empty their arsenals of any BattleMech repair parts. They may leave the small arms and the ammunition."

The young officer knit his brows in confusion, but did not risk outright disobedience. He calmly walked up to the dais and spoke quietly. "At once Major, but may I know why we are calling upon our entire reserve? If a second attack comes, we will have nothing to counterattack with."

Zhiyi glared into the young officer's eyes until he could see the man trembling where he stood. In his seventies Xao Zhiyi's stare carried the full weight of his wisdom and conviction. "The attack is underway, Commander. Our commander has opened the door of the city to our attackers, and soon, very soon now, they will enter it. I am not inclined to give it away. Are you?"

The shaken young officer could only shake his head.

"Good, then do as I say. We are about to be very, very busy."

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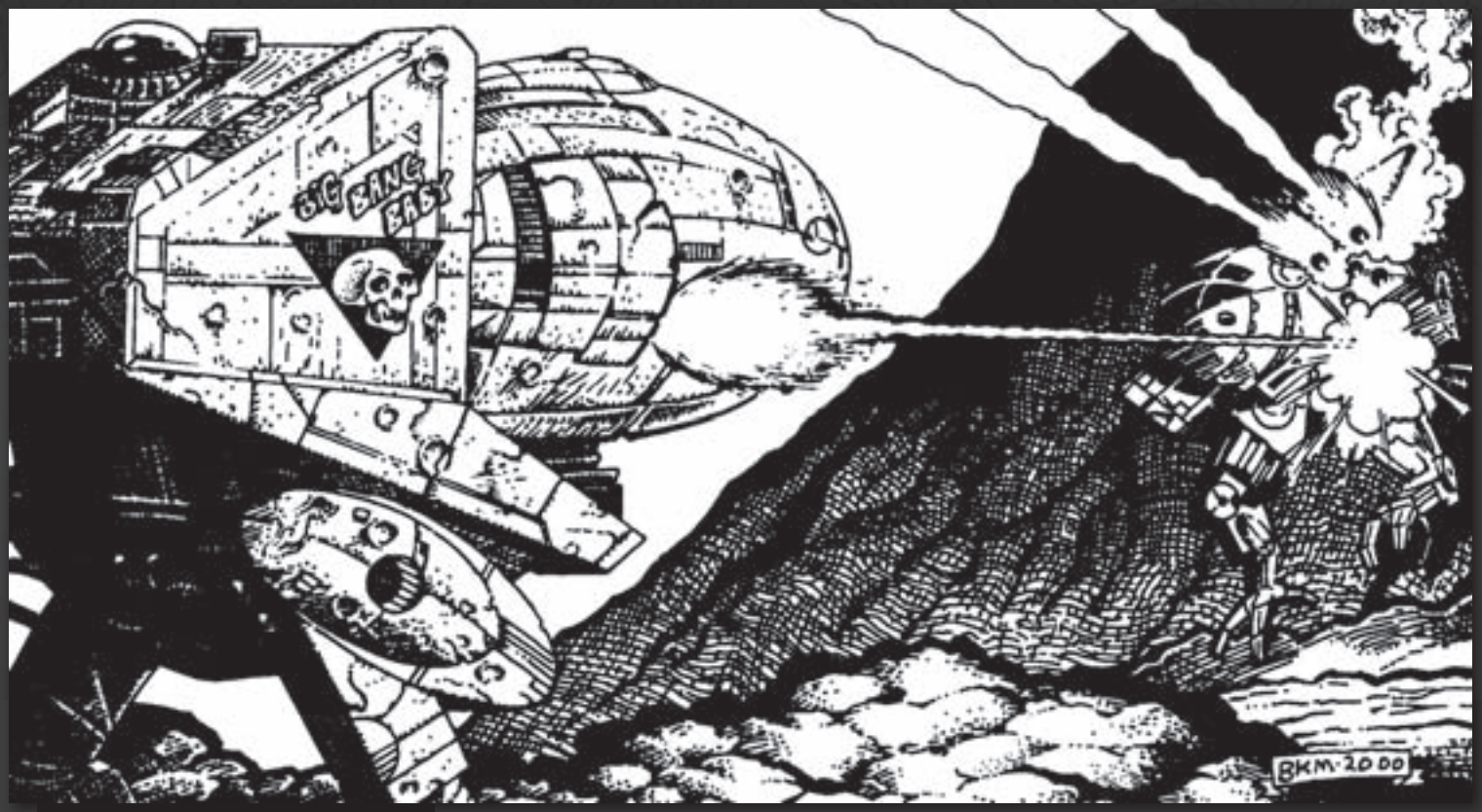
JOUSHE PLAINS, NEAR THE CITY OF BITHINIA
BITHINIA, CAPELLAN CONFEDERATION
17 SEPTEMBER 3022

Switching through various sensor settings, Saul kept his *Archer* moving at the best possible speed. The city loomed on the horizon now, and if his plan was working the other three Bombay Bombers would be approaching the city from the other three cardinal points. The lack of enemy activity was a blessing, but it gnawed at the back of his consciousness. No reserve or militia units had rushed out to save the city. No air strikes or artillery had tried to impede their progress. Perhaps his gambit had worked completely. Perhaps the entire Capellan garrison was chasing his other two lances. That seemed unlikely.



ARTIST: BRAD MCDEVITT
PUBLICATION: FIELD MANUAL: CAPELLAN CONFEDERATION
YEAR: 2000

He keyed his comm channel. "Bomber Lead to all Bombers. Has anybody seen a damn thing yet?"

"Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse," Lieutenant Greshner drawled back. "Now explain to me one more time why we're all spread over hell and gone? I'm not a big fan of these lone-wolf tactics, sir."

"Because," Saul replied, with a hint of irritation, "Lieutenant Vessen has caused enough havoc up north to draw out two whole battalions of 'Mechs. All that's left in the city is some reserve armor and infantry. We're not gonna let them tie us up and then whisk all the goodies from the plant out the back door. Coming in like this, from all four sides at once, we have every major access road covered. I'm not just here for the ballistics plant, Dave. If we do this right, we're gonna stuff the DropShip full of free parts and ammo courtesy of his Celestial Magnificence."

"You're the boss, boss," Greshner said. "I'm just worried about getting nickel and dimed to death by gnats."

"By what," the youngest Bomber, Izzy McClain asked. "A few militia tanks? Maybe an *Urbie* or two? I promise, Lieutenant Greshner, if the big bad militia guys scare you too much? I'll come save you."

"About the time you think you can't be touched, McClain," Greshner growled back, "someone gives you a good solid smack in the mouth."

"I got nothing, Captain, not even civilian traffic or chatter. It's like a ghost town up here," Lieutenant Horn offered. "But my sat-relay says that a full battalion and support forces are chasing Scout and Strike Lances through the northwest province near Harwang and Zico."

"Well, I guess it worked," Saul called back. "Just the same, everybody be careful ready for something weird. If you come across anything too heavy fall back and wait for help. Let's do this like we done 'em all before, folks."

As he drew closer to the city Saul continued to scan through his sensors. Finally he shook his head. "Where you boys hiding out?"

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CITY OF BITHINIA
BITHINIA, CAPELLAN CONFEDERATION
17 SEPTEMBER 3022

Subcommander Li Feng checked his viewfinder one more time. His mouth had long-since dried and now his hands began to shake. The image in the goggles focused to a crisp, deadly visage: the unmistakable shape of a *Zeus* striding into the outskirts of the city's downtown district. He ducked quickly back down behind the barricade and keyed his radio. "Target has passed Lion's Road at Tenth!"

The screech of metal on pavement filled his ears. He felt the compulsion to look and, despite the fear balling in the pit of his stomach, found himself peeking one eye over the concrete barricade. He saw one of the CDF *UrbanMech*s waddling around the corner of a large building. Its compact autocannon ripped out a stream of shells that slammed into the enemy 'Mech's left side. From hip to shoulder, the shells traced pockmarks in the mostly-white armor and its red and black trim. Immediately the *Zeus* fired back, raising its right arm to loose a cloud of long-range missiles. The *UrbanMech* was far too slow to move out of the way and was riddled with explosions. Struggling to stay standing, the small, squat 'Mech ducked back out of sight.

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"Contact left!" Saul heard the fourth member of the lance shout out. From the cockpit of his *Zeus* MechWarrior Izzy McClain called "I got an *Urbie* playing tag with me but he got the worst of it, moving to finish him off, boss."

"You need any help, Izzy?" Dave offered right away.

"Nah, he's too slow to go far."

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In the command center the fight was being played in realtime with a bird's eye view provided by spotter planes circling high overhead. Zhiyi noted the path of the *Zeus* as it charged through the cityscape like a bull in a china shop. The CDF 'Mech was trying to retreat, even using its small jump jets to hop closer to cover, but the *Zeus* was clearly going to get another salvo off before the *UrbanMech* could get away.

"Commander, order Third Platoon to fire and fall back, and send the armored reserves into the fight."

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From their windows in the eighth floor of the Chungsei Building, Third Platoon felt the world shaking under the thunderous steps of the charging *Zeus*. They saw

ARTIST: LOSTON WALLACE
PUBLICATION: FIELD MANUAL: MERCENARIES, REVISED
YEAR: 2003

it heading toward them, and as it drew level with their position, the men were forced to duck out of sight to avoid being seen. Just as the metal monstrosity passed them by, the order to fire was barked into their ears.

The soldiers leapt from their positions, working in teams of three. Shoulder-mounted launchers were aimed and fired in a matter of seconds. Like spitwads being hurled at a charging bull, the little projectiles hammered the area near the *Zeus'* cockpit. Most were detonated by the large, round shoulder socket, but one or two slipped past to rattle the ferroglass. As the machine began to turn their way, the platoon sergeant screamed a retreat and the soldiers ran for their lives.

Outside, the *Zeus* peered into the shattered windows. As it did so, the *UrbanMech* ducked safely out of sight just as a lance of Vedette tanks rolled into range. The quartet of armored vehicles raised their turret-mounted cannons and began to hammer the *Zeus*. Smoke, shrapnel, and explosions peppered the *Zeus* across its entire body. Without hesitation the *Zeus* raised its arm and began to fire back.

The Vedettes rolled backward but the hail of fire from the *Zeus* caught a seam in one tank's armor and set off its magazine. It erupted in a fireball, and the line of tanks cracked. As they started to turn and run the wounded *UrbanMech* came back into view and let loose on the lightly armored back of the assault 'Mech. The shells shredded and penetrated the armor and the *Zeus* once again whirled to face a new attacker. Back to the building, it slashed a large laser across the *UrbanMech's* middle. The laser blasted deeply into the armor and left some of the *UrbanMech's* interior exposed, but the 'Mech held its ground.

Inside the building the men of Third Platoon were bracing to fire a second time. The 'Mech's exposed back was in clear view through the shattered office windows. Three different firing teams took a long moment to aim carefully, and then sent missiles deep into the interior of the attacking enemy BattleMech. An explosion flashed back at the infantry platoon, incinerating them before they could even scream. The infantry missiles had touched off the *Zeus'* missile ammunition, and the resulting explosion destroyed a full quarter of the building even as it turned the 'Mech into a shower of fiery, smoking shrapnel.

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A cheer swept through the command center. The clear image of the destroyed *Zeus* was magnified on the central screen. As fast as the cheer went up, the major shouted it down.

"Our citizens have just died in that explosion," he reminded them. "The enemy we face is powerful. Perhaps the greatest threat any of you will ever face. However, these metal-shod monsters are not invincible. There are things they excel at, and things which they do not do well. When this day ends, we will hold our city, but some of us, perhaps many of us, will be dead and I will not hear those deaths cheered in my presence."

Silence seized the command center save for the radio traffic being broadcast as part of the central viewing system. People began to slowly work back into their tasks with the realization that what they were watching was not abstract, not pieces on a game board. They were men and women fighting and dying in the very city they called home. They were countrymen making the ultimate sacrifice to protect what they held most dear.

Pointing to the screen on the right, Zhiyi directed two new orders. "Direct Armor Three and Armor Four to slow that *Archer* down however they have to. Send the Warriors in to strafe that *Cyclops* and pull it towards Peoples' Glorious Way."

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The *Archer* unleashed a volley of lasers and missiles that spiked its heat briefly. Saul felt the rush pass through his feet and on out the top of his head, but the resulting carnage was worth it. Two armored personnel carriers and several infantrymen were destroyed in a moment. The rest began to run away as if his *Archer* were a monster in some disaster trideo.

Suddenly, a brief scream blipped over the comm channel. It was an instant of pure, raw pain that suddenly went silent. Saul felt his heart drop and the cold rush of adrenaline flash through his veins.

"Bomber Lead to all Bombers," he snapped. "Check in, all units check in."

"Bomber Two, check," Saul heard Dave Greshner answer.

"Bomber Four check," Reggie Horn offered next.

Past that only static lingered. No reply of any kind from Bomber Three.

"Bomber Four, get over there and see if he's really down or if it's just a comms issue. Do it fast."

"Moving now, Captain!"

Turning his attention back fully to the war in front of him, Saul spotted a Swift Wind patrol vehicle in the distance. He launched long-range missiles from both launchers as a reflex, and watched their corkscrewing smoke trails wind their way to the target. A brilliant explosion detonated the small scout vehicle even as it tried to race backwards.

"You wanna play, you bastards?" Saul gritted his teeth. "I got nothin' but time!"

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The Warrior attack helicopters were flying low and fast, swerving through the canyons of the downtown district as they homed in on their assigned target. Holding tight formation, they looked like metallic hornets looking for something to sting. Rounding east past Blessed Laborer Park, they spotted the *Cyclops* running up People's Liberation Avenue. At once the four Warriors unleashed their light autocannons and their short-range missiles. The *Cyclops* suddenly stepped low and right, and the ordnance skipped over the 'Mech's head, detonating in a large office complex. As the Warriors passed over the *Cyclops'* head, they banked right. Behind them, the massive BattleMech rose and gave chase.

Not far away, a lance of Hetzer armor rolled under the bridge that allowed People's Liberation Avenue to pass over Fifth Street. At an order the tanks all shut off their engines and opened their hatches. They powered off everything except the exact minimal functions required to fire their main guns. The orders were puzzling to say the least, but today was not a day to question orders. Turning to his driver, the armor lance commander muttered, "They said we'd know what to shoot at when the time was right. Let's hope that's true."

The Warriors were doing their best to lead the *Cyclops* closer to allied forces. They ducked and banked and circled around the bestial *Cyclops*, firing little pinprick shots at it but doing very little damage. The *Cyclops* itself did its best to

fight back, but the fast-moving helicopters proved too tough to hit with its guns. Only when one of the Warriors got too close did it managed to connect with a giant metal fist that swatted the helicopter out of the air like a bug. The debris shattered against a building and fell to the earth in flames.

A moment later an autocannon round missed the *Cyclops* and hammered another helpless building in a shower of glass and steel fragments.

The *Cyclops* turned, visibly surprised, and spotted the *UrbanMech* firing from the middle of the bridge. Breaking into a run, the *Cyclops* first answered with long-range missiles. Still, the *UrbanMech* held its ground, firing again and missing a second time. The *Cyclops* began to close the range quickly, and a second missile volley peppered light damage on the *UrbanMech's* left arm stub. Just as the *Cyclops* was entering the long range for its hip-mounted heavy autocannon, the *UrbanMech* hopped off the bridge and began retreating down Fifth Street.

Not to be denied, the *Cyclops'* MechWarrior deftly angled his charging beast so that it careened off the bridge and managed to keep its feet even as it fell twelve meters from the bridge down onto Fifth Street. As it rose from a crouch, it leveled the maw of the heavy autocannon at the slow *UrbanMech* trying to back up.

Behind the *Cyclops*, a row of four very shocked Hetzer crews saw nothing but 'Mech legs at pointblank range. Their sudden barrage of fire blew the *Cyclops'* legs apart. Every round struck its target. Every impact wrenched another vicious chunk out of the lightly-armored limbs. Actuators shattered and exploded under the intense fire. Myomer bundles were shredded away. Composite skeleton structure was sawed into bits and soon the torso of the *Cyclops* came crashing down like a building whose lower floors had been detonated.

It fell into the bridge and pinwheeled off the structure, landing face-first in the middle of Fifth Street. Nothing but jagged stubs of legs remained. Only after the 'Mech had crashed could the crews of Armor Two see that the *Cyclops* had fired its heavy autocannon. The *UrbanMech*'s entire torso had been gnawed through.

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The command center was no longer awash with victory. The painful cost of the battle was coming home to the men and women staffing the center. As the *Cyclops* fell the image was taken in stride. They moved to the next target and kept Zhiyi up to date on the progress of all units.

"The *Marauder* has been ignited with inferno rounds and Armor Five along with Armor One are scoring direct hits," the commander offered up from his console.

Zhiyi nodded. "Very good. Order them to keep firing until it drops and tell Second Platoon to remount and be ready to re-ignite if necessary. The Academy should provide a decent vantage point."

As the commander relayed the orders Zhiyi stared at the *Archer* on the central screen. It was the only enemy 'Mech they had not yet contained. It had cut a broad swath through the eastern edge of the city and was threatening to enter the vicinity of the ballistics plant.

"Notify the plant that we may not be able to stop the *Archer*. Rally all units to Celestial near Twelfth Street. Tell them all, commander: we stop that *Archer* or die trying!"

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"DAMMIT!" Saul punched his control couch in frustration. He had *told* Reggie not to chase the helicopters. With no

ARTIST: STEVE VENTERS
PUBLICATION: MECHWARRIOR: THE BATTLETECH ROLE PLAYING GAME
YEAR: 1986

response from the young MechWarrior, he keyed the private channel he shared with Lieutenant Greshner.

"This is bad, Dave," he said. "I think Reggie is down. I need to rally with you five minutes ago."

The reply took a long moment to arrive. Saul could tell by the pain in Dave's voice something was very, very wrong.

"Naw, sir, don't do that," he said through heavy static. "They got me with fire rounds. I'm lit up and I can't get distance. They're gonna get me, Saul, it's a matter of time. I'll buy you what I can, but you gotta get out of here before they get you too."

"What? Where are you, I can get them off of you! Tell me where you are!"

"I been doin' this for a long time, Saul. We're done. We're beat. Get Charlotte out of here and get safe."

"We do NOT get beat, Dave! Now tell me where you are!"

"When I was a kid," 'Dry Roasted' Dave Greshner gritted out through pain and static, "me and my brother once kicked over a hornet's nest down by the river and damn near got stung to death. After we healed up, my dad whipped us both for bein' so stupid. That's what we did, Saul. We kicked over the hornet's nest. Don't get stung to death, partner…."

The radio turned to static. The reality of it all began to collide with Saul Trenton's conscious mind. The Bombers had been broken. They had walked in without a care in the world and their boasts of never being defeated. Impossible though it seemed, it was the truth.

He was now very much alone.

The thought made his stomach drop out the bottom of his boots. His sensors began to register long-range contacts, closing in from every direction. A swarm of enemies hunting his 'Mech. A swarm of enemies closing in for a final, decisive kill.

Turning the 'Mech back to the east, Saul threw down the throttle and pushed the *Archer* into a flat-out run. His steps shattered the concrete. He saw the streaks of missiles and the flash of lasers rushing past his cockpit as he sprinted for his life. He fired back wildly, not even aiming but trying to terrify his attackers with the sheer volume of guns the *Archer* could bring to bear. Every minute, every second, more and more infantry and armor started to line rooftops and streets in an effort to cut him off.

As the wall of incoming fire grew steadily more intense, the *Archer* began to shudder from the impacts. His armor was holding, but a headlong charge was clearly not going to succeed. He had been outflanked and cut off. It was time for something creative. It was time for something different.

To his left was a white building that looked like any other government building on a hundred other worlds. Five stories tall, the building came was just a bit taller the *Archer*'s 13 meter height. Saul slammed the *Archer* through the wall, managing against all odds to keep the 'Mech upright and moving. He found himself in a tangle of plaster and steel with debris impacting against his 'Mech as he blasted through the Interior towards the far wall. Within seconds, he had stumbled through the inner walls and offices. He fired two of his lasers at the exterior wall and weakened it with a visible scar just before he sent the *Archer* blindly through the concrete. The 'Mechs massive hands pushed through first, and ripped the scar open to allow the *Archer*'s exit. Even as he escaped the building, it crashed down like a house of cards behind him.

He emerged on top of an armor unit moving to flank his previous position. The *Archer*'s massive feet smashed one tank turret flat and caused other crews to leap from their vehicles in fear. Utterly stunned by the sudden appearance of the 'Mech, the Capellans weren't prepared to fight. Amidst its thunderous steps and a rain of concrete debris they ran for their lives. A few brave soldiers did their best to fire at the rampaging monster, but a sudden burst from his left missile launcher sent the rest of the Capellans scrambling for cover. Saul stumbled and staggered, dancing over the uneven ground of tanks, men, rubble and turrets. Metal screamed and splintered as people were smashed into pulp beneath his feet. The *Archer*'s gyro was spinning out of control and in the midst of all that chaos, somehow, Saul stayed moving and upright until he was past the causeway and out onto the main highway that headed east out of the city.

As the *Archer* fled down the highway occasional shots rang against it steel skin. Saul ignored the sounds and kept his mind focused on speed and balance. Soon the *Archer* was out of the city.

He felt relief but knew that he was far, far from home.

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CIVIL DEFENSE CENTER, CITY OF BITHINIA
BITHINIA, CAPELLAN CONFEDERATION
17 SEPTEMBER 3022

The gash of ruin left in the *Archer*'s wake looked like a scar across the eastern city from the air. Xao Zhiyi found himself marveling at the skill that had kept the slow, awkward *Archer* moving so quickly even under the hail of fire that had been set upon it. Even now the machine was moving across the plains as fast as its MechWarrior could make it go.

"The last enemy BattleMech has ceased attack and fled the city under fire from most of our remaining Civil Defense units. Do we pursue?" the commander asked.

Xao Zhiyi shook his head. "We do not. We have won the day. Open a channel to that *Archer* for me."

The commander spoke into his headset. After a few crisp words he turned back and nodded at Zhiyi, "On your private line, Sir. He was so close to victory, Major. Why did he flee?"

"Even the largest 'Mechs can know fear, Commander." He grabbed the handset and placed it to his ear. "I wish to speak to your commander."

"I bet you do," the voice spat back, panting hard for breath.

"I wish to offer him honors of war," Zhiyi explained.

A pause. A long pause. More labored breathing. "This is Captain Trenton of the Northstar Irregulars. I accept your offer of formal honors of war."

"Then you will call off the raids in Harwang and Zico?"

"I will, yes, and you will allow my people to board their DropShip without further combat or harassment?"

"Those that can walk on their own power, yes."

"Can we negotiate a prisoner ransom for my men?"

"I believe we can, Captain. I see no reason to be punitive in victory. However, the salvage of your BattleMechs will stay with us as restitution for the damages done to the city."

"I agree to your terms. Thank you, sir." The voice was strained, pushed to a breaking point, but the respect was sincere.

"BattleMechs are powerful, but not invincible, Captain. Many MechWarriors never get to enjoy the wisdom of that lesson. I will make the arrangements here. Please notify me once you have selected a landing site for your DropShip." With that, he cut off the link. Below him, the commander was frantically waving his arms over his head and pointing at the tactical communications channels.

"The colonel wants to speak to me, I imagine," he told the commander. "By all means, connect us."

Rage exploded in Zhiyi's ear now, which could only be the colonel. "By what *possible* right do you offer honors of war, you ancient cur?"

"You directed me to defend the city, Sir, and I have. I offered the attackers honors in order to gather their salvage and prevent further damage to the city."

"The attackers in the city and the raiders near Harwang are one unit! You have allowed these barbarians to escape unscathed, you addled relic!"

"A thousand pardons, Colonel, I had not understood that to be the case. Do with me as you must."

"You were ordered to notify me in the event of an attack on the city," the voice shouted. "I will have you brought up on formal charges for ignoring my command!"

"You directed me to notify you of any unexpected problems, Colonel," Zhiyi said. "The attack upon the city was obvious and expected. It was my belief that you trusted the valiant men and women of the reserves to take care of these flanking stragglers while you took the fight to them. However, do as you must."

With no defiance to crush, the colonel just seethed. "This is not over, Xao Zhiyi! You have robbed me of my glory! I will see you in chains for this no matter how many medals were once pinned upon your chest!"

"As you see fit, Colonel," Xao Zhiyi repeated. "For now, the city is saved."

Below him he saw the young commander cover a smile and smother a laugh. For the first time this day, he allowed himself to smile back, and then returned to the task of organizing the aftermath. The city was safe, for now, and not even the rage of a petulant young lion could make him regret his decisions.

ARTIST: FRANZ VOHWINKEL
PUBLICATION: CLASSIC BATTLETECH: A GAME OF ARMORED COMBAT
YEAR: 2002

ARTIST: MICHAEL KOMACK
PUBLICATION: TACTICAL OPERATIONS
YEAR: 2008

ARTIST: DOUG CHAFFEE
PUBLICATION: FALCON RISING (NOVEL)
YEAR: 1999

ARTIST: FRANZ VOHWINKEL
PUBLICATION: COMBAT OPERATIONS
YEAR: 2003

ARTIST: MATT WILSON
PUBLICATION: FIELD MANUAL: MERCENARIES
YEAR: 1997

ARTIST: MICHAEL KOMARCK
PUBLICATION: MERCENARIES SUPPLEMENTAL UPDATE
YEAR: 2006

VECTOR

ILSA BICK

SOMEWHERE BENEATH THE ROCKLAND FURIES
ROCKLAND
SMOKE JAGUAR OCCUPATION ZONE
5 SEPTEMBER 3059

The insect made the assistant want to cry. Oh, it was just an *Acrolophitus hirtipes Huntressina*, a common Huntress green fool. But she had not seen much beyond the monochromatic gray of tunnels or breathed air that did not clog her throat in months that felt like years that had the taste of eternity ...

"Genetics is destiny," said the Keeper, a hatchet-faced man with steel specs that lent him the look of a machine. "Fact, *quiaff*?"

"*Aff*." The assistant did not like him. And why choose her? She was not an entomologist or parasitologist or any other *–ist*, for that matter. Yes, she was scientist-caste, but only a tech and no one special. Yet appear he had: four months before the Sixth Jaguar Dragoons' ignominious defeat on Labrea. Then the Keeper had asked if she wished to live. If so, they must leave at once.

Withdraw? Smoke Jaguars met the enemy head-on, *quiaff?* And yet ... A pincer of doubt nipped at the pink folds of her brain. Had not the Tenth Garrison Cluster hurled nothing more devastating than harsh language—and what was that but surrender?

So here she was, with these rogues and a Keeper of a Bloodname Not-To-Be-Spoken worming beneath the mountains. She doubted even the ilKhan suspected the true nature of their enterprise, unless this was some strange Trial of Bloodright. And if this was treason ... These tunnels would seem a paradise compared to the dark, dangerous recesses of the *Prinz Eugen*.

"Ah, but if this is so, then I ask you." The Keeper carefully placed the insect on the thick stem of a jungle plant that drooped over a water-filled tank. "*Whose* genetics and *which* destiny?" His lips twisted in a wry grimace. "Observe and learn."

For a long moment, the fool crouched at the junction of leaf and petiole. Then, as if prodded by an unseen hand, the insect lurched forward in a jerky shuffle, so labored she imagined she heard the reluctant scrape of its clawed tarsi. When the insect reached the leaf's edge, it hesitated again.

Stop, the assistant thought at it, crazily. *Stop now, while you can ...*

But the fool leapt.

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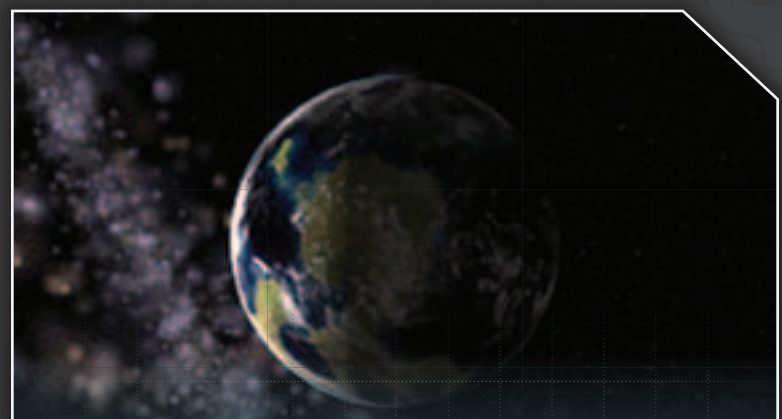
FIRST EDO COMPANY
RED DEVIL MESA, ROCKLAND
5 SEPTEMBER 3059

They were mop-up: a single company commanded by a man who'd seen better days in this Dragon's army. That is, before he cracked up two years back. His people probably thought he was still nuts. At least, that's what *Chu-sa* Evan Mathers assumed. Since he piloted the company's sole 'Mech—a *Gunslinger*—there was nothing like being on the right side of a couple Gauss rifles and pulse lasers to get people falling all over themselves to stay on your good side. So, either his people cut him some slack, or had a misplaced sense of civic duty. After all, nearly everyone had lost someone when Edo was vaporized. In that one horrible moment, Turtle Bay's citizens became kin. If you believed the talking heads on the evening news. Mathers, he had enough relatives, thanks.

Anyway, even if his people objected when he quietly splintered away from the Eleventh Legion of Vega (still dicking around Liberty Park on the other side of the frigging planet) and severed all communications and plunked them down in, oh, a desert ... well, he didn't much care. Suck it up, or get real comfortable using that thumb to hitch a ride home.

In any event they hadn't counted on prisoners. Who would? Clanners were Clanners. Mathers *had* counted on reducing them to grease-spots, not inviting them for coffee and danish. So when Mathers fried that little bugger of a *Dasher* with three bursts from his pulse lasers, they'd converted a supply Quonset. A couple pair of shackles, some chains ... Hey, it didn't have to be the Edo Hilton, for chrissake.



ROCKLAND

World Name: Rockland
Star Type (Recharge Time): G9V (190 hours)
Position in System: 3
Time to Jump Point: 5.82 days
Number of Satellites: 1 (Haven)
Surface Gravity: 1.11
Atm. Pressure: Standard (Breathable)
Equatorial Temperature: 45° C (Warm-Temperate)
Surface Water: 50 percent
Recharging Station: Nadir
HPG Class Type: B
Highest Native Life: Plants
Population (3059): 1,389,000,000
Socio-Industrial Levels: C-C-A-B-C

A small rocky world, Rockland is aptly named for the mountain ranges that criss-cross its surface. Clan Smoke Jaguar captured the world in March 3050, during the first wave of the Clan invasion. A mere two Stars of Jaguar 'Mechs destroyed the defending Rockland People's Army—a poorly-equipped mechanized infantry regiment—within minutes of landing in Liberty Park.

Rockland's primary industries were mining and the export of the bountiful stone that gives the planet its name. The stone quarrying and carving industry surprisingly experienced a huge upturn after the world's capture, as the arrogant Jaguars had countless monuments to their martial greatness erected all across their Inner Sphere Occupation Zone. Rumor has it some pieces were even shipped back to the Clan Homeworlds.

Rockland has two major continents, and countless rocky islands strewn across its seas. The southern continent of Granite includes the capital of Maverick, along with the majority of Rockland's population. Scattered mining and quarrying settlements are dotted across the remaining continent of Limerock.

Thing was there were, what? Only a handful of Elementals scattering through those arroyos like cockroaches after he took out the OmniMech? (And what was *with* that? A *Dasher* had tissue paper for armor and only popguns for weapons. Pit *that* against a *Gunslinger* and get yourself captured in the process? Desperation, maybe. Only explanation …)

As for the Elementals: Well, hello, it wasn't as if those guys were gonna, you know, *blend in*. Plus, *they* were in the middle of nowhere: the whole company perched on a red rock plateau overlooking a shallow scrub valley to the west and ridged north and west by the towering horseshoe of the snow-shrouded Furies, monsters at nearly four thousand meters. Nearest settlement was two thousand klicks north. Worst case scenario, a few Jag-stragglers got their collective heinies

out of DC space and hightailed it back to Huntress, and good riddance.

Except.

Those five Elementals had been on foot—well, okay, in battle armor. So they had jump jets. Big deal. Toads with minimal weaponry, lasers only, so they must be out of SRMs, and they were *close.* Mathers could smell them and he wanted them. Bringing them in would be ... vindication. Because his

(Grace)

crack-up—everything about

(Grace)

Edo—that was the monkey on his back he wanted to buck, real bad.

So Mathers had taken to—insert air quotes—*visiting* their guest. So far, a non-starter and, well, that pissed him off. Got the old volcanic rage bubbling in his chest. At night, his head felt ready to explode, and don't talk to him about sleep. Hah! Sleep was just an alien interlude between familiar nightmares.

Except ... The bad dreams were much worse now and only growing stronger. Those nightmares felt like the steady unraveling of a fraying seam.

So, maybe *harsher* measures. Crack their little guest like an egg. Yeah. That would feel good. Make him a nice omelet.

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ROGUE SMOKE JAGUAR OUTPOST

Kicking free of the leaf, the insect sailed in a high, graceful arc. At its zenith, the insect hung as if suspended on an invisible string between life and death. Then gravity, like destiny, fisted and the insect splashed down like a stone.

"Now," said the Keeper as the thrashing insect sank, "as the fool drowns, the enslaver actually *senses* the water and ... ah, there. You see?"

The assistant did. To her immense relief, the insect was nearly gone, its limbs twitching in agonal paroxysms. At the anus, however, a thin brown rope had appeared and now whipped and pulsed in a muscular cord, growing longer until, with a final twitch, the parasite twisted free.

"And *that*," the Keeper said, fishing out the dead fool, "is an example of parasite-driven behavior. The maturing nematode produces a neuropeptide that influences the insect. In plain terms, the host is brainwashed into committing suicide."

"That hardly seems adaptive." She watched with horrified fascination as the Mechtian enslaver—*Spinochordodes tellinii Strana Mechtii*—eeled through the water. The nematode was no wider than a hair but easily five times longer than the dead fool and she shivered, imagining the enslaver spooling in the fool's dark belly. "What about finding a host in which it might live indefinitely?"

"A final host? Unfortunately, most parasites require a different host for each developmental stage. Yet, just as this insect died fulfilling the nematode's imperative, so other vectors are driven in ways that may prove fatal. The parasite's genetics prescribe the fool's destiny."

"And this will help us ... how?"

"Not only how." The Keeper's lips split in a death's grin. "*When*."

▲▼▲

FIRST EDO COMPANY

The holding cell was steamy and stank of sour sweat. But what Mathers didn't expect and hadn't before noticed was a delicate hint of sweet, soothing jasmine. The scent stopped him dead in his tracks, like a sudden slap to the face. At the height of his crack-up, he'd smelled jasmine everywhere because jasmine was ... Grace ...

Please, God. Sudden sweat dewed his upper lip. *Not now, this isn't real, it's not ...*

But it was. The air was laced with a subtle floral essence that battened onto his heart like the claws of a wild animal and filled Mathers' mouth with the queer tang of rust and salt, tears and blood ... and *Grace ...*

No, not again, not now ...

No use. Other memories flooded his mind, slamming through the neat mental dikes the shrinks had taught him with a sensation that was nearly physical, like a shattering fall from a great height into a cobalt sea that was infinitely cold and fantastically deep. A scent. That's all it took and then the images—his past—burst onto the black screen of his mind in a spray of color and light. Or had they been leaking in infinitesimal dribs and drabs along with the nightmares, and he hadn't noticed? He didn't know, couldn't tell ...

Because then he was sinking, he was drowning in memory. Panic crushed his lungs, and his heart battered against his caging ribs, and he tottered on his feet as the dingy little room swam and the phantoms of his mind coalesced to coherence like the swirling collapse of a dying star. Fresh pain, as scarlet as a rose bristling with thorns, bloomed in his chest and he thought he might, finally, lose control—right there, right then and damn the rest. Either that, or blow his brains out. He squeezed his eyes tight, tight ... felt himself giving in ... letting go ...

"Oh, Grace." Whispering her name in a kind of awe and if there'd been a mirror, he'd have seen a grizzled, gaunt man in a rumpled uniform cupping air with both hands. "*Grace ...*"

Yes, there were her lips on his palms, her tongue tracing first love-line, then life-line, and he groaned. Now the subtle fingers of an evening's breeze lifted from the Sawagashii River and feathered his cheeks in a soft lover's caress. The rustle of grass and the whisper of the moist green drapery of the willow beneath which they lay and now he could taste his wife's sweet mouth and now she was moaning, her back arching as their limbs twined and he moved in and with her, and their lovemaking was slow and cool . . .

Never been like this before ... What's happening to me?

Fight it, he had to fight this, no matter how much he wanted to linger. His throat convulsed, jamming against a lump he'd never quite gotten rid of since Turtle Bay. Yes, *that* was reality, those tongues of fire lashing the sky, the river boiling away in great, hissing gouts of superheated steam. Fiery explosions had scorched the city, blasting away everything good in his life, leaving only an obsidian stain of

fused glass and molten ferrocrete and, somewhere in all that, what remained of his beloved Grace ...

Marshalling his will, Mathers came back to himself by centimeters, the memories falling away in a whisper of dead leaves, until all that remained was this *now*: a dank holding cell on a planet virtually no one cared about.

"Where?" He was blowing like a spent horse. Oily sweat snaked down his neck. Fists clenched, he loomed over the prisoner slumped in a steel chair bolted to the floor, and ground out the words: "Where *are* they?"

The prisoner stirred. She was a tiny woman, as naked as a MechWarrior—just a scrap of grimy linen snugging her hips, a sweat-stained halter clinging to her breasts. A fan of lank hair shrouded her face, and she was bent so far forward he could count the knuckles of her spine and the hazy, bluish lumps of her imaging implants. He felt a slender spike of pleasure when he saw that the shackles around her wrists and ankles had rubbed her skin raw. Dark blood-spiders stained the concrete, and more blood dried in crescents around her ankles.

Good, let her suffer. Every soldier had his breaking point. Every. Soldier.

"Where are they?" he asked for the third time. "And how *many*?"

"Ba-back ... back for more?" Her head wobbled on the stalk of her neck. Her lips were cracked; a liverish bruise puffed her right cheek. "G-good. I ... I've m-missed you, Mathers."

"*Where*?"

"Ne-never." Her lids fluttered, her eyes rolling to thin white fingernails. "I ... will never ... tell you."

"No? Just as you would never surrender?"

"Did ... not ..."

"Liar. What happened? Couldn't key in your 'Mech's self-destruct in time? Oh, wait, that's right: your mind controls it, right? That's what those implants are for? So, you're just a coward? Or maybe bat-shit crazy. I've heard that happens with you people." He laughed—a harsh, broken cawing. "Don't tell me that in some secret little part of your mind you think I'll show the mercy *you* denied *us* on Turtle Bay." He heard himself say this and wondered where the hell that was coming from. Edo had been destroyed from orbit; not a Clanner had stuck a toe from a ship, the cowards, so he'd never know exactly *who* had murdered his Grace. But, yes, she knew about Edo and even if she didn't, she was a Smoke Jaguar and they would all *pay* ....

"Let me tell you something, you whore." His hand flashed out to grab a hank of her hair. She gave a small cry as he yanked her head back, exposing the flesh of her throat, and then the scent of jasmine was nearly overpowering. Straddling the chair now, as intimate as a lover, rage churning in his throat: "There will be no mercy! I will hunt your people down and I will flay them alive and I will love *every* minute ... !"

"As you love this?" Incredibly, her gaze sharpened on his face and her lips wavered in an awkward, lopsided smile. "Who is the torturer and who the victim? You are weak, Mathers, you do not have the stren—"

He hit her. The blow was hard and sharp and shivered into his shoulder in a bright hot lancet of pain so pointed, so good, it was almost erotic. Her head snapped to one side, and then she was choking, retching a spray of bright crimson. The sweat glistened on her chest as her throat worked and then she inhaled in a gargling wet shriek, and he … He was appalled to find that he was aroused.

What am I doing? Suddenly dizzy, he shook his head like a dog. *This isn't the way ... I might be all they say I am, but this was never my way ...*

Yet the sight of her blood and the knowledge of her helplessness were so pleasing he couldn't help himself and, really, he didn't want to. So he hit her again. And again. Because he could. Because he liked it. God help him.

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Ten more soldiers admitted to the infirmary in the last three hours and one guy who smelled like hepatic failure; no way of getting help because their maniac commander was keeping them black (even down to a frigging *guard* who'd turned her away from the comm center at *gunpoint*) and now she had to deal with *this* crap ...

"Oh for Pete's sake," said Gwen Hudson as the guard tugged open the cell door. A cloud pillowed out, reeking of fear and urine and clotted blood, and Gwen nearly gagged. "What the hell did that maniac do this time?"

"Couldn't say, Doc," said the guard, though Gwen spied a grin flitting over his lips. "*Chu-sa* Mathers does his interrogations solo."

ARTIST: MATT PLOG
PUBLICATION: TECHNICAL READOUT: 3055 UPGRADE
YEAR: 2005

"Interrogations, my ass. But I'll just bet you think she had it coming, right?" She tried pushing past, but the guard pointed at her hip and Gwen rolled her eyes. "It's not like she's going to develop superpowers, you know," she said, as she tugged her pistol out of its holster.

"No sidearms in the cell, ma'am. Orders."

"Fine, take it. I never liked the damn thing. Now get out of my way." Pushing past, Gwen hurried to the prisoner, who was—mercifully—unconscious. The woman's face was sheeted with tacky blood from a ragged scalp laceration that jagged right to left like a lightning bolt and through which Gwen caught the faint glimmer of bone. The woman's eyes were puffed a hideous purple-black. A long scimitar gash split her right cheek down to the jaw. Of course, her nose was broken, and the stitches on the upper lip Gwen had placed a few days earlier had pulled apart. And there were ... other things: scratches scoring the woman's chest; fist-sized bruises over her ribs and one massive hematoma right beneath the woman's sternum. A gut punch. A really hard one, too.

Mathers is finally losing it ... Snapping on gloves, Gwen felt for the woman's pulse: thready but there. Dehydrated for sure but, please God, not shocky ... Pressing the woman's abdomen got no response, but the abdomen wasn't distended and didn't feel tense. No fluid wave. A quick listen and she heard the tinkle of bowel sounds. So maybe their prisoner wasn't going to bleed out into her belly. (Or she might be bleeding into her pelvis, in which case she was screwed.)

Gently probing the woman's face, Gwen winced as she felt the delicate bones of the cheek and right orbit shift. Now the woman gurgled, a bright blood-bubble bursting on her lips to release a soft, wet moan.

Gwen pushed up on her thighs. "This is crazy. I can't do a thorough exam here, much less provide effective treatment."

"Sorry, ma'am. No can do."

"Well, okay then, we won't even talk about how ticked off Mathers is going to be if she's got, oh, an abdominal bleed, or a subdural or epidural and her brainstem squishes into her spinal column and she stops *breathing*. On. Your. *Watch*." Stripping off her gloves, she inverted them one into the other, stuffed them into her hip pocket and grabbed up her medkit. "How about we make this real easy? I want her in the infirmary *right now*."

The guard wagged his head in an emphatic negative. "*Chu-sa* Mathers's orders. She stays here."

She considered arguing but figured screw that. "Fine," she said, as she headed for the exit. "You keep covering your ass. I'll be right back."

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Like talking to a stone, but at least Mathers listened, though his right fist was as swollen as a cantaloupe and had to hurt like hell. And that *look* in his eyes made her real uncomfortable. She was no stranger to thousand-yard stares, especially after Edo, but Mathers' eyes were alien: hollow and lifeless and sunken in black caves. Great. Because that brought up a whole bunch of other messy realities like, oh, unfitness for duty or how the *hell* they were gonna get out of this.

She went through the motions, anyway, detailing her concerns and then figured, hell with it, go for broke. Said, "Hey, you in there?"

She was hoping for an explosion. What she got was this sense of speaking Swahili to a wheezy noteputer. She could practically hear the gluey cogs going click-click-click in Mathers' brain ...

"Hey!" She snapped her fingers under his nose. "Wake the hell up, we got trouble!"

Well, that did something. Mathers's eyes ticked to her face and held, held, held ... and then it was like—Gwen searched for a metaphor—like sudden light firing darkened windows: *Look, dear, the lights are on, there's somebody home*.

"Trouble?" Mathers said, sounding shockingly normal. "Like what, Doc?"

She resisted the urge to grab his lapels. "Sir, you're not getting anywhere with that lady. We're wasting time here. Now, a third of the company is sick, we got a couple deaths, and I don't see this flu letting go anytime soon."

"Flu." He sucked blood from his torn knuckles. "So?"

"Sir, I've sent you a frigging report just about every other frigging minute. Gallagher and I got almost thirty cases now."

"Cases?" Mathers echoed. His eyebrows knit to a frown. "Oh yes. So? It's the flu."

"Sir," she said, carefully, enunciating as if speaking to a moron which, come to think of it ... "If you want to fight, you need bodies. If your people are sick and can't *fight*, you're screwed. Now a lotta troops are sick and the worst ain't over. I'm short-staffed, Gallagher and I are run off our feet, and we're low on supplies. We didn't anticipate this." (To be honest, she'd never anticipated being stuck on the ass-end of nowhere with a lunatic commander, either. Ah, life's little surprises ...) "Now, we got to hightail it back to the Eleventh, let our people mend and then—"

"And then the enemy gets away," Mathers grated, his face now the color of a plum. "Not on your life!"

Well, some emotion was better than none. But before she could reply, her commlink chirped. "Hudson."

"Gwen." She recognized Niamh Gallagher's distinctive brogue. "Get your sweet arse back here double-quick, love."

Shit. "How bad?"

"Try worse than you can imagine." Gwen heard Gallagher shout something and then a gabble of voices before Gallagher came back: "Got to ..." He broke off, coughing.

"Niamh?"

"I'm fine," he said, his voice thick. "Get back here pronto." And then he was gone.

"I got to go," she snapped, not really caring if Mathers tossed her in the brig for insubordination. Hell, she could use the rest. "You want to come, great. If not, I hope you and your new lady-friend are real happy together."

Okay, so she was insane. But it got Mathers moving.

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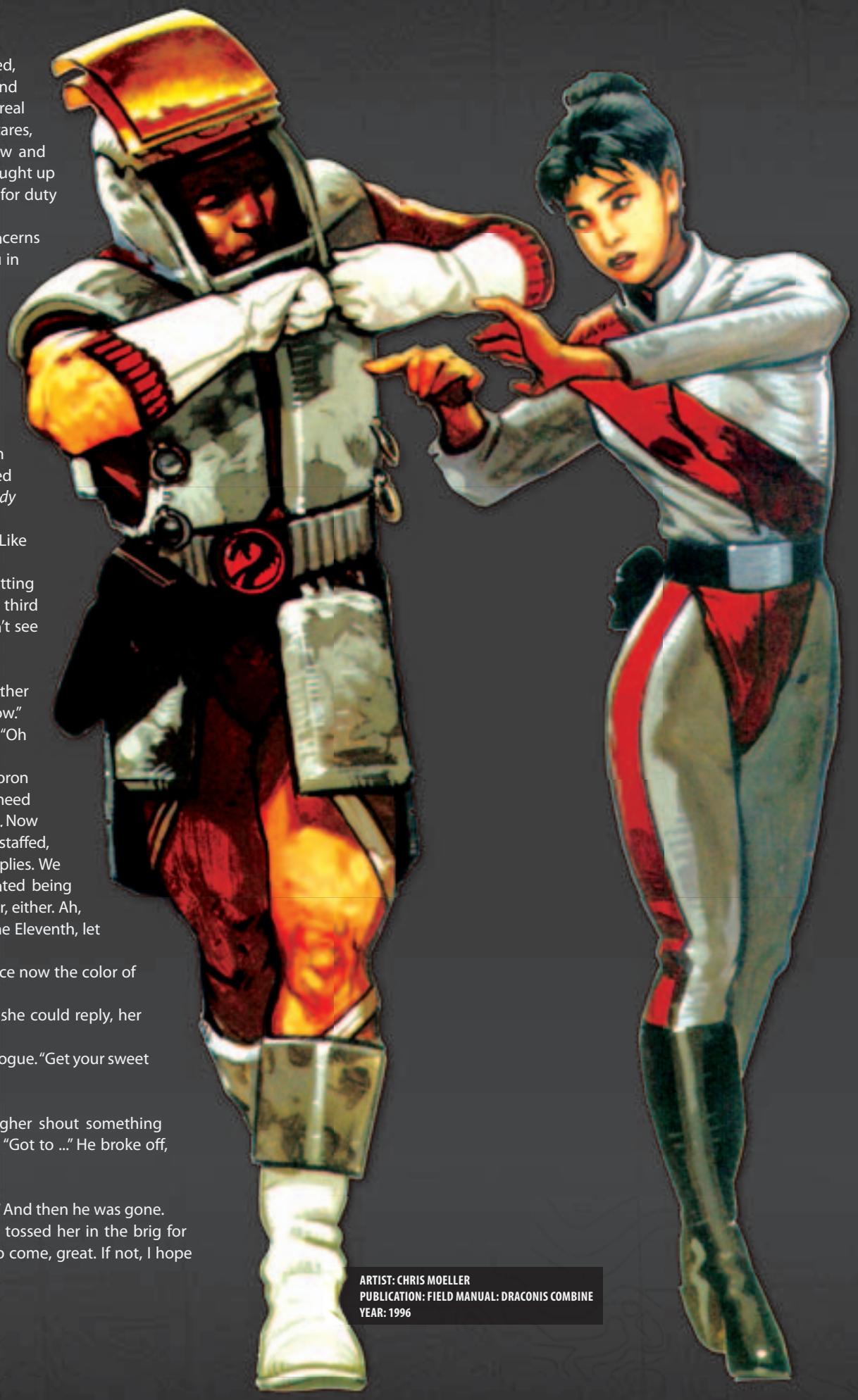

ARTIST: CHRIS MOELLER
PUBLICATION: FIELD MANUAL: DRACONIS COMBINE
YEAR: 1996

ARTIST: CHRIS LAUBENSTEIN
PUBLICATION: INVADING CLANS
YEAR: 1994

ROGUE JAGUAR OUTPOST

"How many parasites live in you?"

"Uh ..." The assistant was alarmed. "None. I hope."

"*Neg*." The Keeper toggled up a holographic image. "What do you see?"

She wondered if this was a trick. She noted the membrane, nuclear material, a Golgi apparatus ... "A simple eukaryotic cell."

"Good." He highlighted a smattering of double membrane-enclosed, rod-shaped organelles. "And these?"

Every Clansman knew this. "Mitochondria."

"And mitochondria are part and parcel of every cell, *quiaff*?"

"*Aff*, mitochondria are required for energy production. Without them, the cell dies."

"Correct. Lose enough mitochondria, and first your organs and then *you* die. But what about the fact that mitochondria possess distinctive DNA?"

She knew mtDNA was only passed matrilineally and how a Bloodname was traced, and she said as much.

"*Aff*, but where did the mtDNA come from? Originally. DNA distinctive from nuclear DNA—how did that happen?"

"I ... I ..." She was mortified. "I do not know."

"Well, let us hypothesize. mtDNA shares many characteristics with bacterial genomes such as proteobacteria, which exist only as endosymbiotes. Rickettsia, for example. So it is no stretch to hypothesize that mitochondria were once parasites, invaders swallowed up by ancient eukaryotic cells where they have remained. A prime example of *manus manum lavat*: The mitochondria provides energy, and the cell affords protection. So, you are *born* with inherited parasites. Such a pairing has resulted in optimum virulence: the state in which both have achieved their highest degree of fitness. Upset the balance ..."

"And they both die, *quiaff*?" said the assistant.

"Correct," said the Keeper. "But what if a parasite found the perfect, final host?"

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FIRST EDO COMPANY

Gwen's uniform was stiff with dried blood, and for a woman who'd seen a lot of death, she still couldn't shake the image of that girl: the crimson gush of blood spewing from her mouth; her flailing eye-rolling panic as the girl began to drown. Cracking the girl's chest in thirty seconds, only to find that Gwen was wrist-deep in a bloody lake of macerated lung and shredded aorta.

And that's only fourth one we've lost. How many more?

A hand on her arm. "You still here, love?"

"Yes." Gwen huffed out a breath. "Show me what you got, Niamh."

"Nothing good, I'm afraid," he said as she ponied up to the e-scope. Niamh looked as if he hadn't slept in a century. His skin was paler than his crop of wild, snow-white hair. "Take a look."

She did, and her stomach thudded to her toes. The field beneath the scope—what should be the orderly architecture of hepatocytes and their supportive matrix of reticular fibers—was instead a gelatinous cytoplasmic sea of shredded cell membranes, ruptured vacuoles, and degraded chromatin.

"Oh boy," she breathed. "Maybe ... maybe it's only hemorrhagic necrosis."

"Gwendolyn, love, you didn't get your degree through a correspondence course off the back of a matchbook." Grimacing, Niamh rubbed a hand over his chest. "Bloody heartburn ...You and I both know the truth. That's either apoptosis in that boy's liver or something so close as to be virtually indistinguishable."

"What?" It was Mathers. Blood had splashed his boots and there were rust crescents beneath his nails. But he sounded and looked more ... present. Good. She'd hoped the shock of seeing what was really going down might snap him out of whatever had hold of what passed for his mind. "Apo ... what?"

"Apoptosis." She thumbed a control and the image shimmered into a holographic display. "Programmed cell suicide. It's normal, designed to get rid of damaged or cancerous cells, maintain the right number of cells, even sculpt the way you look. Apoptosis *in utero* is why you don't have fused toes; the cells between your toes are programmed to die before you pop out of the womb. The process is sometimes triggered hormonally, or locally, like when there's some kind of injury and cells rupture. But *that*," she jabbed a finger at the hologram, "is way not-normal. That's liver tissue from a kid who died this morning, but I'll bet that if I looked at the tissue of that girl who just bled out, I'd find the same thing."

Mathers's face was chalky and that gave Gwen a certain grim satisfaction. A dose of reality for what ailed the maniac ... Mathers swallowed. "How ... how does it—"

"Happen?" Gwen shot a glance at Niamh, who only gave a weary shrug. Niamh looked like he'd been hoverjacked and dragged fifty klicks. *Got to order him to bed; can't afford for either of us to get sick* ... She returned her attention to Mathers. "Any number of initiators, I'm afraid."

"Like a virus?" Mathers asked, hoarsely. "Like the flu?"

"You bet," said Gwen, unwilling to cut the ass any slack. The guiltier he felt, maybe the better off they'd be. "What you're looking at is the end result, what happens when the cell can no longer function. But, regardless of the initiator, the first step of cell suicide is always the same. Either enough or all of the cell's mitochondria die."

"Why?"

"Because without the energy mitochondria provide, the cell's machinery no longer works. The membrane eventually swells and the cell bursts." She flicked at hand at the hologram. "Giving you this."

"A dog's breakfast." Niamh gave a wheezy laugh. "That's not very funny, but you don't know my dog."

"Close enough," Gwen said.

"But not all of us are sick," Mathers said, a tinge of desperation in his voice now.

"Yet. Anyway, it's the flu." Niamh hiccupped and fisted his sternum. "Some of us may have natural immunity."

"You need some rest," Gwen said.

ARTIST: LOSTON WALLACE
PUBLICATION: THE DRAGON ROARS
YEAR: 1997

"I need a bloody retirement home," Niamh said.

"How?" Mathers asked.

"Get me off this rock," Niamh said.

"No," Mathers said, "how's the infection spread?"

"Dunno," said Gwen. "Probably airborne."

"Or environmental," Niamh said. "Maybe even the bloody sand."

"Without isolating the source or agent, we can't know the incubation period," Gwen said. "Plus, the disease course is variable and involves one or multiple organ systems: respiratory, renal, nervous system. Just depends on which fails first. The *only* prodromal symptom a hundred percent across the board is the sweats."

"Sweats?" Mathers gave a hopeless laugh. "Doc, it's forty-C."

"Yeah, tell me about it. So, Colonel, we need help. Let me call the Eleventh's CMO and—" But Mathers was already shaking his head. "For God's sake, why not?"

Mathers face was stone. "I've come too far to give up. This is my one chance to even the score, and that woman is the only one who—" He broke off, his eyes widening, jaw unhinging. "Oh, *shit*."

Of course. Gwen's shocked gaze jerked to Niamh, whose skin was nearly as translucent as milky glass. *It's the one thing we didn't think of because she's been in a cell; only me, Mathers, a few guards have had any contact ... Wait, have any of the guards ...?*

"Could it be?" she asked Niamh. "She's the carrier?"

"The time frame squares," Niamh said—and was it her imagination, or were his lips, suddenly, too pink? "We come here, the Elementals attack ..."

"With *nothing*," Mathers said.

"Or they let us find them," Gwen countered. "It's the only thing that makes sense. They make it hard but not too hard, so we take her alive."

"But she's not sick," Mathers objected.

"She wouldn't have to be. Like Typhoid Mary, she could be the vector. They had to know we wouldn't kill her. We'd keep her alive to find the rest of them."

"But." Mathers was ashen. "But ... that's not ... that's not how the Jags operate, they're in your face ..."

"Unless they're blasting you from orbit," Gwen said, bitterly. "You see anyone in Edo?" When Mathers didn't respond, she pressed: "Colonel, please. Let me get us some help, *please*."

For a brief, hopeful instant, she thought he might agree. But then Mathers's mouth set.

"No," and then he was stalking from the infirmary. "This is mine to finish. I'll get the information, I'll *make* her ..."

"Colonel!" she shouted at his retreating back. "Damn you to hell, she's not going to *tell* you!"

"Ach, would you pipe down," and then Niamh's voice changed: "Oh bloody hell."

She had to move fast to break Niamh's fall. But she couldn't do anything about all that blood.

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One look as Mathers pushed out of his quarters and his aide decided he really had business elsewhere. Everyone else avoided eye contact as Mathers made his way across the rock-strewn plateau to the supply Quonset. No guard at the door, either, just a steaming pool of blood-streaked vomit. A dog's breakfast, Mathers thought—but with absolutely no humor.

The woman's misshapen lips worked in a sardonic spasm that he took to be a grin. "Back for more?" Her words were slurry and she spat out a gobbet of jellied clot. She took in his briefs and cooling vest. "Or have you finally decided to finish what you have begun?"

Yes, the jasmine scent was still there. Different organ systems threw in the towel, depending on the individual; that's what Hudson had said. Standing there, dripping sweat, he thought of that unraveling in his mind, the resurgence of his memories, the old monkey on his back, how real that all was ...

Might not have much longer.

"We're both going to finish this, one way or the other," he said, leveling the pistol. "Time for a little ride."

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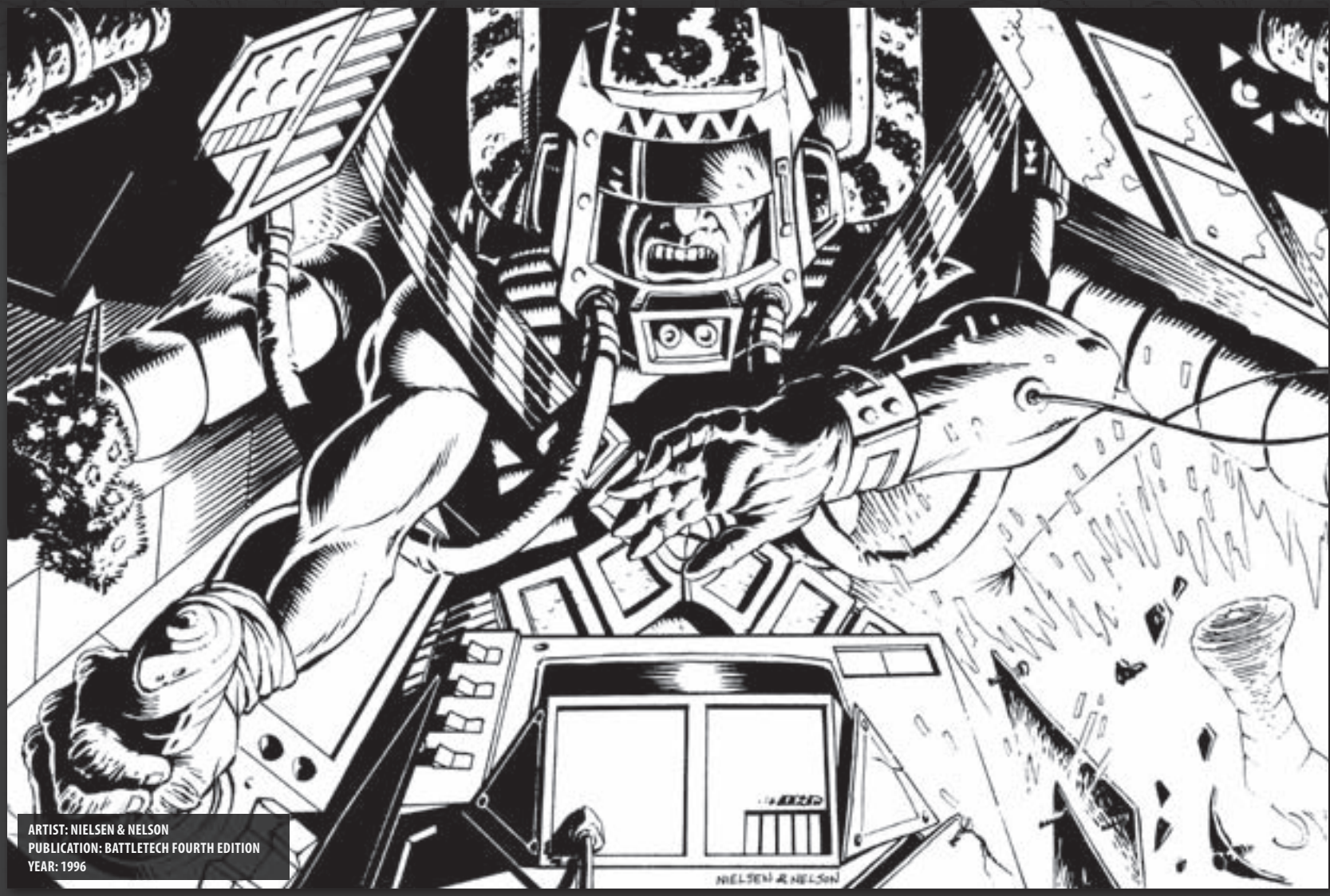

ARTIST: NIELSEN & NELSON
PUBLICATION: BATTLETECH FOURTH EDITION
YEAR: 1996

The infirmary was chaotic, corpsmen scurrying over with bags of saline and packed cells for Niamh. Gwen didn't have a clue anything was going on until she felt the infirmary's floor twitch beneath her feet. "What's that?" she shouted, sweeping clots from Niamh's mouth with her finger, levering the business end of a laryngoscope over his tongue to visualize a swollen, pulpy epiglottis. "We got to intubate, give me the tube, get me some positive pressure going!" Threading the breathing tube, then flicking her eyes to the scanner as she positioned the tube in Niamh's trachea and still the ground jerked and hitched ... "Will someone *please* tell me what's going on out there? Are we under attack, or—?"

"No!" Peering through a window, a corpsman gasped, "The *Gunslinger*! It's *moving*!"

"What?"

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Although he'd lain in his command couch only a short week ago, Mathers realized that he'd let himself forget this pleasure: the sway of his 'Mech, the raw power of the *Gunslinger*'s fusion reactor surging through composite bone and myomer, the muffled thunder of his machine's passage as it ground rock to dust and made the earth shudder.

This is reality, too, the only one that matters now, the only way I can make this right.

His eyes flicked over his HUD, saw the distant teeth of the Furies tear at the darkening sky. The light was fading fast, the day nearly gone, Rockland's moon only a thumbnail, and he quickly punched up the mag into starlight mode. Not quite time for the thermal scanners; the tracery of arroyos where they'd stumbled on the Elementals was still a good sixty klicks distant.

From behind: "What do you hope to gain, Mathers?" Her words were spongy, but he understood well enough. "Your people are dead men walking and your Combine will not help them. They will not risk it."

That, he thought, was something he hadn't considered. "Yeah, well, we'll see," he said, without taking his eyes from his HUD. He found the jasmine scent more cloying now than pleasant and wondered if, maybe, he might not have enough brain to see this thing through. What if his neurohelmet crapped out? Well, no choice ... "By the way, sorry I had to truss you in that sling, but space is kind of tight. I don't suppose you'd like a cool drink or anything? We got, oh, couple hours to go."

"What do you hope to accomplish, Mathers?"

"You gonna tell me how your people did it?"

"No."

"Come on, not even as a last request to a dying man? I get it that you're a carrier and, what, immune? Immune to what?"

No answer.

"Okay, be that way. But tell me, what kind of weapon takes out her own kind?"

A pause. Then:

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, give it a rest. You were never going to fight us in that *Dasher*. They *put* you in that to protect *them*. You must be one contagious mother."

"Just a mother." A breathy laugh. "In a manner of speaking."

What? "What do you want? You want the 'Mech? What?"

"Only to observe, Mathers. Only to watch."

It took him a few seconds—but then he got it.

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She might not get another chance. Pelting out of the infirmary, Gwen tore across camp, dodging milling troops who seemed to have as much purpose as ants in an overturned hill. The Furies had taken a big bite out of the sun, and molten bolts of the day's last light fired the desert bronze. In the distance, she thought she caught a harsh glittery sparkle that must be the *Gunslinger*: Mathers, marching to whatever fate awaited.

Bursting into the command Quonset, she blew past Mathers's startled aide and made a beeline for the comm center. "Wait!" said the aide. "You can't—"

She paid no mind, straight-armed the door, banged through as the comm officer half-rose from his seat. "Muh-ma'am," he said, so white she saw every freckle, "*Chu-sa* Mathers' orders are—"

"Are about to change," she said, drawing a bead. Thinking she finally had a use for this stupid pistol after all. "Get me the Eleventh. Right. *Now*."

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An experiment.

This whole thing wasn't any more complicated than that. They were guinea pigs. No better than cells in a damn beaker, for chrissake. Inoculate, stand back, see what happened. Maybe they wouldn't all die, but that was no consolation because those who had, their deaths would be ...

"Meaningless," Mathers whispered. Worse than Grace's death. His people would be only *data points.*

And what had she meant: *Just a mother* ...

Keying his transmitter across every band, Mathers activated the *Gunslinger*'s locator beacon and then punched up the automatic distress.

"What are you doing?"

"Oh, wouldn't you like to know." Even stripped down, he was swimming in sweat. Switching his vest to max capacity, he gave a delicious shiver as the cooling fluid leached heat from his burning skin.

Whatever else she was, this woman was smart. "You're broadcasting on every band," she said, slowly. Then: "You're baiting them. You're luring them in."

"I am. Because I've got precious cargo, the only person they hoped would be left standing." Now he did crane his head around. Oh, she was there all right, and no phantom: cocooned in a sling and helpless as a fly in a spider's web—and yet so deadly. "*You*."

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A sudden chirp from his thermal sensors. His gaze clicked to his HUD, and then he felt a sudden surge of triumph: five contacts, swarming over the desert, heading his way.

"Here come the kids, honey," he said, and then he reached forward, his fingers rattling over his keyboard. To his right, a dynamic schematic of the *Gunslinger*'s heat sinks and plasma flow indicators winked onto the secondary viewing screen.

"Mathers?" Suspicion in her voice, and he knew why: He wasn't targeting or bringing weapons to bear. "What are you doing?"

He didn't reply. Instead, he keyed in a series of commands then waited as the 'Mech's computer chewed over the problem, was clearly unhappy with what Mathers wanted and so spit back a warning, the computer-ese equivalent of *Man, you got to be shitting me.*

No, really, he thought, almost amused at the computer's assumption that, honestly, he couldn't be serious, and jabbed an override. *I meant what I said and I said what I meant.* Sixty seconds ought to be just right. Then, because he wanted *her* to know exactly what he'd done, he cranked up the volume so high that the shriek of the alarm skewered his eardrums like a stiletto.

"Mathers!" she shouted over the sudden din. "Mathers, stop!"

"Burn in hell," he said—

As the computer ticked: *sixty, fifty-nine, fifty-eight* ...

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When the *Gunslinger*'s fusion reactor went, the pillar of fire was so bright the fighter pilots had to look away.

ELEVENTH LEGION OF VEGA
ROCKLAND, DRACONIS COMBINE
22 SEPTEMBER 3059

Perched on a stool at Niamh's bedside, Gwen checked her watch. Three hours gone, and still no sign of a DropShip. Her gaze swept over the rows of patients, what corpsmen remained hanging the last of their saline. The infirmary was filled to overflowing and they'd been forced to erect a second tent, spread out blankets on bare ground and for what? She had virtually nothing to give these men and women, and in a few more hours not even that.

What could be taking the Eleventh so long? She'd briefed the CMO on the situation, he knew they had a crisis. They needed to *hurry* ...

"Going to get you out of here," she said to Niamh. He was comatose, but hearing was the last thing to go in coma and the first to return. "Don't you die on me, or I'll kick your bloody arse around the frigging—"

What was that? She straightened, ears prickling. Was that ... *thunder*? Heart suddenly thumping in her throat, she slid from her stool, hardly daring to hope and afraid not to ...

Outside: full dark now, the sky milky with stars, the moon gone. Elongated rectangles and fans of light scored the sand as Quonset doors were thrown open and tent flaps jerked back, and she heard the crunch of boots on sand as she and the others still standing turned their upturned faces to the night ...

"There!" someone shouted. "Coming in from the south!"

She saw them: two clusters of orange-yellow stars, impossibly bright, moving fast.

"I don't understand," said someone else. "How come—?"

"Oh my God," she said as the stars which were not stars suddenly broke apart and then reformed into constellations she recognized. "My God. They're fighters."

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Mathers saw it happen. He'd reached the arroyos, stepping carefully over gashes and deep rents in the desert's crust. Even at this distance there was no mistaking those faint telltale needles stinging the earth, the stuttering seams of tracers smearing the southern horizon to a false dawn. Seconds later, the whispery shrieks of the attacking fighters rolled on a hot wind, and Mathers was glad he was too far away to hear his people scream.

Oh, he understood why. He was soldier enough. But still he thought: *No better than the Jags when they killed my Grace* ...

"Captain, it's brilliant," said the doctor as he fiddled with the resolution. "A genetically-designed parasite that not only specifically targets mitochondria but actually *lives* there until an initiator starts lytic production leading to eventual cellular degradation ..."

"Well, those were all words," said the captain, "but what the hell did you just say?"

"It's simple. This parasite lives in the mitochondria. But not just *anyone's*, only a *specific* maternal line can play host. This makes sense given that it's Clan-based. I'll bet they tailored this either to a specific Bloodname or, maybe, some crossmix."

"Why?"

"Because the parasite can safely be carried only within that certain line, you follow? For that line, the parasite is *normal*. Hell, my guess is they *need* the parasite to survive because the parasite's DNA is part of their mitochondria and can't be removed without causing the organelle to disintegrate."

"So then, you get infected and ...?"

"We don't really understand the trigger mechanism yet, but if the parasite infects someone whose mitochondria are incompatible, the parasite gets a kill order. It then produces proteins that literally snip the host's mitochondria in two. Do that enough times and the person dies. Very neat, very elegant. Gene-targeted warfare with only *your* line left standing." The doctor's voice got dreamy. "If true ... could get very ugly for the Clans."

"You won't catch me losing sleep over that." The captain's eyes drifted to a square of clear polymer inset in the door of one of sickbay's isolation rooms. Inside, a nurse in full blood-red hazmat gear tended to her patient: a pretty blonde—doctor from what was left of her uniform—and she might even look like herself someday once they cut away all the bandages and casts. "So, what about her?"

"Oh, she'll recover, physically. But the parasite's part of who she is now. Intriguing when you stop to think about it, but that young lady probably has some Clan in her distant past. It's the only explanation for why she's not dead."

"But if that's true, if that parasite's bound up in her cells," said the captain, "then how long before we can let Dr. Hudson go?"

"Ah, well," said the doctor, "*that's* another story."

ARTIST: BRUCE JENSEN
PUBLICATION: PRINCE OF HAVOC (NOVEL)
YEAR: 1998

ARTIST: FRANZ VOHWINKEL
PUBLICATION: CLASSIC BATTLETECH: A GAME OF ARMORED COMBAT
YEAR: 2002

ARTIST: ALEX IGLESIAS
PUBLICATION: MASTERS & MINIONS: THE STARCORPS DOSSIERS
YEAR: 2009

ARTIST: TONY SZCZUDLO
PUBLICATION: JADE FALCON SOURCEBOOK
YEAR: 1992

FACE IN THE VIEWPORT

ROBERT THURSTON

MARSHALL
KERENSKY CLUSTER, CLAN SPACE
19 OCTOBER 3069

Screaming from the intense pain, Horse stumbled forward, the smoke from the battle nearly choking him and giving a strange, erratic rhythm to the sounds bursting from his parched throat. Fire radiated from his arm, where a projectile had torn a long jagged gash in his bicep, and where his hand pressed futilely against the middle of the long gash to try to staunch the flowing blood. More blood from a light forehead wound had seeped down into his eyes, blurring his vision. On this vast battlefield there had to be some place, a haven, a shelter, where he could just plop down and rest; either to deal with the wound or close his eyes and let fate stop the screams and drain the remaining life from him.

Horrendous, racking coughs exploded in his chest, bending his body at the waist, and making him fall into the lap of a dead Clan Jade Falcon Elemental propped up against a large, purple-tinged rock, clearly a victim of the battle. Scrambling to his feet, Horse stared at his face reflected in the Elemental suit's viewport visor, below the elaborate metal jade falcon head. He was caught short by the pained look on his face. It was the face of a warrior in anguish, even though he had stopped screaming. Mouth twisted, eyes squeezed nearly shut, hair color distorted by the tones of the battle behind him, where fireclouds still swirled over the field. Pain might explain the look, yet it was pain he had endured easily in the past. His ravaged body had weakened, he guessed. He calmed his face muscles—the expression in the viewport relaxed—and struggled to look more normal, whatever normal was for a grizzled MechWarrior like Horse.

Below the viewport, the ornately designed marks of camouflage looked like small shadows dancing across the metal. They were ghostlike, especially combined with the jade falcon eyes, but not as ghostly as the reflection of his own face. The jade falcon eyes seemed to stare at him in piercing disapproval, as if saying, *what are you doing alive, eyas? Why are you still alive? It's a dishonor to be still alive.* The jade falcon eyes appeared to shift from side to side. Their glare was frightening and a bit sinister. Horse had a notion this decorative jade falcon could kill him. Big joke. No matter how much he tried, what risks he took, how hard he fought, he could somehow not wind up dead. It was definitely shameful to still be on the battlefield where he was supposed to die, still breathing, still trying to shake the abnormal feeling that he must fight to preserve his life.

Horse stood and attempted to stretch away the subsidiary pain so he could concentrate on his arm wound. He would not have received the injury if he hadn't removed the heavy armor given to him before the battle. It had been too cumbersome. Horse had thought he was still fleet and agile, even for his advanced age.

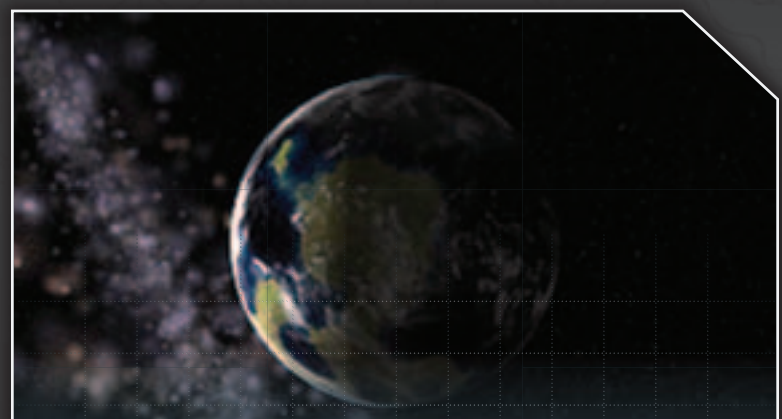
At his feet he saw a severed arm, still in Elemental power armor, a pool of blood lay between it and the suit. Horse knelt down by the dead warrior.

Checking his reflection in the viewport, he saw the face of an ancient warrior. He had forgotten the age in the face, age most clan warriors would be ashamed of. He recalled Commander Joanna cursing her own lines, saying that they displayed her many failures to be killed in battle. She went deeper than that. She said the age in her face merely proclaimed the fact that she had not won a Bloodname in any of her innumerable tries to emerge as the victor in the rounds of combat that qualified a warrior for a Bloodname. She had been in more melees and individual BattleMech clashes than a Cluster of clan warriors, she said, and still she lived. "I curse every breath I take," she had once said in one of her bitterer moods.

And somewhere Joanna was still cursing and battling.

For Horse the issue was different. Even though he was freeborn, age was a curse for him, too, and he hated seeing it on his face. Beyond the age were the smears of battle on his face, the cuts and dried lines of blood, the bruises discolored by the viewport's opaque darkness.

He stared down at the dead Elemental. If he could get the man out, the armor could be the haven he'd been searching for. But his arm throbbed with pain. Seeing torn cloth in the Elemental uniform, apparently caused by the severing of the arm, Horse tore off a usable hunk. Using the dexterity gained from operating a BattleMech for years, he managed to wrap the cloth around his upper arm. Some blood seeped out along the edges of the cloth, but at least he had slowed the blood loss. It would not do for long, but if he got inside the armor he would be able to deal with it.



MARSHALL

World Name: Marshall
Star Type (Recharge Time): F4V (175 hours)
Position in System: 3
Time to Jump Point: 16.13 days
Number of Satellites: None
Surface Gravity: 1.1G
Atm. Pressure: Standard (Breathable)
Equatorial Temperature: 30° C (Warm-Temperate)
Surface Water Coverage: 50 percent
Recharging Station: Zenith
HPG Class Type (Clan): A
Highest Native Life: Reptiles
Population Size (3069): 17,600,000
Socio-Industrial Levels: A-C-B-C-B

Marshall's six continents are not densely populated, but with two of them buried under polar ice and uneven distribution of resources and arable land on the rest, the record six Clans inhabiting this planet are necessarily squeezed into close, fractious quarters. Marshall's early history is marred by unusual levels of civilian conflict and slaughters that have since resulted in one of the most pragmatic systems of Trials of Possession in the Clan Homeworlds. Dedicated areas of the world serve as regular dueling grounds, while the civilian castes maintain their letterhead paperwork with easily changed logos.

Now he had to get the dead body out. Overcoming his pain, he pulled at the corpse. At first it wouldn't budge. Getting his breath under control, he took one more deep breath and tugged at the heavy form, able to move it a bit by using all of his remaining strength. As he recalled, death of its inhabitant stopped the operation of the suit's systems, but he still had to pry the body free of them.

It took a while, but the more he worked at it, the easier it became. Soon he was spreading the warrior as neatly as he could beside his combat outfit. The dead man's face looked calm, impassive. In Horse's mind he tried to see this warrior alive, vital. The man looked a bit like an Elemental Horse had known. What was his name? Selima, that was it. He had been one of the heroes of Tukayyid, making the crossing of a bridge possible through his sheer combat skills. The act had been heroic enough to justify a few lines in *The Remembrance*, the Clan book that

combined history with an epic sense of honor and glory. Horse even had a few lines in it. He didn't remember why. His life had been so many battles, so many acts of combat, so many victories that they'd all blended into one another.

Even the current altercation. He didn't remember anyone telling him what it was about. Maybe a genetic materials contest, maybe Clan Jade Falcon and some other Clan settling an argument, maybe an invasion of another part of the Clan Homeworlds.

They were all one. What, after all, did he even need to know about it? He was now in the last stage of his life as a warrior. As Joanna had indicated that day, warriors disgracefully grown old were used as cannon fodder in battles. A few fighters with outmoded, probably ineffective weapons put on the front lines to draw fire and delay battles. It was an honorable role but, for a veteran warrior like Horse, a demeaning one. He had not had to do it. He could have been decommissioned and sent back home. But for him that was a bigger disgrace. He had to die in combat. It was important to him.

All he needed to do now was get back to the battle and continue slaughtering until he was slaughtered himself. Even the honorable demise had no meaning to him any more. He was no Joanna, maybe because he was freeborn. Anyway, what was the point at this moment? He had to get inside this Elemental armor.

Gingerly, feeling pain in a thousand parts of his body, he maneuvered himself into the Elemental combat suit. As he settled into it, he experienced almost immediate relief, even though he knew the suit had not started dispensing its medicines and salves. As soon as he thought that, the medical features of the suit kicked in. The gelatinous substance known as HarJel began to staunch his flowing blood. The painless massage it seemed to give as it worked was soothing. The suit's MedPack injected him with proper medicines, and he thought he could feel the healing materials travel through his blood. He could not, of course, but the lessening of pain seemed to give the medicines a movement all their own.

He closed his eyes, knowing the curative process would be slow. Again, the face in the viewport visor, his own face, appeared in his mind. How many years of existence did that face display? Too many, he knew, but he also knew that he had given up keeping track of their passing years long ago.

He had to stretch upward to look out the viewport. Thin tracks of blood had run down the viewport, making the smoke and fire of the combat outside, with the mysteriously moving 'Mechs, just shadows that appeared and disappeared in a battle that seemed projected onto a surface, a recording rather than the real 'Mechs fighting their life or death battles.

He suddenly recalled that the first time he had seen Aidan Pryde was through a viewport. They both had been cadets then from different basic training units. They had not known each other, which was no surprise, since Aidan was trueborn and Horse freeborn. Horse was in one of those freeborn units that, if it lasted, could qualify its cadets as MechWarriors, though mostly the job of freeborn cadets was to serve as opponents in the MechWarrior training of trueborns. Normally, trueborns and freeborns did not like each other. Trueborns found the method of creating a freeborn, through a male and a female's coupling, repulsive. Even more grotesque for them was the birth process itself. While most freeborns supported their society, some, while envious of the more elite position trueborns had in the Clan hierarchy, despised the genetic engineering that caused the sometimes uncomfortable social conditions among trueborns and freeborns.

In the training exercise where Horse and Aidan had confronted each other, Aidan had been inside a legless 'Mech shell with most of its equipment removed. Weapons used in the exercise were powered down, as it was too early in their training for either to be trusted with weapons that could kill. Nevertheless Horse, knowing he was just a pawn in the game, had vowed to harm any trueborn serving as his enemy in the mock battle. Armed with a barely-charged satchel bomb, he had climbed onto the 'Mech and looked through the 'Mech's transparent viewport at his enemy. Aidan's face seemed startled, much like what Horse had recently seen of himself in the Elemental viewport. Horse had swung to the side and quickly attached the bomb. Jumping down, he figured he would be giving his trueborn foe a good jolt. But Aidan had quickly countered, scrambling out of the shell, grabbing the satchel bomb and hurling it away. It almost immediately exploded, a small burst of smoke and flame that seemed more like a pop than an explosion.

Horse could not recall the rest of their battle well. He had started rocking the 'Mech shell, which was light enough to fall, but not before his enemy had leaped on him, slamming him to the ground. Horse had tried to stab Aidan with an illegal weapon, a sort of knife he had fashioned from a piece of waste metal, but the other cadet had won the day.

From that point on, Horse had not been able to shake the memory of how he had been so ignominiously defeated by this trueborn upstart. When the two met again, the conditions were so strange that Horse hadn't really recognized Aidan right away. Aidan, now disgraced in the trueborn ranks, had been posing as a freeborn, a strategy arranged by a training commander who had not wanted to waste his combat talents. Horse eventually saw through the disguise and soon the two were comrades, warriors who trusted each other and who came quickly to aid each other in dozens of 'Mech combats. Not just 'Mech combats, but in fights and barroom brawls.

Aidan Pryde, restored to his trueborn Bloodnamed status, had been killed while performing an array of heroic deeds at the Tukayyid battle. Warriors were supposed to be praised for dying heroically, and Horse honored him for it, but he also missed the living man. For a moment Aidan's face took the place of his own in the viewport. No pain in this face, though. There was a half-smile, the only happy look that Aidan ever allowed himself, usually after drinking a few stiff fusionnaires, the typical drink of a Jade Falcon warrior. Horse and Aidan had shared, it seemed, hundreds of rounds of fusionnaires, but it could not be that much. There had not been that much down time, that much opportunity to indulge. Warriors did not indulge. Somewhere there must be a rule that decreed that. But Aidan and he were not typical warriors. They were fierce battlers, to be sure, brilliant BattleMech pilots, yes, but for both of them there were quirks of personality that made other warriors wary of them, that set them apart from clan unity. He recalled Aidan staring with a kind of drunken seriousness in his eyes and declaring,

"Horse, we might as well both be freeborns. We are—"

"For a while we were. You know, your freeborn days—"

"Do not remind me of that shameful period."

"Right. You know, your shameful period, as you call it, is my life."

"You are drunk."

"I usually am when I say stupid things."

Aidan had looked sad then. Clan warriors tried not to show sadness or regret, but sometimes even they loosened up for a moment, usually under the influence of a few fusionnaires. Anyway, Aidan had been right. For all its demeaning status, it was better for Aidan to *pretend* to be freeborn than not to fulfill the need inside himself to fight for honor and glory and the clan, a BattleMech under his control.

The MedPack was working well now. The HarJel had sealed Horse's wounds and he needed only for his blood to restore itself, with the help of medicine from the suit, then he would be strong enough to return to battle.

He stretched his neck again to look out the viewport. The smoke had thickened. Vague figures in silhouette raced by outside. There was such chaos here. That was what battle was, he supposed. Order to chaos to order. BattleMechs entered the battle in some kind of formation, were split apart by attack until the battlefield became what was outside now, a free-for-all array of 'Mechs and warriors grouped into pockets of combat, until the fighting was over and order was restored.

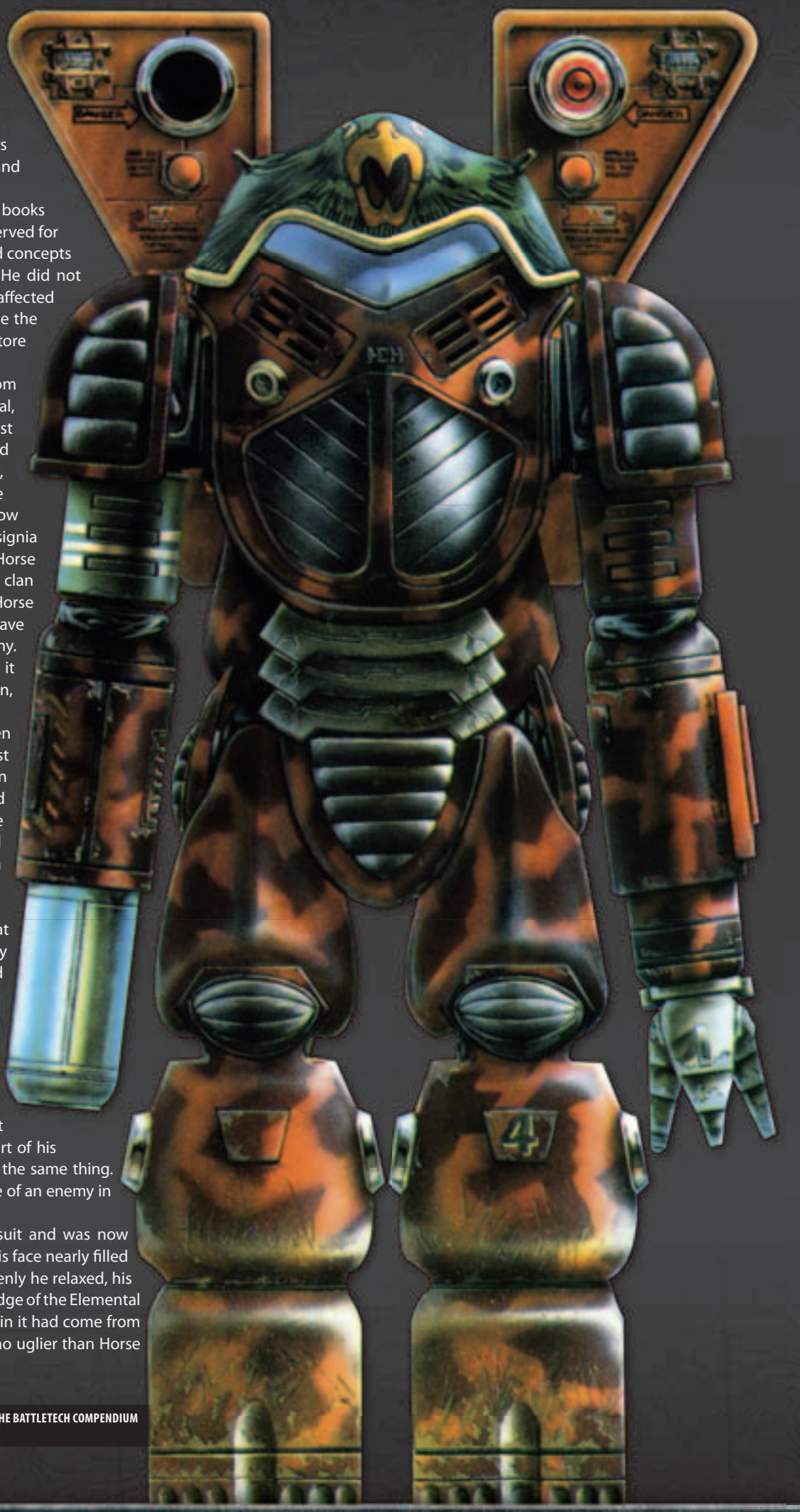
In his early days, Horse had read extensively from actual books kept in what was called a Brian cache, where they were preserved for reasons lost in Clan history. Some of the books had discussed concepts of order and balance as the antidote to the chaos of life. He did not remember much about what he had read, but he knew it affected his thinking from time to time. *Infected* his thinking might be the better phrase. Well, he had to re-enter that chaos soon, restore the order of his own existence.

A figure emerged from the chaos, as if materializing from the smoke. It was a monster of a man. Tall like an Elemental, but not one. More muscular than Horse. Uglier than the ugliest Jade Falcon warrior. Jauntily carrying a laser rifle, he ranged from left to right, swirled around suddenly as if threatened, except there was no one there. He was a MechWarrior. He had probably been downed, his 'Mech destroyed, and he now roamed the battlefield looking for a replacement. From an insignia on the man's uniform, Horse could tell he was the enemy. Horse did not even recognize the symbology of the insignia. What clan did he belong to? He took a couple of steps toward where Horse lay in the Elemental suit. Horse still felt weak. He would have difficulty getting out of this hiding place to confront this enemy. Although he raged to scramble out and attack, Horse knew it was not time, and he lay still. He could almost hear Aidan, brilliant strategist that he was, urging caution.

The man disappeared briefly into the smoke, then reappeared to the right and closer to where Horse lay. Almost strolling, he approached the suit. He came upon the fallen Elemental corpse, so carefully arranged by Horse, and stared at it. He kicked its side with an expression of ugly pleasure on his face. Horse wanted to squeeze out of the Elemental suit and charge the man, avenge this insult, but caution prevailed again. The warrior's first kick had been light, but the next was harder. He stepped back as if measuring his next move, then he slammed the side of the corpse with a kick that almost made him fall. Spinning around, somewhat gracefully for a large man, the warrior fired a quick burst into the dead Elemental's chest, then spat in the Elemental's face.

Furious at the welter of dishonor that he had watched, Horse started to get out of the suit, but weakness overcame him. He recognized that the medicine from the MedPack had not finished its work, and proper strategy called for him to stay still. Reaching down, the enemy picked up the Elemental corpse and, swinging, flung it away with contempt. Horse shut his eyes, unable to bear the insults, even though another part of his brain realized that in the heat of battle he might have done the same thing. Not the spitting, though. He had never dishonored the corpse of an enemy in that way.

Horse opened his eyes. The monster had come to the suit and was now staring down at it. His head was so large and so broad that his face nearly filled the viewport. The fury was still in the face at first, then suddenly he relaxed, his expression changing to curiosity. He probably had no knowledge of the Elemental outfit. With his face relaxed, Horse realized that the ugliness in it had come from his own imagination. He was no uglier than most warriors, no uglier than Horse



PUBLICATION: THE BATTLETECH COMPENDIUM
YEAR: 1990

himself. The look had come from the intensity of battle. Horse recalled some book from the Brian cache that had been about war, about one battle after another. For some reason he recalled the rage of one of the warriors in the story, a hero who had revenged the death of his friend, sought out his killer on the battlefield, defeated him, then virtually destroyed the corpse in subsequent events Horse could not now recall.

Now his own enemy stared down at the Elemental, seemed actually to stare down at Horse. Horse held his body still, angry at himself for his caution. Well, doses of caution had got him this far, and in a few moments the medicine would have worked and he would be able to return to combat. Horse had always fought for the big moment, the killing moment. He would not have made so many kills, done so much other damage, because of any but the most calculated recklessness. Aidan had taught him that. "Choose your moment, Horse," he had said, and Horse seemed to hear his voice telling him that now.

The face in the viewport came closer, as if trying to peer inside. Seeing nothing of interest, he pulled himself to his full height. From Horse's perspective, he looked like a tall building, his head reaching into clouds, although there were no clouds, only the smoke of battle. Then he raised his leg high. His boot looked like a 'Mech foot coming down, large and broad. Horse could not help but slide downward in the suit as the foot came crashing into the already well-damaged helmet. The sound of impact was like a bomb striking followed by the sheer cracking of metal.

ARTIST: JOHN PAUL LONA
PUBLICATION: WOLF CLAN SOURCEBOOK
YEAR: 1991

Something struck Horse's cheek. From the pain it caused, he could tell the wound was deep, and there was no more MedPack, no more HarJel to staunch or cure it.

Reacting as the warrior he was, Horse wriggled out of the suit and sprang up, ready to fight the monster. No weapons, still physically weak, blood streaming from the gash on his face, but ready to kill. But the enemy, the monster as he had come to think of the man, had already turned and was running back to the smoke. He had not stayed to examine the damage, had not discovered Horse in the wreckage, had unintentionally denied Horse his revenge.

Horse relaxed. There was no point in chasing the man now. Even out of the Elemental suit, the MedPack medicines were returning his strength to him. He would find the man somewhere in the battle, and kill him, and after killing him, spit on his corpse.

But now, now he had to plan his next moves. He had to find a weapon somewhere. First, though, he had to find the body of the fallen Elemental the monster had flung away. A few feet away, the corpse lay in a tangled heap, its legs twisted under his body, its head lolling unnaturally, the neck apparently broken by the enemy's abuse.

Lugging the body to the Elemental suit, he straightened it out, swept the dirt off, and treating the corpse delicately, managed to get it back inside his suit as best as he could. It took a while, and Horse frequently thought of the way mothers had dressed children back in the village where he spent his early childhood, carefully squeezing their legs into trousers and arms into sleeves. The last act he performed was placing some of the pieces of the crushed helmet around the body's head. The result was not as honorable as Horse might have wished, but at least it would protected from further dishonor.

Horse turned away from the dead Elemental and looked straight into the eyes of another warrior. Where had he come from? How could he have come here without Horse hearing him? The concentration on honoring the Elemental must have distracted him.

Horse had immediately tensed, then he realized that the tired old face in front of him belonged to another Jade Falcon warrior, an old one like him being used as cannon fodder in the battle.

"Still alive and kicking, Horse?" the warrior asked.

"You know me?"

"Everyone knows you, old man. You have inspired us."

"I doubt that."

"You are in *The Remembrance*; you will not find my name there."

"And what is your name?"

"Does not matter."

"Freeborn?"

"Trueborn. But, again, that does not matter now. We are both just shadows in this battle."

"Shadows?"

"You do not know the term?"

"No. Apparently I have missed it."

"No matter. Just warrior lingo for those of us planted in front of the battle. We are shadows to shoot at, something like that."

Horse took a step toward the warrior without a name. Something weak in his legs made him stagger a step.

"You are hurt."

"A bit. I will be all right."

"That is one thing we may count on, Horse. Rest a bit. You have plenty of time to rejoin the battle. It is a long one."

"What is this battle all about?"

The man shrugged.

"I do not know. But I must return to it now. And you will soon."

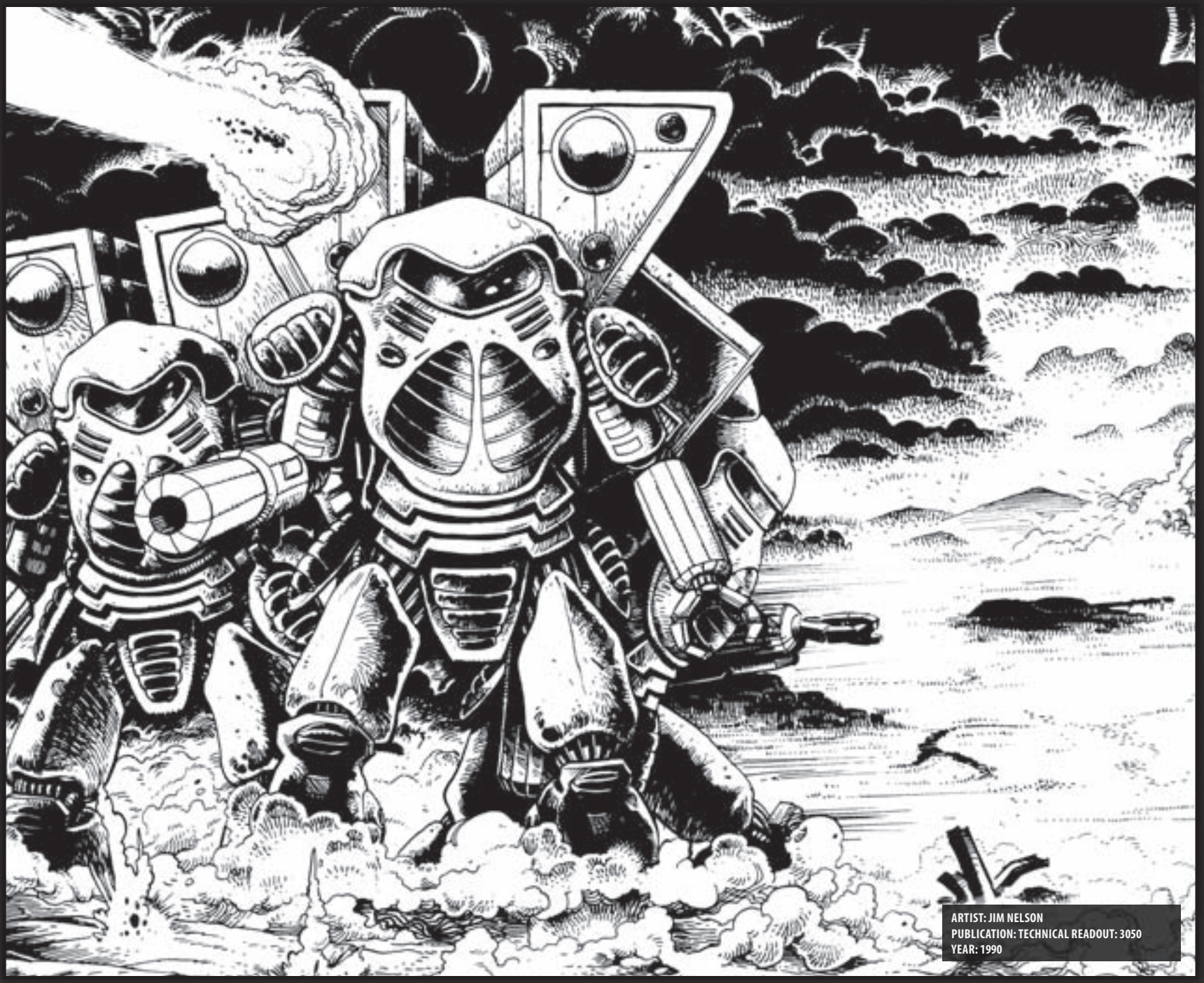
The man turned and ran away, into the smoke. Disappeared. Around him large shadows suggested BattleMechs in action; smaller shadows suggested, well, shadows as the Jade Falcon warrior had called them.

For a long while, Horse sat on the rock the dead Elemental had originally been propped up against. Finally he became disgusted at his inactivity and no longer gave a damn about the state of his strength. He stood, and of course he was strong. He felt better now than he had at the start of this godforsaken battle.

Dampness on his face reminded him of the gash there. Touching it, he could tell it was not a mortal wound. The blood on his face would serve to make him appear more frightening to the enemy. He smeared some of it on his forehead, around his neck.

A voice behind him shouted: "Jade Falcon trashborn!"

Turning quickly, he saw a group of the enemy standing beyond the rock. Counting quickly, he saw four warriors there, all with weapons, all striding menacingly toward him. *Good*, he thought. *Just the odds I need right now*.



ARTIST: JIM NELSON
PUBLICATION: TECHNICAL READOUT: 3050
YEAR: 1990

Afterward, Horse could not have told anyone how he beat those odds. The leader who had called him trashborn was easy, since he was not ready for Horse's sudden run directly at him. With that one downed, and using a laser pistol he had seized from the fallen warrior's grasp, he had killed two of the others while their own bursts went astray. The last one was a knife-wielder who used the wrong moves and fell to a chop in the throat, which Horse followed up by stabbing the foe in the neck with his own knife since he'd lost his pistol.

It all happened so fast that, when Horse surveyed the scene, he could barely remember how he had done it, how he had killed them all or why he had taken so many risks. It was just war, and a minor battle in this one at that. It blended in immediately with all his previous battles, whether hand to hand or in BattleMech combat.

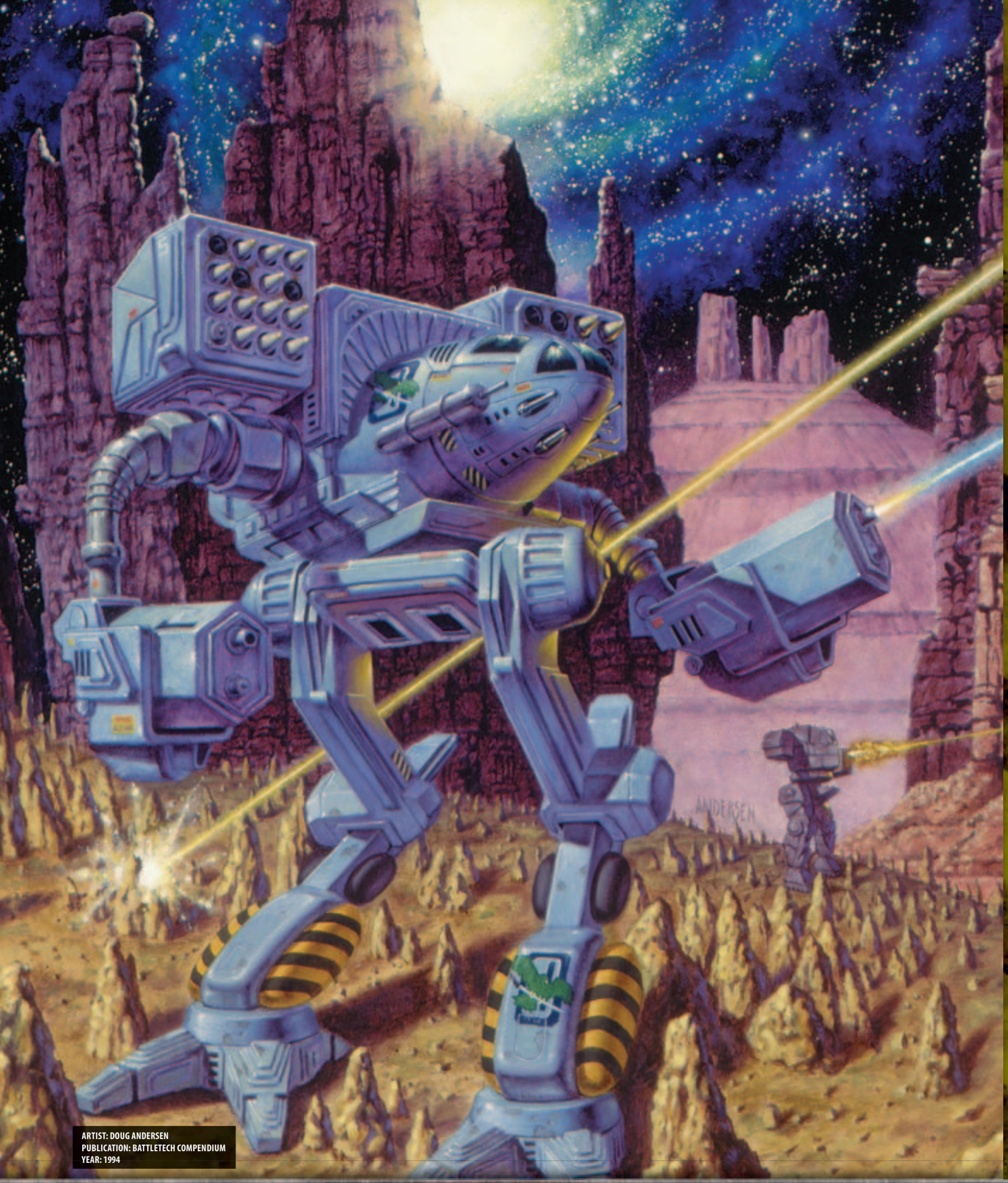
For a moment he felt like a MechWarrior again. Beside him was the ghostly presence of Aidan Pryde. Ahead of him was the victory.

Collecting the weapons from the four attackers, he felt ready to return to the battle. As he looked down at the leader, he saw a faint pulse at the man's throat. He was still alive. Horse could kill him. Instead, he muttered, "trashborn," and walked away.

As he strode away from the battle scene, he took one more look at the fallen Elemental, satisfied that he had performed the best funerary ritual possible for him, and headed toward the battle. Even though his role on this planet, in this battle, might be as cannon fodder, he had a purpose of his own. He would find the monster who had so dishonored the Elemental's body and kill him or be killed. No, he would kill him. Shoot a dozen bursts into his body and spit upon his corpse.

He felt he would survive this battle, survive to become cannon fodder in another place. Eventually he would die, but not now. After disposing of so many enemies, here and in the past, he felt he might never die. As he disappeared into the drifting smoke, became a shadow himself, he cursed his own survival, but not too hard.

ARTIST: LES DORSCHEID
PUBLICATION: THE BLACK THORNS
YEAR: 1994



ARTIST: DOUG ANDERSEN
PUBLICATION: BATTLETECH COMPENDIUM
YEAR: 1994

ARTIST: ALEX IGLESIAS
PUBLICATION: MASTERS & MINIONS: THE STARCORPS DOSSIERS
YEAR: 2009

ARTIST: FRANZ VOHWINKEL
PUBLICATION: HANDBOOK: HOUSE MARIK
YEAR: 2005

ARTIST: CHRIS MOELLER
PUBLICATION: INNER SPHERE
YEAR: 2000

MEANS TO AN END

LOREN L. COLEMAN

THARKAD
LYRAN ALLIANCE
27 OCTOBER 3061

The Tharkan spring was unusually cold.

At the fringe of the suburbs, where the capital's army of sweepers, plows, and salters rarely reached, snow, packed down into deep blue ice, made every step a hazard. He had chosen to wear nubs. A band of small, blunted spikes that fastened over the toe of each oiled leather boot. Simple. Common. Easy to slip off at a doorway, to pocket for later need.

Evening was long settled, and very few people walked the streets. Those who did had an extra bounce in their step, a smile for their neighbors. Too early for holiday spirits; he knew the reason. Yes, he did. The Archon's propaganda machine was making the most out of the defeat of Clan Smoke Jaguar, the supposed guarantee of peace, and the imminent return of all Inner Sphere great nations to Tharkad to elect a new First Lord. Propped up by the State, the mood was infectious.

Still, he found it a struggle to return a smile, a greeting. He was nobody at the moment. Not a neighbor or a fellow citizen. Certainly not a patriot. Just a piece of random violence floating along the capital's streets. Looking for a place to alight.

Finding it, at the next alleyway.

Timing would be critical. Then again, wasn't it always? Timing was so often the fulcrum between success and failure. Timing could force a man to take shortcuts. Shortcuts that led to mistakes. Mistakes he could not—would not!—allow. Never again.

But a calculated risk, now and again, was acceptable. All a part of the game.

A means to an end.

On this third night, walking the same path down suburban streets and across patches of blue ice, he passed his mark at the mouth of a deserted alley—the location he had chosen a week before. Head bowed. Sleeves of his wool coat pinned into his pockets and filled with a light foam. The very image of a non-threatening person and a mirrored reflection of his target, who had also wrapped a thick scarf around the lower half of his face this evening. A face he knew well. A face he had studied. Modeled. Could wear with enough confidence to fool his mother, if it became necessary. Though, of course, it wouldn't.

No warning. No hint of a challenge. He waited until his victim glanced his way and nodded with the same air of geniality infecting all Tharkad, gaze quickly sliding back to the treacherous walk.

Grinding the nubs on his right boot down into the ice, he pivoted hard. His arms, held in tight against his chest along the entire walk, now pistoned out through special-cut slits in his wool coat. A spark of high voltage crackled out from the simple stunner. His victim managed nothing stronger than a pain-filled gasp as he bull-rushed the other man into the darkened alley, throwing him down amid frozen garbage and grime-stained snow.

A taste of ozone burned the air. The stunner's charge had not been lethal, but leverage and a quick, cracking *twist* solved that. It was the work of a moment to pat the man down, securing personal effects that went into his coat's extra-deep pockets, including a thick wallet containing his victim's entire life in the form of holographic identification, secure-chipped cards, and a credit stick made of thin, unbreakable crystal.

And now he was someone.

Grasping his victim's coat at the back of the neck, he dragged the body deeper into the alley where he had prepared for this moment. He used a wide stance and short strides, letting the nubs on his boots bite in at each careful step.

Tharkad City's winter-clad streets could be treacherous.

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Despite protests from TharHes Industries' security force, the Diplomatic Guard had waved everyone through the usual checkpoint and set up its own security station near the site of the day's photo shoot. One velvet rope line to hold back the press pool, who would be allowed to observe and record *from a distance*.

THARKAD

World Name: Tharkad
Star Type (Recharge Time): G6V (187 hours)
Position in System: 5th
Time to Jump Point: 7.01 days
Number of Satellites: 1 (Marsden)
Surface Gravity: 1.10
Atmosphere Pressure: Standard (Breathable)
Surface Water Coverage: 80%
Equatorial Temperature: 20C (Arctic)
Highest Native Life: Mammals
Recharging Station: Zenith, Nadir
HPG Class Type: A
Population Size (3061): 7,000,000,000
Socio-Industrial Levels: A-A-A-A-A

Tharkad, capital of the Lyran Alliance, is a frosty world. With only a narrow tropical band and most of the rest of the world dusted in snow through the world's long winters, Tharkad has always made life hard on its people. However, soon after the world's discovery in 2310, huge deposits of gemstones and radioactive materials were found. This drove Tharkad's settlement and made it a gateway to the Protectorate of Donegal. When the Draconis Combine threatened the Lyran capital of Arcturus in the Age of War, Archon Alistair Marsden selected centrally-located Tharkad to be Arcturus's successor. Today, Tharkad is a cosmopolitan world, a crossroads of trade and politics for the entire Lyran realm, and its people are friendly, despite the arctic chill in the air.

Archon Alistair Marsden's 2407 selection of Tharkad as the new Lyran capital paid off time and again. Its location (and stout defenses) usually spared Tharkad from direct combat, even in the savagery of the early Succession Wars. This allowed Tharkad to be a financial, industrial, and technological heart of the Lyran Commonwealth, as well as its capital. The planet is more than a hive of government bureaucracy, though Tharkad City on the Bremen continent does epitomize a House capital city. Huge Tharkan cities are also found on the continents of Franz, Grolsch, and Heidelberg, where Tharkad's industrial muscles reside. Domestic tourism sends tens of millions to the tropical Tatyana archipelago annually (belying the world's arctic reputation).

Another to guide the subjects of Daniel Torrent's NEXT GREAT WORK from the ad hoc makeup station, through the vestibule, to the hall's only unguarded, open door.

Field Agent Harrison Harding stepped in front of that door, physically blocking Khamen Tvetska from passing through at a hurried pace, forcing some distance in between the Capellan Diem and Defiance Industries' Milton Rathburn who had been first in line today. Security protocol demanded that he take a minimum of twenty seconds to carefully scrutinize Tvetska's verigraphed badge. There was also something to be said for ensuring that the Diem did not further harass Rathburn, who had the ear of Archon Katrina Steiner and was not afraid to use it.

Mostly, though, Harding simply did not like Capellans. And that was reason enough.

Tvetska had blunt features and a wide, disapproving mouth, far more Slavic than Asian. Only his robes, with the high, sloped collar and the House Liao crest on his breast, made him look at all a part of the Confederation. Still, Harding privately thought of him as the "squinty-eyed Capellan bastard." Training in the Intelligence Corps reinforced many casual stereotypes. And in this small group of assembled nationalities he had them all.

"I assume my identification is adequate yet again, Agent Harding."

Tvetska wore his look of patient sufferance like an officer would wear a commendation. Proudly. Openly. With the haughty air of a man used to bearing up under such trivialities. A political appointee with oversight over the backwater world of Turin, one would think Tvetska took daily lunch with Chancellor Liao. Yet here he was, assigned to a photo-op troupe being shuttled around Tharkad, one of a dozen "special projects" helping to create promotional material for the new Star League.

"Yes," Harding said, returning the Diem's badge. His eyes searching. Always alert. "Adequate."

Tvetska bobbed his head in a stiff nod, stuck his chin a bit higher into the air, and stepped past Harding without another word.

"You enjoy that far too much," Rachel Barr said as she replaced Tvetska at the agent's station. Her admonishment died with the devilish grin that turned up the corners of her wide mouth, and she said it loud enough that her words would chase down Tvetska and twist the knife one last time. Davions and Capellans. Cats and dogs.

"Do you think so?" Harding asked. He held up her badge, but spent more time examining her than the ident. She was worth looking at. A senior technician with the Syrtis Fusiliers, Rachel had fierce, blue eyes and unruly hair that his fingers itched to run through again. She wore her work uniform today. Tight-fitting coveralls, a loose khaki overshirt—worn open—with House Davion's sword-and-sunburst crest emblazoned over her right breast, and a tool belt.

"Capellan-baiting is a time-honored tradition back home. We just don't get to practice it as much these days. Pity."

"That seems a very cynical attitude."

"Cynicism gets me through the day, Agent Harding." She tossed her hair back playfully. "What gets you through yours?"

"Suspicion."

"To each his own, I guess." Her voice dropped to a private whisper. "Tonight?" she asked.

He returned her badge with a flourish and a nod. Though technically against regs, many would consider his whirlwind relationship with Rachel a rare perquisite of the job. The winks and raised eyebrows he'd seen from his fellow agents said that they agreed.

As she moved on, Harding wondered if Rachel was the reason he was here. He doubted it. More likely it was Tvetska. Or *Chu-i* Kasawa Cho, who followed after Rachel. The Combine MechWarrior remained in full dress uniform, with gold braid draped over his left shoulder and the House Kurita dragon buckled at his waist, despite Daniel Torrent's repeated demands that the *Chu-i* "try a new look." It was at times like those that Kasawa's language skills deteriorated suddenly, bowing sharply to the artist with a muttered "*Wakarimasen*."

No. Harding did not think it would be Rachel. But if it was, it would not stop him from completing his work. Such affairs never did.

In fact, of those assembled, Harding was so far discounting only two. The first was *Lady* Juliana Carsters, who stepped up after Kasawa and waited with enormous indifference to the entire procedure as Harding checked her ID and performed a random DNA spot-check against the badge's verigraphed code. Lady Juliana was a credentialed Member of Parliament for House Marik, with enough *bona fides* to satisfy all but the deepest paranoia. More, the woman was *SAFE*—a deep-cover operative for the Free Worlds League intelligence service. The electronic files delivered to Harding's noteputer had been extensive, documenting twenty-plus years of state visits and "diplomatic exchanges." And she almost certainly knew that they knew. The two extra guards assigned to the MP were obviously part of the Intelligence Corps' counter-espionage force. So unless Lady Juliana had *yet another* secret life...*and* was on a suicide mission... no, it wasn't her.

Probably.

And beyond suspicion was the man who brought up the rear. Dressed today in the voluminous, formal robes of a ComStar Precentor, he had pressed them to military standards with precise creases and not one wrinkle to embarrass his organization. His one good eye stared with piercing clarity, missing little and revealing absolutely nothing.

Agent Harding had no doubt whatsoever that Precentor Martial Anastasius Focht was a man used to discovering, and keeping, secrets. But in this case, he was easily vindicated.

After all, Focht would hardly have been hired for his own assassination.

Focht stared after Lady Juliana a moment, then swung his gaze back to the man in charge of the Diplomatic Guard's contingent. "All quiet on the front lines, Agent Harding?"

"I expect Diem Tvetska to file a new complaint. *Chu-i* Kasawa wore his dress uniform again. Mr. Torrent is bound to be unhappy. Sir."

"I have the feeling Mr. Torrent lives his life in a perpetual state of unhappiness," Focht said. "Much the same way as Diplomatic Guards live their lives in a perpetual state of wariness."

"It gets me through the day," he said, borrowing Rachel's line from earlier. "You might say it gets you through the day as well. I'll precede you through the door, and you will not stray further than five meters from my side."

"Generous, today." Focht stared sidelong at the agent. "People will think we've been fighting."

Focht was personally overseeing several of the Star League public relations pieces, Harding knew. But like a bull after a red flag, he'd not missed one of Torrent's events since Harding had instituted stronger security. As his profile suggested, Focht was a man who preferred to meet all challenges head-on. Which was fine with the Harding. The Precentor Martial could dance all he wanted, so long as it was the agent still calling the tune.

"You realize I've spoken with the Lyran Intelligence Corps," Focht said, persistant as ever.

"Yes, sir?"

"They commend your service record, and assure me that there is no specified threat against *anyone* here to justify heightened security measures."

True. The LIC would not exactly be able to report a specified threat, would they?

"However, they also reminded me that such decisions are left to the agent in charge. So, in this situation, it seems you are able to do pretty much as you will, yes?"

Harding stared flatly at the Precentor Martial. "That's why I smile so much. Sir."

Focht stared. Sighed. Gestured toward the door. "Very well. After you, Agent Harding."

"Yes."

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The secret pride of TharHes Industries was their Hall of Honor. A grand room built to BattleMech scale. Framed by massive redwood timbers stained to a near-golden hue, the room smelled of raw wood and cold metal. The floor was of black granite, polished so deep that Harding felt as if he was walking over a depthless, dark pool. His reflection was mirror-perfect but stained to a shade of burnt coffee.

And, standing at attention in silent, ominous rows on either side of the hall, were 'Mechs.

Wolfhound. Atlas. Barghest. Zeus. Falconer. BattleMaster. Archer. Crusader. Hatchetman. A dozen more, gleaming in perfection as showpieces of every BattleMech designed by TharHes Industries or with TharHes Industries' parts. One of the corporation's greatest secrets was how they had managed to move so many large machines inside without so much as a scuff in the floor's perfection. Another was why they had opened up the magnificent gallery, long considered a private treasure, to Torrent's very public display.

To bring Focht out into the open? Harding had to wonder.

"Let us go. Let us go." Daniel Torrent walked through the group, holding up a large tri-d camera. He pressed a button and an electronically reproduced *shutter-click* warned that the artist was now working. "And how is everybody today? Mr. Kasawa, as intractable as ever. We will use the *Fafnir*. Let us go."

He kept the button depressed, *shutter-clicking* through several shots of each of his subjects. Torrent also took several seconds of Harding, other agents of the Diplomatic Guard, and several of his own staff who were making last-minute makeup adjustments or assembling a small, multi-level stage at the foot of the giant, one hundred-ton BattleMech.

Harding stepped in between Torrent and Focht, watching the artist's hands carefully. A glare and a slight shake of his head discouraged Torrent from making it an issue. Torrent gave him back a frosty smile, layered with sarcastic cheer.

Another complaint to be filed with the Diplomatic Office.

"Places!" Torrent shouted, letting a touch of his pique show through. "I want Mr. Tvetska on the highest platform. Yes, enjoy it while it lasts. Because it will not. Ms. Barr...did I ask you to take that position. No, I did not. One step further down, if you please." It would be a morning of false *bonhomie* and terse looks. Everything the group had come to expect from the popular photo-artist.

"What if I had wanted my picture to be taken?" Focht asked, stepping up against Harding's right shoulder, crowding the agent's gun arm.

Harding steeled himself against a physical reaction. Focht was testing him. Pushing for whatever intelligence could be gleaned from the agent's mannerisms. Looking for an advantage. Always the warrior.

"Did you?" he asked. He felt Focht shrug.

"A nice eight-by-ten for the office wall would not be totally out of the question."

"You will pardon my saying so, Precentor Martial. You do not seem the sentimental type."

ARTIST: STEVE VENTERS
PUBLICATION: MECHWARRIOR: THE BATTLETECH ROLE PLAYING GAME
YEAR: 1986

"No, no, no," Torrent yelled, interrupting the conversation. "Mr. Kasawa! This is why I asked you to try another uniform. I can not have you overshadowing Mr. Rathburn when we are posing at the foot of the Lyran military-industrial complex." He moved about with flamboyant, exaggerated strides. "Yes, I know. *Wakarimasen*. I think you *wakari* just fine. Step to your left, please. Your other left. That way! And turn away from Mr. Rathburn as if you do not like him. A bit of a glower. This shouldn't be a stretch. It is that look you wear all the time. Perfect!"

More false-shutter *clicking*. Dozens of digital, tri-dimensional stills being loaded into the camera's memory.

"I'm not sentimental," Focht said. "Sentiment comes with too high a price, and don't get me started on the cost of personal insight. I am, however, a fan of irony. Wouldn't it be ironic, Agent Harding, if there was a danger to my person and yet I was unable to aid in my own defense due to security concerns?"

He considered that. Rated it. "I believe that would qualify as irony. Sir." A pause. "Of course, I'd rate it as *bitter* irony if your interference, through a misguided desire to control those same security concerns, is what ultimately compromised your safety."

"Hrm. Indeed. And if my interference ran toward insisting the Com Guard take over all security on this project?"

"Now that would approach *delicious* irony." Harding tried to imagine that. A cordon of Com Guard servicemen surrounding this public relations zoo. Raising hackles with the national representatives. With any local security force. Demanding to check Harding and the Diplomatic Corps detail in and out of every location! "I have to warn you, Precentor Martial. I will not allow that to happen."

"Still, you are wondering if I'll put it to the test."

It wasn't really a question. Still, Harding nodded. Once. Decisively. Concerned that he had overplayed his hand. Doubt was not a common caller. Neither was overconfidence. But both had been known to visit him in the past.

"I am not unsympathetic to your concerns, Agent Harding. Especially as they are for my own health." Focht had apparently read the agent's silence as pique. "I am also aware of the historical pressures at work here. The Diplomatic Guard would not have been in charge of main security that day, but you must have had agents on site. Maybe friends..."

That day. 19 June 3055. And by *on site* Focht referred to the Frederick Steiner Memorial Library banquet. A barely-significant event for a hardly-remembered war hero. It also happened to be the day and place where Archon Melissa Steiner-Davion had been assassinated by one of the most elegant plots ever perpetrated. An intrigue which Lyran intelligence agencies would be studying for decades—if not for centuries—to come.

"We're going to move now," Torrent called out, his camera never once pausing. "Ms. Barr to the top platform and Mr. Tvetska one level down. Now everyone *but* Ms. Barr turn slightly to my left. Adequate." More shuffling. More *clicking*. "A bit more now. And more."

Having let the silence hang between them for long enough, Harding said, "I appreciate that you have some grasp of the situation, Precentor Martial." It seemed the safest comment to make.

He felt Focht lean in closer. "Despite my age, Agent Harding, I am neither senile nor cantankerous. Yet. You have a job to do. It would be foolish for me to interfere without warrant. Realize, however, that I also do not like being 'handled.' You might discuss that with your superiors."

A tactical retreat and immediate flanking maneuver. Focht was not finished with his meddling, but at least it seemed—for the moment—that he would continue to work within the system. And that was fine with Harding. Because this time around, the system was working for *him*.

"Ms. Barr, you are moving!" Torrent stamped a foot. "I want you to remain full-front, since you, at least, have a front to full. You should be turning away from the common aspect, as if you know better than everyone else. Try to think *Capellan March* and you'll do fine."

Rachel's glare spoke volumes, very little of it complimentary. Torrent's camera responded with electronic indifference. When she looked his way, Harding shrugged, resigned to fielding new complaints and not willing to let it get in the way of his mission. Nothing would. Not Torrent, Rachel, or Focht himself.

"Cantankerous," he said, choosing to ignore the rest of the Precentor Martial's comments.

"It means crotchety," Focht said. "Grouchy or ill-tempered."

"But a much more erudite choice of language. You are, at least, well-spoken. For a grumpy old martial, that is."

"We're not through with this yet, Agent Harding." Was there a hint of a smile in his voice?

There was none in Harding's.

"No, Precentor Martial," he said. "I did not think we were."

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The DropPort outside of Tharkad City looked into white-blanketed mountains on the one side, opened up onto wind-scoured plains to the west. DropShips hunkered down across several dozen square kilometers of ferrocrete, separated by thick bunkers, wide, low-built buildings for the storage and maintenance of ground-support machines, and three auxiliary terminals dedicated solely to smaller shuttlecraft. The sky was a cold, impersonal blue. The sun a distant, cool globe falling toward the horizon.

Their fourth setting in as many days, and Harrison Harding was beginning to question Torrent's motives. True, the artist did choose strong—even evocative—settings. But how much contrariness had there been in demanding access to the DropPort, and then shutting down all traffic for ninety minutes while his staff and the unfortunate subjects of the propaganda piece tried to catch the sun setting behind the DropShip *d'Artagnan*?

Not to mention the icy wind that sliced across the black, tarred rooftop on which the artist had placed everyone.

"Can we get this guide-wire removed?" Torrent was complaining. Again. He was the only one dressed for the exposed location, muffled up in a heavy coat and a fur bomber's hat. "If I trip over it one more time, I will call it a day and we can all come back up here and start fresh tomorrow!"

Focht pulled his robes tight around his frame. "Since that wire is helping to support a communications tower," he said to Harding, *sotto* voice, "I don't think Torrent should remove it."

Warming his hands around a paper cup of coffee, Harding watched Torrent rearrange his subjects across three levels of platforms: Rachel and Rathburn now at the top, Diem Tvetska off-center in the middle, Kasawa and Lady Carsters at the base. Behind them, half a kilometer away, an *Overlord*-class DropShip had been repainted to display the House Davion sword-and-sunburst logo. Large floodlights brightened up the vessel's side, to compete with the setting sun's backlighting. Similarly, Torrent had aides moving around a series of reflective screens to throw natural light back into the faces of the five nationalities represented.

"I've already posted an agent at the eyehook," he finally said. "The wire stays."

"Some people just enjoy shouting into the wind."

Harding allowed himself one small sip of his bitter drink, then turned a steady gaze to the Precentor Martial. "So I've noticed."

Focht's bearing never wavered. He stood military-erect and his voice contained not one ounce of apology. "If you are referring to the demands my staff has been making for intelligence briefings, consider it nothing more than professional oversight."

"Or interference in an ongoing investigation."

"True enough, I suppose. *If* there was an actual investigation in progress. To which, I assume, you are still not admitting."

"No."

"Then, as an intellectual exercise only, let me say this. I think it's Lady Juliana Carsters."

"Have something against House Marik?" Harding asked.

"Since the general impression is that I am the one in danger, the proper question would seem to be, does House Marik have something against me? They have strong ties to Word of Blake, there has been considerable national resistance to the Star League within the Free Worlds League, and Lady Juliana is, as well you know, a trained SAFE operative."

"Who has been assigned only to diplomatic events," Harding said, falling into an immediate rebuttal before he recognized the trap laid for him by Focht.

He had been half-listening to Torrent berate Diem Tvetska for having too shiny a bald head, comparing it to a DropPort landing beacon, watching the movements of each of Torrent's aides, and wondering how many windows and hangar doors had a line of sight onto this rooftop. Trying to second-guess an assassin was a kind of mental juggling. You had to keep so many thoughts in the air at once, it was easy to let one slip.

It wasn't hard to read Focht's self-satisfied bearing. But that could tell Harding things, as well. He rolled the paper coffee cup between his hands, stealing its warmth, chasing down a line of thought. Then, "Our records which you have accessed so far would not have given you Lady Juliana's identity as a SAFE operative. ComStar's records told you that. Or suggested it. Which means you would already have suspected. You requested her as part of this event *because* of who she is." He sipped his coffee. "You are looking to trade intelligence with SAFE."

"And you are being wasted in the Diplomatic Guards, Agent Harding." Focht smiled, shook his head, admitting nothing. "A very keen analysis. Although I would not be so quick to write Lady Juliana off as a suspect in...shall we call it a 'non-diplomatic exchange.'"

"Why is that?"

Focht stared through Juliana Carsters and off into the distance. "Do you understand the discipline it takes to maintain such a cover, Agent Harding? Day after day. Year after year. It takes a level of belief of which most people are incapable. A woman who can believe in herself that deeply is a dangerous person. Capable of great—or terrible—things."

Harding stiffened, unable to help himself as Focht dug around in dangerous grounds. But then he saw the change steal over the Precentor Martial. A tightness around his one good eye. The thin set of his lips. Focht had slipped away for a moment. A lesser observer might have missed it altogether, or dismissed it.

He was not a lesser observer.

"You might see such belief in a woman and assume she is capable of anything," the agent said, choosing his words very carefully. "I think she is capable of the one thing she does so well that it reinforces her belief that the end justifies the means. Stepping outside of such a carefully defined role would be...chaotic."

Considering that for a moment, Focht gave a reluctant nod. "Then on whom would you focus your attentions?"

"In a textbook case? One of the aides. Always in motion, and no one looks twice at them once you become accustomed to their presence. Especially with a distraction like Daniel Torrent always near." Even as he said it, one of Torrent's aides bustled by with a screen, adjusting the lighting effect. "Less than six feet away. Impossible to stop if they are willing to trade their life for yours."

"Since you've already thought it out, I assume it will not be one of the aides," Focht said.

"Not this time."

"In that case, let me say this. I think it's Rachel Barr."

He smiled. It was tight-lipped and never came close to reaching his eyes. "And if I were to explain how Rachel promotes too much chaos around her, showing none of the discipline necessary for such work, you would then go on to claim that it is Diem Tvetska, who is so highly placed in the Chancellor's favor that he is stuck on Turin. After that, Mr. Rathburn or maybe *Chu-i* Kasawa. Mr. Torrent. Or even myself." He sipped his coffee, letting it warm his throat. "Perhaps it is fortunate that Mr. Torrent slighted the St. Ives Compact and Rasalhague Republic by not including their representatives. It reduced your suspect pool by a solid twenty percent."

"They are not being slighted," Focht said. "They are being included in other public relations pieces. Though Mr. Torrent did argue for their exclusion on the grounds of 'historical symmetry.' As for the parade of suspects... Yes. That was part of my cunning plan. Though I did find it fascinating that you referred to everyone except Ms. Barr by their last names."

So much for the smile. Harding felt it slip away.

"Precentor Martial, perhaps it is time to leave this propaganda event, and Lady Juliana if necessary, in the hands of others."

"And perhaps I'd consider it, Agent Harding, if you would explain to me why you feel so strongly that I am in danger. Especially when your superiors and fellow agents do not seem to share your level of urgency."

"They will not be the ones held responsible."

Focht folded his arms across his chest. "Not good enough."

"*Verdammt*!" Torrent yelled, stumbling back over the guide wire, sitting down roughly on the tarred roof. With another shout, he threw his camera at the nearby communications tower, shattering it against one of the steel legs. "That is it! We are through for today. If the Archon does not care enough to allow me a decent working environment, then I will not care that Lady Carsters stands in a permanent slouch or Diem Tvetska is unable to keep his rat-shifty eyes off Ms. Barr's push-up bra." He kept on in a steady rant, detailing the many transgressions and shortcomings of his subjects, while his aides began to quickly strike the set. One swept up the pieces left of Torrent's camera, presumably to rescue the data chip.

Harding pulled Focht to one side as the five representatives bustled past. "I have a source," he said, his voice pitched low, but not too low. "A source I've done business with in the past. I can't give that source to you, or to the Diplomatic Corps. All I'll tell you is that word reached me through an agent on Solaris VII."

If Focht recognized the significance of the world, he did not display it, and Harding was barely paying attention to the Precentor Martial regardless. He was busy studying the national reps with his peripheral vision. Did Kasawa Cho startle? Had he overheard? And was Rachel's backward glance anything other than a flirtatious invite to follow after her? He didn't believe it was either of them, but life had taught him to take nothing for granted.

Fate, he knew, had a twisted sense of humor.

"So," Focht asked, "you have a source on Solaris VII who told you someone was offering a contract on my life?"

That wasn't exactly what he had said, and if that had been the case, then Harding would have been working this a whole other way.

"No, Precentor Martial." He was trusting that his read on Anastasius Focht had been correct. His task was about to get a little easier, or a lot harder. That was the way things like this worked.

Shaking his head, he sipped his coffee one last time before turning to face Focht squarely.

"That someone had already accepted it."

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"Places!" Torrent shouted, his camera already *whirring* through hundreds of stills as the photo artist captured candid shots of his aides setting up, subjects jostling for their assigned positions, and agents of the Diplomatic Corps pressing in close.

Harrison Harding watched it all unfold, feeling the pressure as time slipped away from him. Like a terrible itch at the back of his mind. Anastasius Focht had shown up again, unworried, apparently, about tempting fate. And the morning's security briefs, delivered to the agent's private noteputer, had left Harding very unsettled, his instincts screaming at him.

Soon, he knew. If it was going to happen, it had to be soon.

Today's shoot was taking place on a sound stage borrowed from Starbright Films. Everyone's voice had a tinny cast to it, thrown back by hard surfaces and harsh angles. The lighting level was only a few steps above dim. Set decoration was sparse. Only a pair of cast-off director's chairs, a life-sized, stuffed camel that someone had decorated with a pair of sunglasses and a half-smoked cigarette, and framed movie posters crowding the back wall advertising the *Immortal Warrior* series, averaging over fifteen explosions per one-sheet. He had counted.

The studio shoot was already running two hours late because of the Star League Conference. Three of the national representatives were required to attend daily sessions, with only Rachel Barr and Kasawa Cho exempt from political duties. A stone-faced ramp had been erected in front of a giant, projected, green-screen wall. The backdrop—really a holographic field set against an array of luminescent glass panes—was a marvel of tri-dimensional video technology. Blurring a traditional green-screen effects wall into a field with depth and varying degrees of clarity, any tri-dimensional setting could be seamlessly added in later.

When explained to them, Rachel Barr had been the one to ask, "Why didn't we just come here on the first day, then, and be finished?"

Torrent had frozen stiff in the middle of a wild gesticulation, his left arm held out at full length, seemingly forgotten. "Do you see me dressing up in greasy coveralls and tell you how to best lube your joints?"

Hand on her hips, Rachel stared daggers at the artist, who raised his camera and burned a dozen quick stills. "Perfect. Now hold that pose and try not to ruin it by talking again."

While Rachel seethed, Torrent placed Kasawa at the highest level, then Diem Tvetska. Rathburn and Lady Juliana were set one step below the Davion technician. He left Rachel standing slightly apart from the others.

Anastasius Focht, standing at the studio's only working monitor, waved Harding over to his side. The Precentor Martial remained in formal robes today, hood pulled up so that his face was cloaked in shadow. On the Tri-Vid monitor was a sample of what the final shot might look like: Five national representatives arrayed at the foot of a thirteen-meter-tall *Atlas*. Distant in the background, shot through a dusky haze, was a famous Terran landmark—one of few to survive the ages and mankind's proclivity for war. The next-best thing to moving the entire event to Terra itself.

"Let's say I believe you," Focht said by way of preamble. He did not look up from the monitor. "That there is someone out there who is able and willing to strike at myself or ComStar, and with resources enough to hire a professional assassin."

A game of hypotheticals. Interesting. Now that the agent had admitted the existence of a threat, the Precentor Martial was giving him room to maneuver. Likely in the hopes of discovering more for himself. All right. Harding knew how to play along.

"It may not be so personal as you are thinking," he said. "Someone who wants to pull a black cloth over this conference. Disrupt your Star League."

"It's your Star League, too," Focht pointed out.

"More yours than mine, though." At least until Archon Katrina Steiner managed to get herself elected First Lord, which everyone was talking about it as if it had already happened. Even the agents who were part of Harding's detail. "But, sure."

"So," Focht tried again, "let's say I believe you."

"All right. And then let's prove you do by not showing up where you are not wanted." Harding shook his head. It was certainly of no surprise to him that there were people able and willing to target the Inner's Sphere's greatest leaders. More amazing, perhaps, was that so few succeeded. "I could almost believe, Precentor Martial Focht, that you are trying to get yourself killed."

"I was killed. Once. An eye-opening experience, but not one I am anxious to repeat."

"All right, then."

Harding let his attention wander back to the room. Watching as Torrent weaved about the stage, burning dozens—hundreds—of pictures to his camera's memory. The artist gestured expansively, using his hand motions and his sharp tongue to turn his subjects this way and that. One particularly wild sweep nearly backhanded one of Harding's agents, who ducked at the last second. They were all used to Torrent's theatrics by now.

"But you aren't really trying to save my life, are you?" Focht asked.

He heard the question, of course, but wondered briefly if it had registered correctly. The Precentor Martial was calling him out on his professionalism? Had Harding betrayed some thought, or given the Precentor Martial any reason to question his purpose? It was one more reminder that Focht was not to be underestimated. At any time.

Outflanked for one of the few times he could remember, Harding could only say, "Excuse me?" Even so, he knew he'd given something away by the long pause, his suddenly stiff movement.

"Agent Harding, you've had every opportunity to ban me from these shoots. You could have turned over your source to the Diplomatic Corps. You might even have gone outside channels and requested intelligence from the Com Guard, through

me, on your suspect. Playing your cards so close to the vest, risking another high-profile assassination on Tharkad? It leads me toward one conclusion."

Forcing himself to relax, keeping an eye on the rest of the room, Harding let one hand slip closer to his jacket's open front. His mouth tasted bitter with adrenaline. "And that is?"

"That you may be protecting something of more value to you than my life." Focht said it as if it were the least important fact in the world. "So were I to fight you, I'd lose."

It was a well-founded piece of reasoning. Strongly presented. Passionately argued. So: "Yes," Harding admitted with a shrug.

So much for hypotheticals.

"You admit it?" His one, good eye widened, gaze spearing out from beneath the heavy cowl. Whatever Focht had expected, it hadn't been a straight answer. It threw the Precentor Martial off his game for a moment, which Harding had needed to recover from anypossible gaffe.

It also gave him the opening for which he'd been searching.

"Precentor Martial Focht." He allowed his voice to rise several notches, overriding the other man's surprise. "I have gone to great lengths to ensure the security of this event and safeguard your life. Sir. Why should you expect anything less of the Diplomatic Guards? And if you feel overburdened with our security measures now, that is nothing compared to the restrictions I expect to be handed down tomorrow."

He had an attentive audience. Torrent's camera never stopped, but it was clear from the body posture of everyone on the ramp, and those watching the shoot from the sidelines, that they were hanging on Harding's every word.

"Why should tomorrow be any different?" Focht asked. It was the only question Harding had left for him in the conversation.

"Because my security report this morning highlighted a discovered body. Great pains had been taken to erase its identity, so only a DNA match will be possible. At a time when the Lyran Alliance is hosting the greatest leaders of the Inner Sphere on one planet, and especially within a single city? The security implications are too great to ignore."

Silence, broken only by the soft *shutter-clicks* of the camera. Torrent moved up on the ramp, still burning off picture after picture, moving his subjects to one side or another with curt, economical gestures.

Focht had recovered now. Stepping in toward Harding. Turning his head so that only the agent could look him in the eye. Could hear him.

"I realized that two days ago," the Precentor Martial said. "And yet here I am. Placing myself completely in your hands. So what does that make me?"

Motion, off to one side. Subtle, but a sign to anyone schooled for what to watch.

"Bait," Harding said, drawing the gun from his shoulder holster in a smooth, lazy motion.

The un-silenced report filled the sound stage with a crashing noise. The first bullet caught Precentor Martial Focht in the side of the head, knocking him over, throwing him roughly to the ground. It was followed by a quick pair of thunderclaps as two more bullets hammered into the fallen body.

And Harding had his gun thrust out at full extension.

Aiming back at the assassin on the ramp.

No one but Harding had paid attention to the eccentric photo-artist, or noticed the difference when normally flamboyant gestures gave way to sharp, focused movement as the man mounted the ramp. No yelling or complaint at Harding's outburst. A man with a mission. To reach the top level, where he could reach *into* the green-screen projection. A reminder that it wasn't a wall, but a holographic veil backed by strategic mirrors and optics, where the man pretending to be Daniel Torrent had hidden the Westerfeld nine millimeter—perhaps days ago—in his preparations to kill Anastasius Focht.

It had been well planned. Harding gave the man that.

Then he squeezed into his own shot, and double-tapped a pair of slugs into his target's centerline. Blood spatter stained the shoulder of Diem Tvetska's high-collared robes, and Torrent's body fell backward from the ramp, disappearing into the holographic projection.

"Lock it down!" Harding yelled, leaping forward. He raced up the ramp, holding his gun in a two-handed control grip. "Nobody leaves."

Diem Tvetska cowered off to one side, using a towel plucked from the inside of one sleeve to wipe some small spatter from the back of his neck. *Chu-i* Kasawa and Rachel Barr, no strangers to combat, held the top of the platform—but now that it was all over, there wasn't anything left to do but appear ready. He stepped in between them, looked down.

A pair of legs lay on the floor below, disappearing at mid-thigh into the holographic field.

The adrenaline surge and the gunfire had left his ears ringing. He shook his head, trying to clear it. "Keep anyone else back," the agent told them.

Doubtful that they could, but Rachel could be very persuasive. She might slow someone down. She nodded. And Kasawa Cho gave Harding a partial bow. "*Hai*. This we can do."

Jumping down to the floor, Harding saw the Westerfeld nine-mil laying nearby. He kicked it aside, far from reach, then stepped into the field. From the other side, the green-cast haze disappeared. There was only a spread of nine mirrors, varied depths and positions, with an empty hole in the exact center.

Here was the getaway. Harding read Torrent's entire plan with a practiced eye. Assume the real Daniel Torrent's identity. Spend a few days acclimatizing the Diplomatic Guard detail to semi-erratic behavior and wild gestures. Then, in the most controlled environment possible—the sound stage—use that edge to take out ComStar's Precentor Martial. A quick leap into the holographic field, and he would be immediately lost to observers on the far side. There was a small trap door nearby, blocked partially open, which would lead to whatever waiting vehicle the agents would later find.

"Not a bad plan at all," he whispered, kneeling at the assassin's side.

The man wasn't gone, but it wouldn't be much longer. He clutched both hands across the wounds in his sternum. Blood spread between his fingers and dribbled from the sides of his mouth. His eyes were beyond the pain, glazing over into shock.

"You...waited," the assassin said. "Already...suspected."

"Had to be sure," Harding admitted.

Bright red foam covered the man's lips. "Set...me... up. Didn't care...about Focht. Why?"

"Why?"

"What you said. More value...than...his life."

Harding nodded. He checked that Kasawa and Rachel still held the upper ramp.

Then he leaned down next to the assassin's ear. And told him.

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Two agents knelt at either side of Anastasius Focht. Harrison Harding relieved them, returning his handgun back to its shoulder holster. He would be ordered to surrender the weapon eventually, when and if an "incident" agent took control of the scene. Until then, it stayed with him.

"Don't try to sit up for awhile," he suggested, dropping to one knee.

Ashen-faced, his gaze vacant from a likely concussion, Focht grimaced against the pain. Squinted, and saw who was now kneeling over him. "Did we get him?"

PUBLICATION: BATTLETECH FOURTH EDITION
YEAR: 1996

Harding nodded. "Shooter's down."

"Head ringing like bells," he said. The words came slowly, put together into careful sentences. "May have to lodge a formal complaint. You were...a little slow on the draw. Agent Harding."

"And your robes are reinforced with a ballistic weave, Precentor Martial." Still, the bullet that had slammed against the side of his head must have kicked him like a horse. "What happened to 'putting yourself completely in my hands?'"

"I am trusting. I am not an idiot."

That drew a tight-lipped smile from the agent. "Fair enough. I'm relieved to see you had enough survival sense to protect yourself. I might have suggested something like that myself, if..." If. If he hadn't been more concerned with getting the assassin than he'd been about protecting Focht?

"If," Focht agreed, understanding perfectly.

"You are going to be fine. I'd even say you were due some fanfare, putting your own welfare second to the Star League. Except my guess is that you will keep this quiet."

"Count on it," Focht said. A little too loud. He winced, and groaned. "So we'll find out the body discovered today was that of the real Daniel Torrent."

Harding hesitated, considered, then shook his head. "No. I doubt the real Daniel Torrent ever made it to Tharkad. The imposter made the switch somewhere en route. At least, that's how I would have done it." He laughed, short and sharp. "All the assassin needed to hear was 'tighter security.' Though I was careful not to say exactly *where* the body had been discovered. Just in case."

"The wicked flee where none pursue." Focht closed his eye. "Proverbs. Though I am certain Jerome Blake cribbed it somewhere in his teachings." He was silent for a few long heartbeats. Harding began to rise.

"Agent Harding?"

"Yes, Precentor Martial. I am still here."

The eye was open again, and fixed weakly on him. "You mentioned before that the contract was taken on Solaris VII."

"That is not quite what I said, sir." He steeled himself, expecting what was to follow.

"I have...a friend. One who told me about a man—an assassin—who worked off Solaris. This man was particularly...skilled." He glanced toward the back of the room. "Do you think we may have..."

He knew of whom Focht was speaking. Of course he did. They had discussed him just the other day—the man who had been responsible for the death of Archon Melissa Steiner-Davion, the target of one of the largest manhunts in the history of the Inner Sphere, and still known to be at large. At large, and *extremely* dangerous.

Harding shook his head. "Sorry, Precentor Martial. I believe this man may have been making claims to such a talent, but he was a gifted amateur. Nothing more. Tell your friend..." Harding paused, and watched as Focht slid off into a troubled rest.

"Tell him he's going to have to keep looking."

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He had chosen to wear nubs, even though the streets surrounding the Triad were as clear now as they would be year round. No packed snow or black ice upon which nobles or officers might slip. No need to be wary of frozen garbage in the alleyways, or footing in a short, violent struggle.

Still, Tharkad's streets could be treacherous.

The early evening was clear and crisp, with silver-bright stars but no moon staring down on Tharkad's royal palaces. The air tasted of old snow and fresh holly—decorations that adorned every lamp pole, every wall and gate. His breath was even, coming out in regular puffs of frost. His eyes never held still as his gaze shifted from the street, to the rooftops, to a nearby wall, and back to the street. He walked steadily, coming up on two guards at a postern gate to the royal palaces.

APPROACH SLOWLY, BE PREPARED TO SHOW IDENTIFICATION. The sign was posted very clearly.

So close to the Archon's private residence, such warnings were for more than convenience's sake. Especially to a man who was not a neighbor or a fellow citizen. Certainly not a patriot. But neither was he that piece of random violence he'd been when he'd first arrived, floating casually along. For the rest of his time on Tharkad, and especially for what he was about to do, he could not afford to be simply *nobody*.

A calculated risk, now and again, was acceptable. All a part of the game.

He understood the risk he took in coming here.

Three days he had waited, always aware of his surroundings, to see what kind of response might work its way through channels—official or otherwise. The silence spoke volumes. No word on the body that had been discovered. No big investigation into the assassination attempt. Just a short ad taken out in the personal classifieds, which read:

KK- HEARD YOU ARE IN TOWN.
CAN'T WAIT TO MEET AGAIN.

It was a message reminiscent of the one that had found him a few months back, working its way through his system of agents and cut-outs. A message addressed simply to "Karl," which spoke of being "gravely concerned" that he was coming out of retirement to take care of his aging grandfather, Anastasius. And that assistance "could be arranged." It had been signed, simply, "Melissa."

A warning, and an inquiry. It had been the work of only a few days to confirm that an assassin—claiming to be the very one who had killed Melissa Steiner-Davion, no less!—was gunning for Anastasius Focht. Strange, then, that no official word had leaked down through the Lyran intelligence networks.

Or perhaps not, if the person sending along the warning cared less for the life of the Precentor Martial than she did for tempting someone out of retirement.

"Why?" he had been asked. What had he valued so much?

"Protecting my own reputation," he'd whispered into the man's ear. And a man's reputation was more than just bragging rights. It was, in many vocations, a means to an end.

As he drew near the gate, the guards came to some semblance of attention. He had no staff badge, and was not recognized by either. One of them stepped aside, out of arm's reach—a wise precaution. The other beamed a flash into his face. "State your business," the guard with the flash ordered.

The gun, the identification, the personality—all were gone. All he had left was a name. For now.

"Harrison Harding, here to see the Archon," he said.

"I believe I am expected."

ARTIST: MARK ZUG
PUBLICATION: HISTORICAL: OPERATION KLONDIKE
YEAR: FORTHCOMING

ARTIST: FRANZ VOHWINKEL
PUBLICATION: CLAN EXPANSION BOX SET
YEAR: FORTHCOMING

ARTIST: CLINT LANGLEY
PUBLICATION: THE DRAGON ROARS
YEAR: 1997

CHERRY BLOSSOMS

ADAM SHERWOOD

PRIVATE QUARTERS, WARRIORS RESIDENCE
VERNAN, ASGARD
CLAN SMOKE JAGUAR OCCUPATION ZONE
0400 LOCAL (0300 TERRAN TIME)
28 MAY 3059

Brone Kotare started awake, eyes wide and breath heavy in his chest. Sweat soaked his sheets and matted his chestnut brown hair to his head. Moonlight streamed into his quarters through the parted balcony doors before him, bathing the floor in its radiance yet cloaking the rest of the room in a veil of inky darkness. He watched coils of mist lap at the edge of his bed, the cool tendrils of downy smoke filling the room. Only the goosebumps on his hot but quickly cooling flesh proved the lie for what it was, merely another sleepless night among many.

The faint scent of flowers reminded him of where he was and, more pointedly, who he was with. He slowly exhaled to steady his heart and rolled over. His eyes wandered over her form, taking in the sight of her. Moonlight reflected off the soft bronzed skin of her shapely legs. The head and claws of a dragon clutching a rose peeked out from under the thin sheet covering the thigh on which it was etched. He marveled at the craftsmanship. The body and tail wrapped around her supple waist, ending at her navel. The magnificent scales flexed and swirled as she breathed. He let his eyes travel up her lithe athletic body to linger on her ample but firm breasts only a moment before staring at her face. Soft Asiatic-Latino features, deep brown eyes with their slight epicanthic fold, long thick eyelashes, full eyebrows, slight button nose and luscious rosy lips. Stunning, even among a Clan that valued martial prowess above beauty. She lay with one dainty arm draped over her head, midnight black hair cascading in a waterfall around her pillow. Warrior or not, the sight of her still caught Brone's breath and stirred far more than just his desire.

That thought was more disturbing than anything he had faced in a hundred battles.

Theirs was a camaraderie unlike anything he had ever shared with a sibmate. There was coupling among the sibko, a fact that was overlooked if not condoned. It was merely physical, a contest of wills—one warrior besting another on different battlefield. With her it was different, something that he could not quite put into words. He looked at the thin gray-spotted cord wrapped once around her delicate wrist and wrinkled his face in self-loathing.

Never had he cared so much about a fellow warrior—much less a mere bondsman.

No, worse: a freebirth Spheroid bondsman. He knew their relationship was what had held him back from a Cluster command. Still, bondsmen or no, stigma or no, he thought about her constantly. *Stravag*, he even looked forward to the end of the day just to see her, to hear her voice, to smell her hair and to ...

Irked by the sudden flux emotions he rose and padded across the frigid floor to the ferroglass double-doors, mist curling around his legs as he passed. Outside, the moons of Asgard reflected turquoise light off of the jagged mountain peaks which themselves filled the valley around the Jaguar installation. Rarely did the mists leave the mountains like they did this night.

An eerie glow shown over the rooftops of the base itself and for a brief moment the scene reminded him of nights spent in the Jaguar city of Lootera on Huntress before the invasion, before his people had lost their way, before they had become *savashri* stewards. It reminded him of who he was and who he was destined to be, a hunter in the mist.

Deep in thought, he stared beyond the ominous foothills leading to the natural rock formation known as Odin's Retreat. There among the boulders and bunkers the Fourth Jaguar Dragoons had defeated the Third Benjamin Regulars seven long years earlier. There his life had become so very complicated …

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ASGARD

World Name: Asgard
Star Type (Recharge Time): K9VI (200 hours)
Position in System: 4
Time to Jump Point: 3.31 days
Number of Satellites: 3 (Alfheim, Midgard, Hel)
Surface Gravity: 0.94
Atm. Pressure: Standard (Breathable)
Equatorial Temperature: 35° C (Mild-Temperate)
Surface Water: 60 percent
Recharging Station: Zenith
HPG Class Type: B
Highest Native Life: Amphibians
Population (3059): 1,975,000,000
Socio-Industrial Levels: CCCBB

A former Terran Alliance colony, Asgard was convinced to join the Alliance of Galedon in 2309 by the silver tongue of Shiro Kurita. When the backroom dealings that had brought many of the Alliance's worlds together came to light a few years later, the leaders of Asgard raged at Shiro Kurita's duplicity. And when the Alliance of Galedon's fleet and army were sent to conquer Asgard, the citizens of Asgard refused to submit without a fight. Though lacking a sizable army, the defenders were devoted to their freedom and adopted guerrilla tactics to stifle the attackers for the best part of a year, resulting in massive casualties on both sides. Asgard finally fell in August of 2312.

More than three-quarters of a millennium later, Clan Smoke Jaguar assaulted Asgard in February 3052. Once more the headstrong Asgardians and the defending Third Benjamin Regulars put up an incredibly strong resistance, delaying the indomitable Smoke Jaguars' conquest of the world for over a month.

Asgard has five major continents and a number of large island chains. Asgard's capital, Vernan, is located on the southern continent of Muspell. The world's largest city is situated in the Ragnorak Plains, in the foothills of the formidable Odin's Retreat mountains. Despite centuries of attempted Kurita brainwashing, Asgard's citizens remain strong-willed and have now transferred their defiance to the Smoke Jaguar occupiers of their world.

BRAVO STAR, FIRST TRINARY BATTLE
ODIN'S RETREAT, ASGARD,
BENJAMIN MILITARY DISTRICT, DRACONIS COMBINE
1500 LOCAL (1400 TERRAN TIME)
25 FEBRUARY 3052

Crushed rock and white-hot shrapnel flew everywhere as a quad of SRMs exploded against the boulder to the right of Brone's *Stormcrow*. Following the twisting gray contrails of smoke back to the offender was child's play. He grinned wickedly. Guarding the mountain pass ahead of him, but well hidden under a camouflaged tarp and a chunky outcropping of hematite and shale stood a disheveled *Jenner* painted in the whites and browns of the Third Benjamin Regulars. Rents and tears along the 'Mech's torso and limbs displayed the pilot's experience.

For three long weeks the Cluster had attempted to engage these freebirths in honorable combat but they hid in the jumbled fortress of rock and stone that was Odin's Retreat. Time and again the Fourth Dragoons had been thwarted by ambushes, artillery fire, and *dezgra* raiding. No doubt this was the very same pilot who had attempted to strafe the warrior's mess this very morning and been chased away by Star Captain Sersa and a Point of Elementals.

Behind him his Star of OmniMechs were arrayed in overwatch pattern Delta, taking a brief respite from the long march around the front. The rest of First Trinary Battle was deployed a few kilometers farther back, waiting to exploit any breach in the lines. MechWarrior Krista reined in her thirty-ton *Adder* alongside his much-larger *Stormcrow*.

"Sersa will not be pleased to lose her quarry, *quiaff*?" Her tone belied her mirth. She was always happiest when she was hunting.

"*Aff*, but all is fair in war and football." The thought of taking the boisterous Binary commander's kill brought another smile to his lips. After all, she had not formally bid for the right to kill the *Jenner* though she had certainly sworn publicly to do such.

Returning his thoughts to the present he watched in amusement as it tried to shuffle out from under the tarp that had become snagged on its antenna array. Its attempts to free itself only served to worsen its predicament and soon its antennae were bent and warped.

A unit crest—a ring of stars—stood out in stark contrast against the bleak surroundings of Odin's Retreat like a bull's-eye. Brone raised his targeting reticle and zeroed-in on the symbol, then frowned. The 'Mech's left arm—and the two medium lasers mounted there—hung loosely toward the ground. *Hardly a worthy foe. Still, the weak must be culled so that the strong survive.*

He activated his microphone. "I am Star Commander Brone of Clan Smoke Jaguar! I pilot the *Stormcrow* of Bravo Star, First Battle. I invoke the ritual of *zellbrigen* and challenge the pilot of the *Jenner* who dared fire on me unawares to a duel of warriors. To even the odds I will not use my missile systems against you. In this matter let no one interfere!" His Star-members responded with a chorus of "Seyla". They knew that no matter how the fight may progress, to intervene would be to rob him of his honor and cost them their life. Satisfied that all was as it should be he trotted his 'Mech forward fifty meters to give his target space between him and his Starmates so as not to risk having the *Jenner* hit them and open the duel up into a free-for-all.

He zeroed in on the *Jenner's* torso just as the pilot engaged the 'Mech's jump jets and leapt into the sky. The tarp went with it. The maneuverable light 'Mech sailed over the boulder-strewn clearing firing its SRMs and both remaining medium lasers, the mottled gray and maroon tarp flapping wildly behind it like a cloak. Two missiles corkscrewed into the armor of the *Stormcrow's* left arm while the medium lasers cut parallel lines into the bedrock at the 'Mech's feet.

Unfazed, Brone let loose with two of his medium pulse lasers, scoring deeply into the *Jenner's* already-thin left torso armor. A silver flash and billowing smoke told him he had tagged a jump jet. The loss of thrust staggered the small 'Mech in mid-flight and what had been a graceful leap now became a wild plummet as the pilot struggled. With uncanny effort the scout swerved his crippled *Jenner* away from a collision with a looming monolith. He could not arrest his fall and landed sideways with a tremendous crash. The impact from the fall mangled the left leg, caved-in the left torso and tore the already-damaged arm completely free.

Far too quick and easy. If only we had been bid into the fighting sooner. Brone brought up his opponent's damage schematic on an ancillary screen and scanned

ARTIST: SHANE WHITE
PUBLICATION: THE DRAGON ROARS
YEAR: 1997

ARTIST: DES HANLEY
PUBLICATION: INNER SPHERE
YEAR: 2000

the *Jenner*. *Not much honor to be gained here*. He gave the pilot a chance to recover—after all, it would not be honorable to attack a foe that could not defend himself. After a few seconds the 'Mech began to stir and Brone prepared to finish the duel, even if it had turned out to be so in name only.

"Star Commander, beware!" MechWarrior Erik's warning prompted him to action. He glanced up to see an immense war machine with upraised shoulder-pauldrons and a distinct helmet-like head assembly step into the pass the *Jenner* had previously occupied. His computer immediately tagged the newcomer as an eighty-ton *Hatamoto-Chi;* the PPC barrels on each arm crackled with raw energy as it moved.

Brone slapped his throttle forward, forcing his 'Mech into motion from a dead stop. To stand was to die. Caught flat-footed he could not move his fifty-five-ton *Stormcrow* fast enough. Blue-white arcs of energy lashed his 'Mech, ripping into his right leg and arm with electric blasts of man-made lightning. *Fitting that I pay the price for my inattentiveness.* Moments later, two volleys of SRMs whizzed past his 'Mech's chest and slammed into the shale boulders of the pass.

"Blighted *stravag* of a freebirth *surat*!" Challenges rang out as his Star bid for the right to engage the interloper. Brone cut them off. "*Neg*! It is mine by right of *zellbrigen*." He flipped over to an open broadcast, "In the name of Kerensky, who dares impede this sacred and honorable duel? I will know your name before I take your head!"

The red and pink assault 'Mech stepped forward. "I am *Tai-i* Masamune Mikki Asganari." Executing a perfect bow, the *Hatamoto-Chi* took up a fighting stance, "*Iie!* My eyes see no honor here, worthless cur! Your 'Mech outweighs *Gunsho* Tanagi's by twenty tons with *lostech* he could not hope to match and yet you would pretend this to be a fair and honorable contest?" Brone saw clearly the cherry blossoms adorning the Kuritan 'Mech's radiator fins, waist-plate and head assembly. "Even were he whole and fresh the dictates of *bushido* would demand I intercede."

Brone ground his teeth and pounded his command console in fury. The barbs stung. "You insult me! I offered him fair terms. I bid away three of my missile racks to compensate yet what would you freebirths know of honor? For weeks you have hidden among these iron-cursed mountains refusing to face us in honorable combat. Now you violate *zellbrigen* and fire on me unannounced? I will face you both and when I am finished I will see you scrubbing the mud from my 'Mech as my bondsman!"

He twisted his torso and snapped another laser shot at the *Jenner*, which had risen and was attempting to sneak back toward the narrow pass. His pulse laser dug deeply into the 'Mech's upper left thigh, slashing through myomer. "No, stay for a while. I insist."

"You Smoke Jaguars would not know honor from a *toire*. Evidently, I must teach you."

The *Hatamoto-Chi* fired another full salvo of PPCs and SRMs but this time Brone was ready. He juked hard, digging his Mech's foot into the ground to make the turn, braked, then stoked his extra-light engine, once more throwing off the Combine warrior's aim. Neither PPC scored and only a handful of SRMs achieved lock, spreading their damage equally over his 'Mech's chest legs and arms.

He switched to his Star frequency, "Krista, watch the pass and beware any interference. Engage any targets that present themselves."

"*Aff*, Star Commander," she growled. "The will of the Jaguar be done." The Star spread out into the clearing and began searching for more prey.

Ah, Krista. A true huntress on the prowl. Our coupling will be even sweeter than usual tonight. Toggling his missiles over to his second firing tick he brought the targeting reticle up onto the now-steaming Combine 'Mech and waited for tone. As soon as the crosshairs burned gold he fired both Streak SRM packs and his arm-mounted LRMs. Thirty-two short- and long-range missiles screamed out, raising smoke and dust as they flew across the clearing. Just before they struck the Combine warrior threw the 'Mech's right arm up and out in a pirouette which spun it behind the rock outcropping. Most of the missiles snaked into the boulder, exploding in a dazzling—but harmless—cacophony of smoke, light and sound. A few of the Streaks retained their lock and slammed into the 'Mech's exposed arm and torso, but did little damage.

Savashri! Never had he seen such a maneuver. Truly, this pilot was a foe worth fighting! He snapped another laser shot at the limping *Jenner*. This time the staccato pulses of ruby light buried themselves deeply into its side. A gout of flame erupted from the blackened hole and the doomed 'Mech collapsed. Brone spared not a thought on the pilot. He had fought poorly. Heat flooded his cockpit but was quickly brought under control by his ample cooling systems.

"You will pay for that, *gaijin*!" Shunting heat of its own, the Combine assault 'Mech stepped from behind the boulder and charged into the clearing, firing both SRM racks as it ran. Twelve missiles jetted straight for Brone's cockpit.

Determined to put some distance between himself and the crimson goliath, Brone backpedaled, cut right, then reversed his momentum, hoping to break missile lock. He was only partly successful.

Ten short-range missiles slammed into his 'Mech's torso, right arm and right leg, shaking him like a marble in a tin can. His restraints dug deeply into his flesh. He ignored the pain and focused instead on returning fire. He twisted his torso and waited for a solid lock, then fired only one of his Streak SRM racks. As the missiles zoomed toward the *Hatamoto-Chi*, the wily warrior again pirouetted at the last moment, spinning the 'Mech to the left. This time Brone was ready.

He aimed all four of his arm-mounted medium pulse lasers at the space where the 'Mech would be when it finished its maneuver. As its head popped up, he fired. All four crimson beams caught the *Hatamoto-Chi* full in the chest. Gigajoules of concentrated light blasted through ferro-fibrous armor, sending molten globules of metal steaming down onto the gravel of the streambed. They cored their way through to the 'Mech's internal structure, finishing their vile caress somewhere within.

As the lasers abated, shards of smoking black material shot from the open hole. Brone knew he had eviscerated the 'Mech's gyro when the graphite composite of

the reaction wheels burst out. The Kuritan pilot struggled vainly against the laws of physics but the *Hatamoto-Chi* crashed to the packed earth in a lifeless heap. Its destruction meant an end to the battle and another addendum to his codex: two more kills added to his string of thirty. *But that can wait.*

He cantered his 'Mech over to stand over his fallen opponent. The cockpit hatch popped open. A figure in a dark-red coolant vest and matching neurohelmet climbed out. *Good, the fall did not damage my prize.* He activated both his broadcast array and external speakers, "Pilot of the fallen *Hatamoto-Chi*: you have fought bravely. Never before have I seen a warrior perform thus. You have won my sincere admiration." He glanced at the downed *Jenner* and scoffed. "As such, I, Star Commander Brone of Clan Smoke Jaguar, hereby take you as my bondsman to serve the one true Clan. Let all those present hear these solemn words."

His Starmates all breathed the word "Seyla" in response.

Below him, the pilot climbed down from a chain ladder and leapt the last meter to the ground. Raising gloved hands over his head, the warrior removed the antiquated helmet and let flowing black hair cascade around her shoulders and down to her back.

What is this?

A gust of wind lifted her hair from her face and revealed a woman far more fetching than he had ever seen. She flung her helmet at his 'Mech and extended the center finger of her right hand in a back-handed gesture, all the while yelling something in archaic Japanese. At her hip she wore a long, slightly-curved sword. Around her waist she wore a red sash into which was tucked a second, shorter sword approximately one-third the length of the first. One word crystallized in his mind: *samurai*.

"I have never seen that greeting before." Erik—the former Ghost Bear—sounded genuinely perplexed.

"Nor have I, Erik." Brone laughed. *So much for my ever learning that maneuver.*

Ahead, a battle-scarred *Panther* attempted to fill the gap left by its fallen comrades but was quickly cut down. Krista sang out her glee and sprinted her *Adder* forward to prevent another Combine 'Mech from filling the hole. Behind them the remainder of First Trinary Battle came flooding through the western pass. A Star of armored Elementals approached his new bondsman and tried to remove her weapons, which resulted in heated discussion. Eventually, they were forced to sedate her after she tried unsuccessfully to lop off one of their arms with her sword.

Satisfied his bondsman would not escape, he followed Krista into Odin's Retreat.

"All right, Bravo Star. Move out."

The rout of the Regulars had begun.

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PRIVATE QUARTERS, WARRIORS RESIDENCE
VERNAN, ASGARD
CLAN SMOKE JAGUAR OCCUPATION ZONE
0430 LOCAL (0330 TERRAN TIME)
28 MAY 3059

Brone slammed his fist against the doorframe in frustration. *Seven years! Has it been so long?* He suppressed a primal roar. *Yet here we are still. Caretakers of a battlefield long since won. Our beloved Clan a shell of its former self.*

Humbled in the defeats at Luthien and Tukayyid and staggered by the loss of nearly all of Alpha Galaxy, the Clan had withdrawn to its holdings to reorganize and recover. The Fourth was transferred to the newly-formed Epsilon Galaxy and ordered to return to Asgard to take up duty as the garrison there.

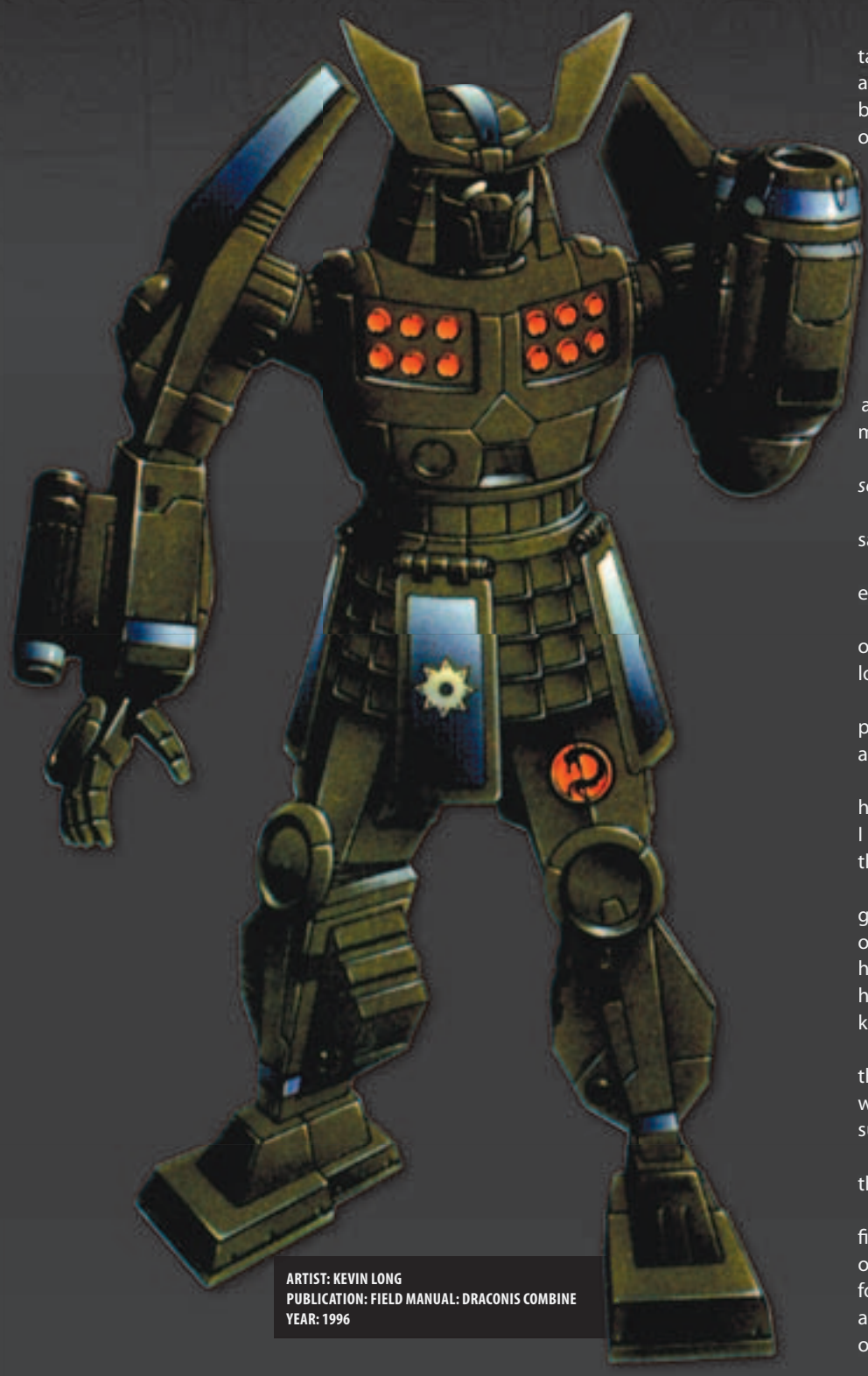
He clenched his fist so tightly his fingers went numb. *Yet still we wait like* savashri *laborers for the merchants to open their doors so the toil can begin.*

Brone suspected they were to wait until the end of the truce ComStar had won at Tukayyid, which lasted still eight years hence. So too did the rest of the Fourth.

It was a slow death sentence.

Soon many warriors would be cycled out to *solahma* units to hunt pirates in the Periphery or—worse—to the sibkos where they would train snot-nosed brats until the end of their days. Some of the most seasoned veterans had already left to be replaced by a younger, newer generation of warriors with faster reflexes and stronger bloodlines: the Clan solution to every problem. Fix it with genetics. What

PUBLICATION: 1ST SOMERSET STRIKERS
YEAR: 1995



ARTIST: KEVIN LONG
PUBLICATION: FIELD MANUAL: DRACONIS COMBINE
YEAR: 1996

they needed was the experience that had sharpened his Trinary in battle, the very qualities that had made them the feared Death Dealers.

Now our warriors walk with heads hung low, their eyes cast down, powless *to change their plight. Our leaders posture and preen in endless debate but in the end we only raid among ourselves for supplies and genetic material. As if that will give us the edge we need to renew our drive toward Terra, let alone rebuild our losses. By the time this cursed truce is ended we will all be cold in the grave.*

He ran his hand down a scar in his side, taken during a Trial of Grievance over a trivial matter in which he had been forced to kill his opponent after she had refused to yield.

To make matters worse, when opportunity for real battle presents itself our older warriors throw themselves headlong into combat, heedless of the outcome, in the vain hope that they will die gloriously and that their actions will redeem them—that their giftake *will be used in the breeding program so that they may live forever.*

Brone shook his head in disgust, remembering the underbidding that had taken place earlier in the month when the mercenary unit Jake's Heavy Hitters had attempted to raid the supply depot. Some commanders were so eager they had bid as low as a single Star in order to win the right to engage an entire company of Spheroid raiders. The casualties had been horrendous.

Five fine warriors killed, two more badly wounded. Such a waste! They have learned none of the lessons that were taught so forcefully on Luthien. Bah! A single smoke jaguar does not throw itself against an entire herd of hell's horses in the vain hope it can bring one down before being trampled in the press, quineg*? It selects a single horse, determines when and where to strike and then leaps, tearing out the throat in one fell lunge! That is the way of the Jaguar. The Founder developed the practice of bidding in order to preserve our forces, not fritter them away bit by bit in a vain search for individual glory! The needs of the Clan must come first.*

He sighed. He too felt *powless*, like one of Mikki's cherry blossoms caught in a hurricane. He knew what needed to be done but he was a single voice among many.

I no longer even recognize my own people. We are falling, I can feel it. I fear that soon we will fall so far that we may never recover.

He started as warm, soft hands caressed his tense shoulders. Looking back, he saw she had not bothered to dress.

"*Sumimasen*, Star Captain Kotare," Mikki apologized, breathing huskily into his ear. "I did not mean to startle you."

He let her supple hands massage the tension out of him as he continued staring out at the dark landscape, "No apology necessary, Mikki-*san*. The fault is mine for losing awareness of my surroundings."

She laughed, a merry tinkling he had always found musical and highly provocative. "Were I of a mind I could have slain you and stole away, like an assassin in the night."

With lightning reflexes he took her right hand in his, reversed her grip and spun her around so that she was in front of him, the back of her neck exposed. "Were I of a mind to die I could not imagine a sweeter death." He kissed her lightly on the neck.

She ran her hands slowly up his arms in a soft caress then, fast as an adder, grabbed his head with both hands and pulled herself up and over while kicking out against the door for leverage. As she dropped she placed her elbow around his throat and then pulled his head to the side. "Had I wanted you dead it could have been so a thousand times over. Perhaps your death is not what I seek." She kissed him on the neck, albeit far more passionately.

Brone hesitated. They had never spoken of their relationship. It just was. Fearless though he was in battle, the idea had somehow formed that if he gave voice to what was, it would no longer be. Somehow sensing his conflict, she changed the subject.

"Are the Prowlers on maneuvers this morning?" She looked past him and out the window.

"What?" He turned in time to see two Stars of *Visigoth* and *Jagatai* aerospace fighters streak high into the sky toward a very faint light which to the casual observer might look like a distant comet or small meteor. He knew it immediately for what it was: the drive flare of a DropShip. In moments several more appeared and within a minute's span he counted ten separate drive flares which could mean only one thing. Invasion

"*Shikata ga nai*. Nothing can be done about it. Whoever they may be, they are still many, many hours away and you have not yet been called." Mikki wrapped her arms around him and led him toward the bed. "For now, in the moments we have left, let us speak of cherry blossoms. Fate will decide our destiny. We have but our part to play."

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BATTLEMECH MAINTENANCE FACILITY
VERNAN, ASGARD
CLAN SMOKE JAGUAR OCCUPATION ZONE
0635 LOCAL (0535 TERRAN TIME)
28 MAY 3059

A tap sounded on his canopy glass. He looked over and found Mikki, wearing her technician's coveralls. She pointed to a portable communicator in her hand.

"Star Captain, your 'Mech is fully armed and armored with the modifications you requested." He examined his wire-diagram battle schematic and verified his weapons and armor status. All indicators read green.

"I have also left something for you under your command couch. May it bring you luck in battle."

He reached under his chair and pulled out a red sash, the very same she had worn on the day he had captured her. He looked up in astonishment. She merely smiled, though it did not quite meet her eyes. Instead he saw sadness in their depths. Her *Hatamoto-Chi* stood directly across from his *Stormcrow*, though it was powered down, its reactor cold. It had been fully repaired and rearmed yet no warrior within the Cluster would suffer the disgrace of being saddled with the inferior Spheroid machine. Thus it had sat for seven years, meticulously maintained yet pilotless.

He looked into her eyes, knowing her pain. For an ex-Spheroid warrior to be Dispossessed was the worse fate of all. He could not imagine what it must be like for her; as bad as being driven to a *solahma* unit, perhaps. He nodded in recognition and glanced at her bondcord, the cord of battle prowess.

The cord he would never be able to cut.

"*Aff*." To say more would be inappropriate, especially in front of the other techs present. He smiled his appreciation then tied her sash around his neck.

Seeming satisfied, she bowed then climbed down from the 'Mech gantry. In moments she was gone.

He shook himself. *Focus, Brone. You have a mission to perform.* Powering up his enhanced targeting computer he quickly ran through a function check of each of his *Stormcrow*'s weapon systems.

"No *batchall*, *quineg*?" Krista had been out on maneuvers and had missed the initial briefing. He could see her through the ferroglass of her *Warhammer IIC's* cockpit across the 'Mech bay. She had lost her *Adder* on Luthien and had been given the second-line assault 'Mech as a replacement—a mark of shame for her participation in the defeat. He remembered the battle well.

"*Neg*, no *batchall*." Brone peeled off a dermal adhesive patch, placed it on his chest, and plugged the last medical monitoring sensor into his command couch. "Their transmission was only a string of poorly-phrased threats laced with invectives and contractions."

"Then I am glad not to have heard."

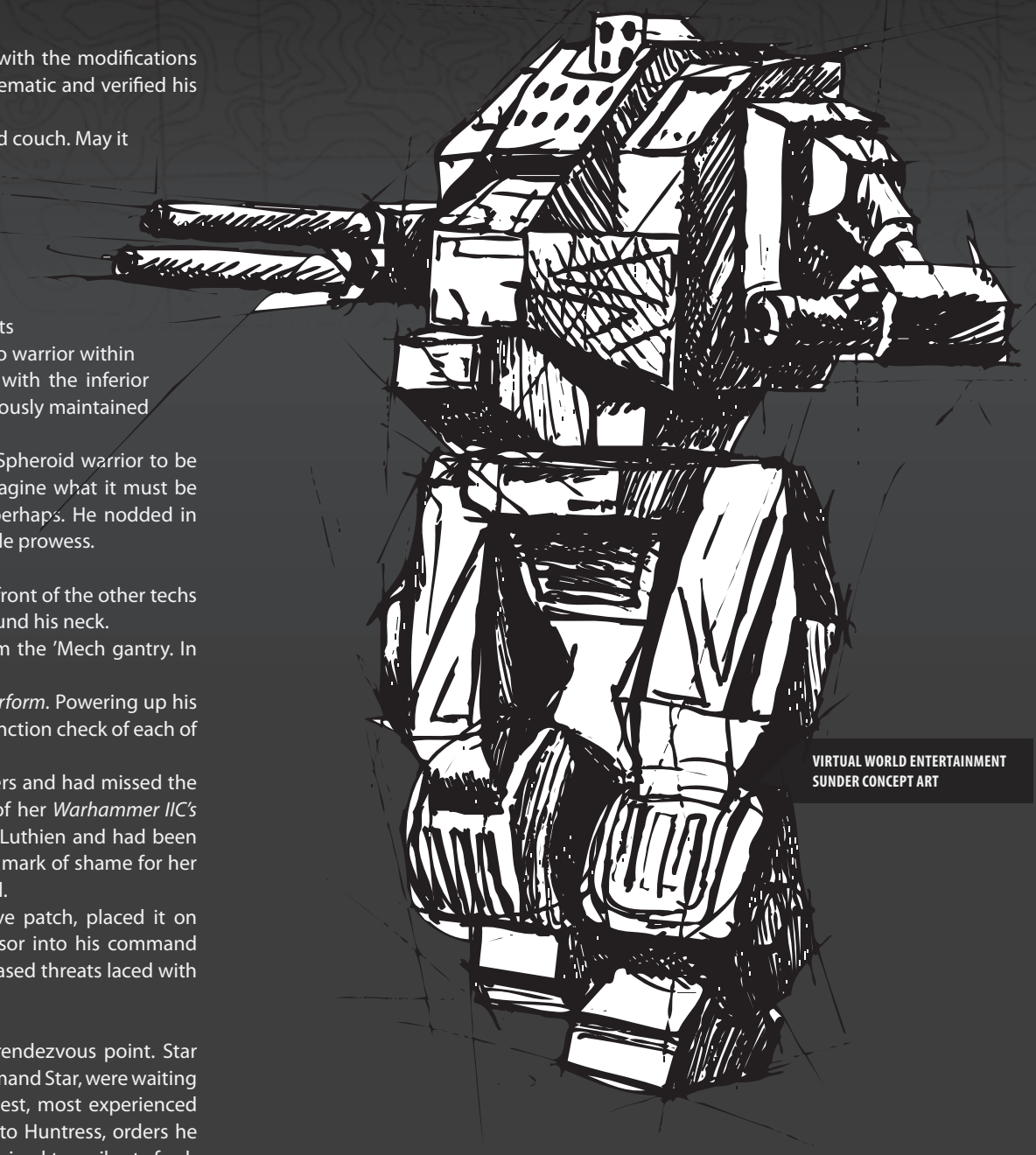
The rest of the Trinary had already departed for the rendezvous point. Star Commander Erik, along with two other warriors of his command Star, were waiting outside so they could proceed. He had lost two of his best, most experienced warriors last October when they had been rotated back to Huntress, orders he had protested vehemently. As replacements they had received two sibrats fresh from their Trials of Position. MechWarriors Shaughan and Ian were the result of an experimental mixing between Smoke Jaguar and Goliath Scorpion genes; the Furey line crossed with the questionable Dinour bloodline. Neither had any experience outside of their sibko, yet both exhibited the typical arrogance of youth. It would have to suffice.

Brone brought up his tactical feeds and uploaded the mission briefing data to the Trinary command net. It showed the deployment of each invading DropShip and their respective troops. A total of ten spheroid DropShips of various sizes—the largest were two *Overlord*-class vessels—had grounded thirty-five kilometers outside of Vernan. At last count more than six Clusters of BattleMechs, armor, and artillery had already off-loaded and begun to deploy. Many of the 'Mech designs were unfamiliar to the Cluster's analysts and registered as new models. Dozens scanned as OmniMechs. Fortunately, less then twenty percent of the forces arrayed against them were advanced designs. Full schematics and specifications had been uploaded to their battle computers. The Watch was competent. Still, the situation did not look good.

"I counted ten DropShips, enough to hold more than two Galaxies. Less than honorable odds, *quiaff*?"

Brone knew Krista asked not out of fear but simply to better understand her role in the impending battle. "*Aff*. We will face the Third Benjamin Regulars and the Third Proserpina Hussars. The Davion Heavy Guard and the 278th Com Guard appear to be taking up defensive positions around the city in an effort to cut off any retreat."

She scoffed, her voice filled with contempt, "The Benjamin Regulars? So they have returned with help to do what they could not do alone. Typical."



VIRTUAL WORLD ENTERTAINMENT
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Brone watched as she flexed her *Warhammer IIC*'s legs and began the long walk toward the assembly area. He slipped his own 'Mech from its berth and followed her out. As the morning mists obscured the base from view he found himself wondering if he would ever see it—or Mikki—again.

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COMMAND STAR, FIRST TRINARY BATTLE
ODIN'S RETREAT, ASGARD,
CLAN SMOKE JAGUAR OCCUPATION ZONE
1300 LOCAL (1200 TERRAN TIME)
31 MAY 3059

"That was an order! Pull back!" Brone ground his teeth in frustration. Another 'Mech, this time a *Hankyu* from Alpha Star, disintegrated as it suffered the combined fire of nearly a full company of Kuritan BattleMechs.

Against orders he had rushed out to duel a lone *Raptor*. Of course it had been bait. The Jaguar warrior had left the safety of Odin's Retreat to face the Spheroid 'Mech and been ambushed. Brone pounded his chair. Savashri*! At least he took the 'Mech with him but at what cost?*

The Third Proserpina Hussars had started another push along the front—their third today—and as usual he was working full time just to keep the warriors of

First Trinary Battle from dashing headlong into oblivion. *At least, what is left of my Trinary*.

Their first engagement had been a disaster. As he had suspected, warriors both young and old had abandoned all semblance of order in their mad rush to engage the enemy and had been cut down like wheat under an AgroMech. Less than a fourth of the Trinary remained. The supposedly-honorable warriors of the false Star League wasted no time on dueling or even preamble; they merely focused their fire on the nearest target and cut it down as fast and as efficiently as possible. Even after a 'Mech ceased to be a threat they continued to fire, refusing to allow wounded warriors to withdraw or to surrender. Not that many Clan warriors would consider such a disgrace. There was no honor in these so-called warriors' actions, only expediency. It was murder, plain and simple.

In desperation he had suggested to Star Colonel Showers that they fall back to Odin's Retreat, if only to plan a proper response to the Spheroid's outrageous and excessive use of force. The Epsilon Galaxy Command Trinary had slipped away quietly in order to arrange DropShip support. It was only a two-hour march to reach the DropShips.

That had been two days ago.

Brone opened a command-wide channel, "The next warrior to disobey an order will be summarily executed. I will see to it that their *giftake* is destroyed." *Hopefully, that will deter further acts of suicide.* If not then there was no hope for the Trinary, let alone the Cluster. His battered and beaten *Stormcrow* crouched behind a large boulder while he ran through tactical options. He pored over the maps of the area, looking for any possibility of escape. There were none. They were running out of time.

Krista called out. "Brone, here they come."

He glanced out of his ferroglass canopy at the bleak, battle-scarred landscape, straining to find with his eyes what his 'Mech's sensors could not. Then he saw it. A shadow moved, dust flew. They were using the boulders as cover for their advance.

"Sentries, identify targets and paint them with your targeting systems. All units with LRMs and SRMs will engage targets as they present themselves. Concentrate fire as they move into the kill zones I have established. No dueling!" He did not want to dispense with *zellbrigen* but he simply did not see an alternative.

A huge red and white speckled BattleMech, one he had never seen before but that his battle computer identified as a *Sunder*, waddled up the southern defile. On its shoulder it bore the familiar Star League star along with several other crests on its chest and thigh that he did not recognize. Before he could utter a word one of his sentries, MechWarrior Ian, stepped out from behind a stone pillar and into the defile, eight of his *Nova*'s ER medium lasers blazing.

Ton after ton of armor fell from the arms and torso of the immense machine as it took hit after hit but it stood unfazed. In slow motion, the *Sunder* raised its stubby arms and fired, catching the young warrior's medium 'Mech with a barrage from its own lasers and powerful autocannon. Already mangled from artillery and air strikes, the *Nova*'s right leg crumpled under the savage assault. His *Nova's* active probe and TAG kept streaming data to the unit as he fell.

"*Stravag*!" Brone stepped his *Stormcrow* around the boulder. "Engage!"

He raised his targeting reticle and his enhanced battle computer instantly obtained a lock. Thirty-two missiles from his torso-mounted LRM-20 and Streak SRM-6s leapt out of their launch tubes and crashed into the *Sunder's* chest, continuing the savage destruction begun by the *Nova*. Seconds later they were joined by a flight of SRMs from Erik's *Timber Wolf*. The Kuritan Omni staggered as more and more explosions rocked its squat, blocky torso and for a time it appeared that it might fall under the onslaught. Yet despite the calamitous damage it had received, the *Sunder's* relentless advance continued.

Behind it a line of heavy and assault 'Mechs—a *Black Hawk-KU*, an *Avatar* and another *Sunder*—pushed into the narrow confines of the defile, firing at the crippled *Nova* as they came. Ian died in a violent hail of laser and autocannon fire.

Anxious to end their dangerous thrust Brone fired his lasers at the lead 'Mech, pushing his heat into the yellow. All five lasers reached across the defile, gigajoules of penetrating light seeking a chink in the *Sunder's* thick armor. Finding a flaw amid the already-damaged armor, one laser cut through and speared an ammunition bin. Brilliant flashes erupted from the 'Mech's chest as its SRM and autocannon rounds cooked off. The 'Mech exploded, sending pieces of scalding steel everywhere even as Krista and Erik fired past.

The Kuritans advanced undaunted.

Brone backpedaled, searching for cover, and took a few autocannon hits to his 'Mech's lower legs. He found temporary sanctuary behind a rounded mound of shale, ducking just as a Gauss slug pulverized the striated rock and ricocheted into the air. Then disaster struck.

"The northern pass is lost. We cannot hold." The sound of battle filled the airwaves as Star Colonel Showers transmitted, his voice a husk of its former strength. "Trinary commanders, your task is to escape and warn the Clan. Use any means necessary." An artillery blast shook the ground, reverberating up through the 'Mech's feet. "My Smoke Jaguars, it has been an honor and a privilege to serve as your commanding officer. Farewell." A greasy plume of smoke to the north signaled the Cluster commander's demise and the collapse of their flank.

Brone sat in stunned silence. *We are lost.* He watched as MechWarrior Shaughan charged his *Mad Dog* into the defile, firing his large pulse lasers as he ran. Another warrior, he knew not who, flew past on flaming jets of charged plasma to land his *Shadow Cat* somewhere beyond his sight. Another explosion rocked his *Stormcrow*, knocking him from his stupor.

All around him his warriors were dying. Dying because they believed they had nothing else to lose. His own failure to prevent catastrophe would most assuredly mean that his *giftake* would be worthless, Bloodname or not. He looked down at his sweat-encrusted hands and wiped them clean. *A charge*…

The scent of cherry blossoms caught his attention. He was confused until he noticed Mikki's sash lying forgotten against his cooling vest. He pulled it to his face and breathed in her scent.

All the memories, the meals, the conversations, the countless nights spent in her arms, all flooded his consciousness and galvanized his will. One thought in particular—the route they had used to infiltrate into Odin's Retreat seven years ago. He would not lie down and die, not for the Star League, not for anyone.

"All units. I am uploading nav points yankee and zeta. Use that route to exfiltrate. Follow me." He punched several coordinates into his console then began maneuvering his way through the system of bunkers and boulders that made up Odin's Retreat. "Erik, Krista, we are going to punch through whatever forces they have and break clear of these *surats*." A tired chorus of "*affs*" followed his directive. Only a few warriors still lived to make the attempt. He hoped it would be enough.

They quickly made headway ducking around the broken terrain as they charged out of the mountains toward the narrow western pass. Twice they charged through pairs of light reconnaissance 'Mechs who made the mistake of attempting to impede their march. Twice they bulled their way through, leaving the light 'Mechs in smoking ruin. Each time they lost a little more armor, each time they took a little more damage.

Then, stepping around a series of broken spires he found the exit to the Retreat, and his heart sank.

Standing before the western pass were four very large, very ugly 'Mechs, for which the computer had no classification. At 90 tons each identical BattleMech carried a round missile launcher in its shoulder assembly while a weapon barrel sprouted from its left arm in place of a hand. Their heads consisted of a vile masks shaped in the form of some grim demon. Were it not for the fact that they displayed the emblems of House Kurita and the Third Benjamin Regulars, Brone would have thought them creatures from the abyss come to take his very soul. He stood transfixed by their evil grins. It was not until one of the devils fired a PPC into Erik's *Timber Wolf* that he was able to break free from his paralysis.

"They are all that stand between us and our goal." He aimed at the centermost 'Mech and fired everything. Missiles and lasers bored in, hitting it in the right arm and torso. It stumbled and fell, but not before firing its own missile pack and ER PPC dead center at a *Hankyu* that accompanied his group. The Jaguar 'Mech vomited fire from its back, but collapsed despite the CASE's valiant attempt to contain the missile explosion.

"This one is mine!" Erik charged his *Timber Wolf* into the fray, firing his PPCs and Streak SRMs. Krista limped her *Warhammer IIC* forward, its leg dragging limply behind, sickly green coolant pouring down the thigh like spilt blood. She too fired as she walked. Their weapons cut a swath through the pass, forcing the immense assault 'Mechs back several steps. Their raw fury blazed a trail for Brone and the survivors to follow.

And follow they would.

Brone stalked forward in their wake, determined to win through to freedom. He fired his lasers at another of the demonic BattleMechs, striking it in the right

arm. The Kuritan pilot shrugged off the damage then—amazingly—took to the sky on jets of heated plasma. It landed directly in front of Brone's *Stormcrow* and raised its mailed fist.

"*Stravag*!" Brone tried to reverse his direction, fired all of his weapons, but was too late. Nearly six tons of myomer, actuators and armor crashed into the side of his 'Mech. His *Stormcrow* shook as armor was pulverized and internal supports buckled under the tremendous impact. His lasers caught the Kuritan in its left arm. Gouts of fire exploded out of the assault 'Mech's chest but Brone had no time to process this turn of events.

Warning chimes rang out: LRM launcher out of alignment; engine shielding damaged; gyro housing cracked. He felt his 'Mech failing around him. He wanted to arrest the fall, he wanted to fight back, but for some reason his body was not responding to his commands. *Why not?* His mind—somehow detached from the chaos—finally realized he must have bounced his helmeted head off the cramped canopy enclosing him. Odd, he hadn't felt it.

As his head sagged to the side of his canopy he could have sworn he saw a familiar *Hatamoto-Chi* striding through the pass, PPCs alight. Then everything was black and peaceful.

▲▼▲

He woke in room devoid of decoration. The walls were grey. The sheets were white. An IV stuck out of his arm while a monitor of some form linked his wrist to a large ovoid machine which beeped at regular intervals. *Where in the name of Kerensky am I?* Had they escaped? Had his people rescued him? He did not recognize his surroundings and Spartan as they were, they certainly did not appear to be Clan in origin.

He tried to rise, but failed. His body was not yet ready to respond to his commands. *I must have suffered a tremendous amount of feedback to be in this sorry state.*

He was still trying to ascertain his whereabouts when the room's only door, a large oval portal with a metal handle, opened, admitting a person in a white overcoat who Brone assumed was of the scientist caste.

"Scientist, where am I?" What Brone had intended to be a forceful command came out instead as a whisper.

The man turned, "Ah, good, you are awake." He had the same features as many Kuritans but that said little, so too did many Smoke Jaguars. "I will return shortly." He departed and moments later another person, this time a beautiful woman with long black hair, entered the sparse recovery room. She brought with her the faint scent of flowers.

"Mikki?"

"Yes, love?" She smiled and kissed him on the forehead. The smell of cherry blossoms was overwhelming.

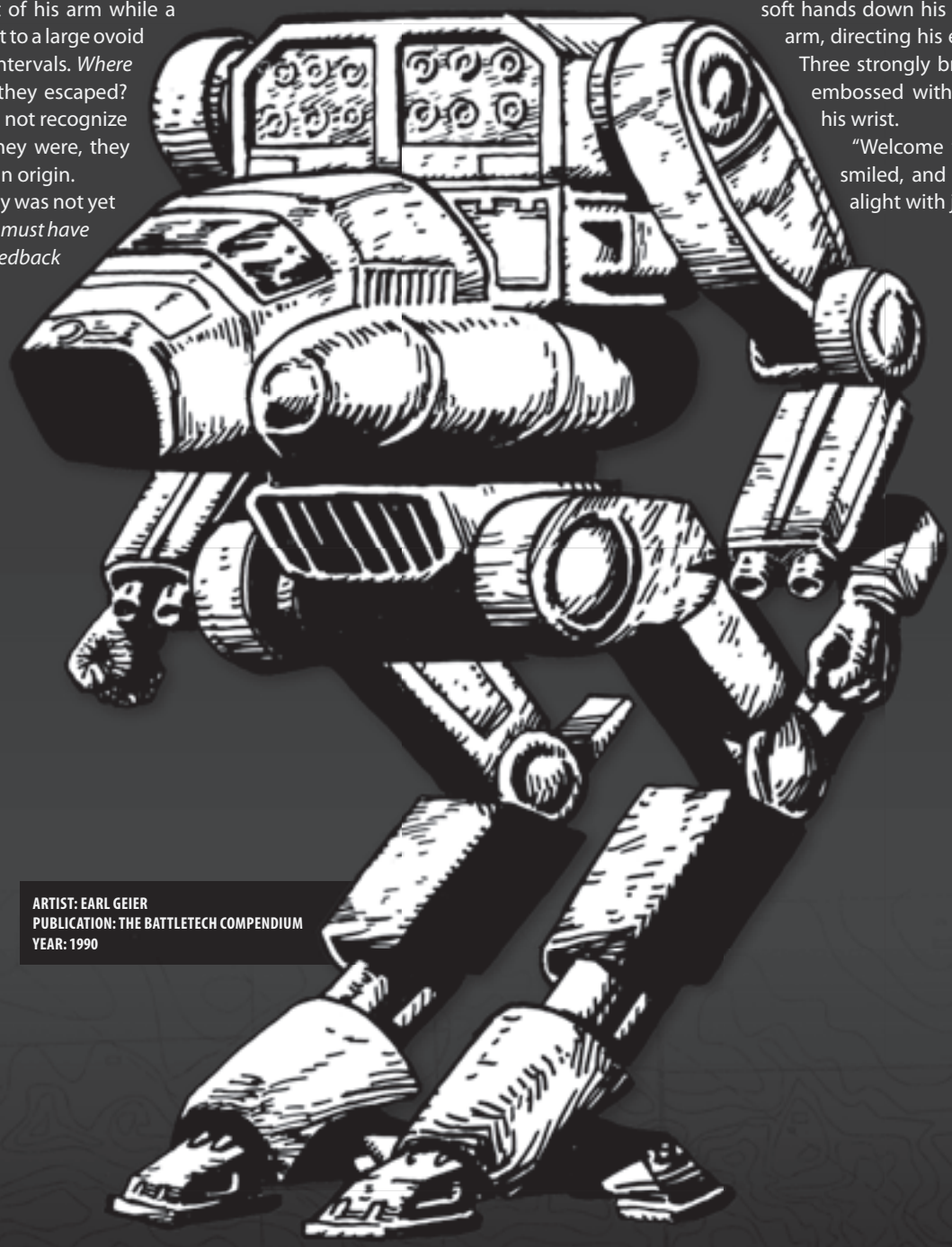
"Where am I?" He croaked out the words, shaming himself with the feebleness of his efforts.

"Hush, now. You have been through much." She brought a finger to his lips. He noticed she no longer wore her technician's coveralls but instead wore a crisp white uniform with red piping and gold epaulets.

He shook his head. *I must know*. "My command? My Clan? What has become of them?" His need lent strength to his words.

She frowned and shook her head, kissing him once more, "None of that matters anymore. You are among your new Clan now." She ran her soft hands down his body and lifted his right arm, directing his eyes to follow her hands. Three strongly braided white cords, each embossed with a Cameron star, circled his wrist.

"Welcome to the Star League." She smiled, and this time her eyes were alight with joy. "Bondsman."



ARTIST: EARL GEIER
PUBLICATION: THE BATTLETECH COMPENDIUM
YEAR: 1990

ARTIST: STEVE VENTERS
PUBLICATION: BATTLETECH REINFORCEMENTS 2
YEAR: 1990

ARTIST: LES DORSCHEID
PUBLICATION: CHAOS MARCH
YEAR: 1995

ARTIST: LES DORSCHEID
PUBLICATION: THE FALCON AND THE WOLF
YEAR: 1995

ARTIST: ALEX IGLESIAS
PUBLICATION: MASTERS & MINIONS: THE STARCORPS DOSSIERS
YEAR: 2009

ARTIST: MICHAEL KOMARCK
PUBLICATION: SHADOWS OF FAITH (NOVEL)
YEAR: FORTHCOMING

ARTIST: JOHN ZELEZNIK
PUBLICATION: SOLARIS VII BOX SET
YEAR: 1991

FIRST CHAIR

JIM LONG

THE BLACK HILLS, SOLARIS CITY
SOLARIS VII, SKYE MARCH
FEDERATED COMMONWEALTH
15 MARCH 3053

"No!"
"What?"
"Out."
"Why?"
"You know damn well, 'why,' O'Shea."
"That?"
"Yeah, that."
"I said I'd pay."
"That's what you said, but that ain't what happened."
"It's happening now."
"Yeah?"
"Yeah."
"How?"
"I got a ride and a small advance."
"Who? Never mind. You got cash?"
"Some."
"Out!"
"I'll cover his tab."

O'Shea glanced at the woman sitting alone at the bar. He'd seen her speak, but she'd not bothered to turn and look as he argued with Davis at the Night Watch's front door. O'Shea figured Davis had a percentage, and didn't like it when the place got busted up. Bars across the Inner Sphere tended to get busted up, some fatally, when O'Shea was in high spirits.

"You got cash?"

The woman took a long pull of a dark beer and nodded. Davis returned to his stool near the door, looping the strap of his head knocker on its wooden peg. O'Shea shook his head and walked past the doorman. Davis had tried the short club on him a time or two until O'Shea had broken the last strap and cold cocked the doorman.

"I can't believe he was going to try that again," he said as he took the seat next to the red-haired woman. Running a hand through his beard, O'Shea turned on his biggest smile. "Badicus O'Shea, at your service."

"Esmeralda," she replied into her beer.

O'Shea ignored the rebuff and moved his stool closer. "And to what to I owe the pleasure of your company? My good looks? Charm? Perhaps my reputation has preceded me?"

"Carstairs." Esmeralda finished her beer and waved at the bartender for another. O'Shea nodded and turned to the bar, raising a finger.

"Oh, him. Come to keep tabs on me then? Protecting his new investment?" O'Shea scowled. He'd finally gotten back into the command chair of a BattleMech, and now it appeared his employer was going to take all the joy out of it.

It was the beginning of the season on Solaris VII, and excitement was high. There was a world of opportunity awaiting an experienced pilot, and O'Shea had just enough experience to consider himself really good. After two years clawing his way up through the outlying arenas, he was finally with a stable in Solaris City. All right, it wasn't one of the class "A" stables, but he'd finally made it to the capital and had his own 'Mech. At least, he finally had an owner who was going to let him pilot a BattleMech. It was almost the same thing.

"Nope," Esmeralda replied. She nodded to the bartender as he set down the two darks. "Glen Rhanna," she said, "Bring the bottle."

O'Shea was broken from his thoughts. "Well, Esmeralda, I don't know who you are, but I see you like the good stuff."

"I'm your new boss, that's who I am."

O'Shea wasn't often shocked, but his jaw almost hit the bar. Worse, he almost spilled his drink. Setting the heavy mug down, he turned to stare at the woman beside him.

SOLARIS VII

World Name: Solaris VII
Star Type (Recharge Time): K1V (192 hours)
Position in System: 7
Time to Jump Point: 5.18 days
Number of Satellites: 1 (Solaris 7 Able)
Surface Gravity: 1.10
Atm. Pressure: Standard (Breathable)
Equatorial Temperature: 25° C (Temperate)
Surface Water: 80 percent
Recharging Station: Zenith, Nadir
HPG Class Type: A
Highest Native Life: Fish
Population (3053): 492,131,000
Socio-Industrial Levels: A-A-A-A-B

Rich in minerals and water, though often gloomy because of its turbulent seas and atmosphere, Solaris VII became a thriving industrial colony soon after it was first settled, with most people flocking to the industrial centers on the Greyland continent. Originally claimed by the Free Worlds League, this planet easily transferred its loyalty to the Lyran Commonwealth during the Succession Wars. House Marik was a sore loser and bombarded the planet with nuclear weapons, leaving it horribly scarred for decades. Since then, the locals have harbored a simmering hatred for the League, a hatred that only abates in Solaris City itself. In this open capital, all nationalities can interact peacefully—theoretically, anyway.

Solaris VII became known as the Game World during the Star League era, when its BattleMech factories used pre-selected areas on the continents of Greyland and Equatus (the less developed continent) for live-fire weapons testing. As more and more companies sought the publicity (and media royalties) of this testing, the weapon testing involved into combat matches and betting. These gladiatorial combats are the hallmark of Solaris VII today.

In profile she was, well, pretty much the embodiment of his dreams. She was big, like him, with a muscular build. She wore technician's shorts and a work shirt that was stretched out in all the right places. She was a bit older than him, with wrinkles around the eyes and at the corner of the mouth, but there wasn't a speck of grey in her hair. She took a pull of her beer and let O'Shea continue to stare.

Well, he thought, she moves like a MechWarrior. No wasted movement; easily poised on the stool. Her physique suggested a heavy or assault 'Mech, but that was stereotyping and O'Shea knew that was wrong—and could get him killed. His mind wandered as he continued to stare. Another Warrior. Could he take her? Was she serious? Was she a fighter? A leader?

O'Shea snorted and turned to his beer. "My left teat. I just signed on with Carstairs Stables. He's my new boss, not some barroom hottie who's offered to cover my tab." He took a long pull and considered his so-called new employer. "By this time tomorrow I'll have the rest of those 'Mech jockeys following my lead. I'll be first chair by the end of the week, mark my words."

He took another deep pull from the mug to punctuate his plan, which seemed perfectly reasonable.

O'Shea had a gift. Several actually. He could make friends wherever he went and under almost any condition. People just naturally liked him. He was a bit 'rough and tumble,' as his ma used to say, but that was just part of the charm. He stood straight and snapped to when the brass was about, but when the shit went down, the men always looked to him for advice and leadership. He was steadfast and reliant, just the type of personality people came to count on when the chips were down. Carstairs Stables would be no different. While his career on Solaris hadn't been anything to brag about just yet (although he'd certainly done more than his fair share of boasting, none the less), he had good skills and was an excellent teammate despite the bravado. Perhaps because of it. He'd never actually held a lead position, but he was feeling good tonight, and anything seemed possible.

"And the current first chair?" she asked.

"Bah," he replied after another hearty swallow. "There's always second chair. Besides, I'm sure he won't mind. It takes the pressure off him, if you know what I mean."

"I was afraid you'd say something like that." There was an edge in her voice, making O'Shea pause in mid-swallow. Esmeralda stood on the rails of her stool, partially rising as she reached into the deep front pocket of her shorts. Pulling out a carefully folded stack of D-bills, she flipped out several 100s, placed them on the bar, and slipped the rest of the stack back into the pocket.

"My tab wasn't nearly that high," he commented as he went back to the beer. Tomorrow was going to be difficult. Nothing like getting on the Captain's bad side to make a new posting seem like hell.

"It will be after tonight." O'Shea choked on his beer, actually spilling some on his shirt.

"Oh, you can't be serious," he said with a half-smile. "I'm bigger than you, faster than you, and while you might be older, I'm more experienced." He snorted. "Sit down before you embarrass yourself."

"Mr. O'Shea,' the woman replied, "you don't know me. I, however, know you. You're left-handed, but I'm sitting on your right. You've got a rebuilt knee, the right one. You've got a skull as thick as a Nighbor Ox, and you're lighting fast with your fists or your pistol, which you've sensibly left at home."

O'Shea released the mug and turned toward Esmeralda, glaring at her. There was no mistaking the challenge in her voice, but it was the strangest one he'd ever heard. She hadn't even turned to face him.

"You've been on Solaris for three years, two of them among the outlying arenas. You've got a solid reputation, but you imagine it's better than it really is. Now you're in the city for the first time, and you think you've got the world by the tail, but you've never fought at this level and your time in the service hasn't prepared you for what you're about to face."

"So, what am I about to face?"

"Me," Esmeralda replied simply.

"So, what happens next?" O'Shea felt the adrenaline rise as Esmeralda recounted his history. He had to admit, she knew him well. A small part of him actually agreed with what she was saying, but that wasn't going to stop him from saying or acting like he damn well pleased. This woman seemed to have a lot of answers and she certainly had him, at least partially, figured out.

"Now I'm going to hit you over the head with this bottle of Glen Rhanna. The best single malts always come in a thick bottle, so it might not break. Tomorrow morning we'll consider your placement at the stable, and whether Mr. Carstairs made a good decision hiring you.

It seemed like a precious waste of scotch, but it was her tab. O'Shea glanced at the bottle. "Take your best—"

The woman kicked out with her right foot, not at O'Shea, but his stool. She had no leverage and no power, but the nearside legs caved in, throwing O'Shea off balance for a moment. He fell toward Esmeralda, but was regaining his balance as she turned and actually leaned into him. He hadn't considered that. Could she have somehow sabotaged the legs of the stool?

The thought came and went in an instant. His hands moved to defend against a knee or fist, but neither attack came. Instead Esmeralda allowed O'Shea's to fall face first into her ample chest. The distraction was minor, but enough. Esmeralda's right hand clamped on the back of his head, keeping him close. Pain exploded through his body, centering behind his right ear. Esmeralda let him go and stepped away as he crumpled to one knee. Blood dripped into his beard and his vision began to contract. With a snarl, he fought to retain consciousness.

He could barely lift his head. All O'Shea could see was Esmeralda from the knees down and the partially sawn legs of his stool. She had great calves and narrow, delicate knees. Despite himself, or because of it, he bellowed and slammed down with his left fist on the arch of Esmeralda's right foot instead of striking the knee. She was right, he'd been though rehab and didn't wish that on anybody, especially not in a friendly fight like this.

The boot toe may have been steel, but the shoe was only leather. There was a loud pop and Esmeralda crumpled into the bar. O'Shea staggered back to his feet, using the bar for balance. He shook his head, flinging blood. He didn't have to see or touch the wound to know he'd need stitches. Probably a lot of them.

He'd barely regained his footing when Esmeralda jabbed at him with her left hand. O'Shea caught the flash of a knuckle duster before the sharp pain burst in his mouth. No wonder he was leaking so much blood. Years of brawling taught him how to take the punch. His head didn't snap back, so he didn't get knocked out. His lip paid the price, splitting wide open in a shower of blood. It may have also cost him a tooth, but he couldn't immediately tell. He snapped out with an open hand, slamming the striking wrist with the outside of his hand as Esmeralda pulled back from the blow. It didn't break the wrist, but it deadened the hand.

O'Shea spit blood and smiled through red teeth. "Is that all you got?"

"Nope." Esmeralda stepped forward, swinging the bottle of Glen Rhanna in a roundhouse blow. O'Shea almost missed the attack, but ducked in plenty of time to avoid the blow. Unfortunately, her broken foot didn't hold, and Esmeralda lurched forward. The roundhouse that should have passed over his head descended with

ARTIST: DOUG CHAFFEE
PUBLICATION: MAPPACK: SOLARIS VII
YEAR: 2004

her, hitting O'Shea on the top of his head. Both MechWarriors crashed to the floor, Esmeralda driving the air from O'Shea's lungs as she fell on top of him. By the time he got his breath back, O'Shea was pinned under her as she sat on his chest.

"I promised you I was going to hit you with this bottle, but that tap hardly counts."

He struggled, but had no leverage to move. Instead he grabbed the only thing he could find, her butt, and dug his fingers into the muscle. Esmeralda gasped and stiffened.

"You'll find I'm not such an easy target," he whispered through clenched teeth.

"Ass. Who do you think recommended you for the job in the first place?"

O'Shea paused, slightly releasing his grip. His last thought as the bottle came down toward his head was, I think I'm in love.

▲▼▲

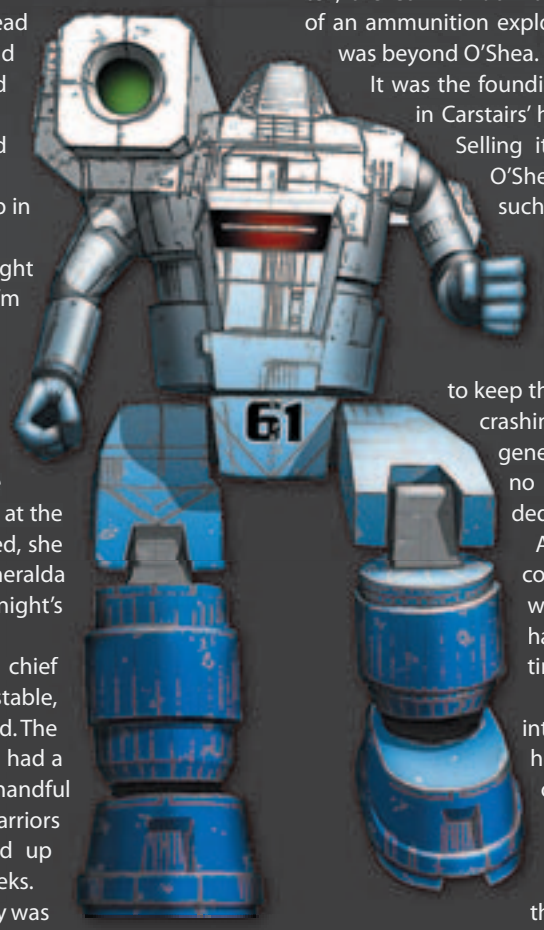
Despite a "mild" concussion, O'Shea arrived at the stables the next morning precisely on time. A single travel bag held his few possessions. Esmeralda met him at the front door, and although her foot was heavily bandaged, she walked without a crutch or cane. O'Shea saluted, but Esmeralda held out her hand instead. With the handshake, last night's events seemed to be forgotten.

Introductions were quick. Esmeralda served as chief technician, chief mechanic and first chair for the small stable, sliding from role to role as needed. There was a lot of need. The only other pilot was Henry Shayne; a small man O'Shea had a hard time reading. There were two technicians and a handful of support personnel, but they mostly left the MechWarriors to themselves. Esmeralda, Shayne and O'Shea ended up spending quite a bit of time together in the first few weeks.

Despite O'Shea's earlier assumptions, life in the big city was much like the outlying stables. The quarters were nicer, but just barely. He had a single room apartment near the stables, in the same building as Esmeralda. He got up early and went downstairs, but he was rarely there before Esmeralda. The two would walk the short distance to the 'Mech bays and spend all day knee-deep in 'Mech parts, trying to get Carstairs' three BattleMechs up to speed.

Shayne was the pilot of a *Wolf Trap*. The 45-ton 'Mech was easily the most serviceable of the three. According to Esmeralda, Carstairs had shown up at the stable one morning smiling like the proverbial fox. As the man rarely muddied his hands in the actual work of the stable or the warriors, Esmeralda was on guard for something unusual when the 'Mech was delivered several hours later. Although it arrived in pieces, the breaks were 'clean' and the component damage relatively light. Most of the work could be done by the techs, leaving her and the two men to focus on the real headaches.

Esmeralda's 'Mech was an ancient *Hunchback*. The design was considered a classic, but O'Shea swore this model must have been the first one out of the factory. Nothing seemed to work properly. While the structure and armor was solid, the electronics were a tech's nightmare. At some point a previous owner had rewired the main chassis using a Frankenstein's nightmare of salvaged parts. Everything could be made to work, but just barely and not consistently. Esmeralda had wanted the entire system rewired, but the downtime and cost would be immense and Carstairs refused to authorize it. As long as the 'Mech could walk and fire, everything would be fine, he argued. Esmeralda fussed, fumed and threatened, but Carstairs refused to budge. "Make it work," was his only advice. O'Shea frequently saw Esmeralda perched high on the 'Mech's shoulder, "fixing" the AC/20 with a 30-pound Presslite Spanner applied repeatedly to the ammunition feed. He quickly learned to leave her alone during such repair sessions.



ARTIST: FRANZ VOHWINKEL
PUBLICATION: CLASSIC BATTLETECH: A GAME OF ARMORED COMBAT
YEAR: 2002

Unfortunately, O'Shea's 'Mech was the worst of the lot. As near as he could tell, the *Commando* was even older than the *Hunchback*. There was evidence of an ammunition explosion, and how the chassis had survived such an event was beyond O'Shea. Everything in the 'Mech was subtly warped or off-plumb. It was the founding 'Mech of the stable and reportedly held a soft sport in Carstairs' heart, but O'Shea doubted the man had such an organ. Selling it was; however, out of the question, so Shayne and O'Shea spent most of their time trying to get it working. As such, due to the extensive damage and generations of repair, everything needed to be crafted or modified by hand to make it work. After three weeks, they'd managed to fire up the engine. O'Shea considered it the high spot of the week, until he tried to take a step forward and had the left leg lock up from the hip to the ankle. He's managed to keep the *Commando*, which he'd secretly dubbed 'the Evil' from crashing through the wall, but he'd destroyed the only portable generator in the stable, sending Carstairs into a fit. He had no doubt his next check would contain an inappropriate deduction.

As his third week came to a close, O'Shea was in a comfortable groove of long days of work and short nights with Esmeralda at the corner pub. While their relationship had remained purely professional, O'Shea envisioned a time when that would change.

After a short Friday, Esmeralda called O'Shea and Shayne into her office. The converted storage locker was piled high with neatly categorized parts and equipment. While overstuffed, it was orderly and O'Shea had no doubt whatsoever that Esmeralda could place her hands on any requested item in the room in seconds. When the men arrived she was scowling, so O'Shea prepared for the worst. If Shayne read her mood, he didn't show it. Even after working together for three weeks, O'Shea still didn't have a good feeling for his fellow pilot.

The man seemed reasonable enough. He was not terribly knowledgeable about the technical side, but he worked when asked. He had no experience in the arena, but had somehow landed a job inside the city with no credentials. O'Shea considered him terribly young, but in truth he was probably only a couple of years younger than himself. He could quote chapter and verse of the games, matches and his heroes from years gone by, but he seemed extremely naïve about the truth of BattleMech combat. He was still in his "noble warfare" phase of being a pilot that most MechWarriors grew out of after their first combat. O'Shea wondered if Shayne would ever understand it as a grim, deadly business.

Esmeralda pulled out a bottle and three mismatched glasses. It was the same bottle of Glen Rhanna she'd used on his head the night of their first meeting. Although it was more than half gone, O'Shea was glad to see his commander wasn't the type to drink alone. He and Shayne had helped reduce the scotch to its current state.

She poured a couple of fingers worth into three glasses and stopped the bottle. "To fallen friends," she said, raising the glass to her lips. O'Shea and Shayne repeated the customary toast and followed suit. Cradling the glass in her lap, Esmeralda leaned back and regarded the two men.

"You know I'm not much for ceremony, so I'll keep this meeting short and sweet.

"First the good news. Carstairs has been working like a fiend to line up as many matches as possible. That's good, because we're not getting paid to be technicians. The bonus will come in handy,

especially if, or when, we win.

"I won't sugarcoat it, we're in for a hell of a ride. We've got three 'Mechs and three pilots. Carstairs has us fighting at least once per week in a variety of engagements all across town. One thing we will not lack is exposure to the media and the other stables."

She sipped again, before continuing. "Now the bad news. I'm sure you've figured out that with a heavy schedule like that we were going to have trouble keeping the 'Mechs upright, let alone arena-ready." O'Shea had already figured it out, but was pretty certain Shayne had not a flipping clue. "The ugly truth is that we're going to get beaten up and, even if we win, we're going to have to climb back into the saddle for more. We don't have the staff to do that.

"I've convinced Carstairs that we need some more support staff and another pilot to serve as back up. Neither is really an issue this early in the season, so that should be covered. There will be a string of folks in here for the next couple of days. O'Shea, I want you in on the process when we talk to the techs. You don't seem to be completely stupid in that regard and another opinion is always good."

O'Shea smiled and raised his glass at the backhanded compliment. He knew the bad news was still coming.

"Our first match is in two days. It's a straight forward challenge match, one-on-one, at medium class. Carstairs won't let us even interview for a backup pilot until we win our first match. We all know that might be too late. With his schedule, we need that pilot now for training and integration into the team. Besides, good pilots will become a hot commodity when damage starts to build up." O'Shea saw the value in getting the pilot now, but he didn't share their leader's opinion. He glanced at Shayne to see if he could read the man's opinion, but the youngster was practically bouncing in his chair. O'Shea listened to Esmeralda, but kept an eye on Shayne.

"We need to win this first match and win it with as little damage as possible. Normally I'd take the *Hunchback*, but I still don't trust that ammo feed and until I get replacement parts, it's sidelined. O'Shea, you're ride is, I'm guessing, about five days away from being arena ready. That leaves us with only one choice; the *Wolf Trap*."

"Yes!" Shayne exploded out of the chair, spilling most of his drink on O'Shea. "I knew it, I knew it. My first combat. Don't worry, Esmeralda, I'll win that fight. You can count on that. And we'll get that new pilot." Shayne nearly hugged himself, he was so happy. O'Shea almost smiled at the youth's naïve display, but he didn't. He'd already caught Esmeralda's eye and knew what was coming next.

"Shayne, I'm sorry, but I'll be piloting the *Wolf Trap*." Shayne froze like he'd taken a PPC to the head.

"What?"

"This fight is too important. Whether Carstairs understands it or not, if we lose this fight, our season is pretty much over. Our best 'Mech will be damaged, maybe even fatally. That puts too much of a load on the rest of the team."

"No."

"Yes. Carstairs has already made the down payments for the upcoming matches. If we forfeit or don't have 'Mechs to fill the duals, he'll lose the deposit and we'll likely lose the stable. It's a rookie mistake, but hell, he's a rookie manager. We need to start with a win. I'm the best pilot and I have the most experience, but that doesn't even matter. I'm the boss here and I'm telling you what's going to happen. This meeting is purely informational; I'm taking the *Wolf Trap* into the arena in two nights. Now you can help make that happen, or you can get the hell out of the way."

"He wouldn't do that."

"He did and it's done."

"No, no, NO!" Shayne threw his glass at Esmeralda, but he was so enraged, the missile came nowhere near her. As he stepped forward, O'Shea intervened.

"It's just one match, Henry. You'll be in the arena within a week." For a moment O'Shea was sure the smaller man was going to take out his frustration with a swing at him, but a spark of sanity returned.

"Piss off, both of you." Shayne turned on his heel and left the office with a stiff-legged shuffle. By the time he got to the main doors, he was almost running from the stables.

O'Shea let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. "Ah, youthful exuberance. It'll be the death of us all."

Esmeralda snorted. "Treachery, more likely."

O'Shea smiled, but nodded. "As you say. So what do we need to do to get ready for the match?"

Esmeralda reached for the bottle and poured a double measure before passing it on. "Polish, mostly. We've got a new actuator for the right ankle. That needs to be installed and tested." She paused and stared up at the ceiling. "The primary cooling array needs a test. The heat pumps in the third and fourth heat sinks aren't running properly, but that's about it. We just need to kick the tires and light the fires."

O'Shea knew the work was easy, but critical. He followed Esmeralda's gaze out the main door. "He's young and foolish. This will pass."

Esmeralda sighed. "Yeah, but it was still a crappy thing to do. I tried to get Carstairs to delay the match, even for 24 hours, but he wouldn't have it. I know it's the right thing to do, but to lose your ride like that, even for a couple of days, well, it sucks."

O'Shea nodded. No matter who 'owned' a BattleMech, there was a special bond between the 'Mech and the pilot that transcended mere matters of ownership and title. Warriors put much of their psyche and soul into their machine, and came to view it as an extension of themselves. That was why the Dispossessed were so pitied. Losing a 'Mech, even for a couple of days, was hard, especially when it was going to battle and you were not.

"He'll get over it." O'Shea reconsidered. "Will the old man back your decision?"

Esmeralda nodded. "Hell, Carstairs demanded I take the match before I could get a word in, so I don't think there are any issues there."

"So, are we going to dig right in or get an early start tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow. Tonight I have some serious drinking to do. After that it will time to get our game face on and get ready for the match."

O'Shea tipped his glass and returned it to the desk. "You're in luck, because I'm just the man for both jobs."

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When O'Shea awoke the next day, he was in unfamiliar ground. The quarters looked similar to his, but they were not. He was mostly dressed, but his shirt was missing several buttons and he could not find his left boot. After adjusting his kilt, he carefully regarded his surroundings and realized, somewhat abashedly, that he was in Esmeralda's apartment.

He found her, still asleep, in the quarter's only bed. His head was throbbing to an invisible drummer, but the sight of Esmeralda in the small bed almost banished the hangover. For a moment he considered joining her as she slept *au natural,* but he stopped and tiptoed back into the only other room. He quietly let himself out and was delighted to discover his boot in the hallway, two shirt buttons inside. Hopping down the hall as he put on the boot, he beat a hasty retreat to the landing and the stairwell.

He beat Esmeralda to the stable, but not Shayne. The young man was hanging near the doors when he arrived.

"Reconsider?" O'Shea asked simply as he worked the keys to the personnel door.

"Yeah. I was a bit hasty yesterday." O'Shea didn't really believe the man was truly repentant, but he took the admission at face value.

"So, did you talk to the stable master?" O'Shea opened the door and let Shayne enter first.

The young man chuckled. "Something like that." O'Shea let it go and crossed to the *Wolf Trap*. He really didn't know the 'Mech well and wondered where to start, but Henry had a suggestion. "The techs can handle the actuator while we work on the cooling system. That will take more time anyway. Numbers three and four keep going off line, but I think these new parts will solve the issue." He crossed to the storage area where several crates were secured under lock and key. If we get going, we can pull the old parts before everybody else is here and be ready for the replacement when the key arrives to open the storage area."

"Sounds like a plan to me," O'Shea replied, "but first we need to get some caffeine brewing and I'll be taking a quick tour of the medicine cabinet for some pain pills."

Shayne laughed. "See you up top."

The two worked until Esmeralda and the techs arrived later that morning. True to his suggestion, O'Shea and Shayne had the old parts removed when Esmeralda opened the supplies. Putting the parts in proved to be a bit more complex than taking the old ones out.

Civilians viewed the cooling system as one large integrated unit, but in most 'Mechs it was much more complex. An individual heat sink was actually made up of several components, like pumps to circulate coolant to hot spots, like myomers, engines, and weapons; a radiator to dump the heat from the coolant outside the 'Mech; and a heat pump to ensure that the heat exchange was one way, even in the hottest of deserts. It was a fundamental system and essentially one of the more "simple" components of a BattleMech, but O'Shea had very little knowledge about them. Fortunately, Henry was well informed, keeping up a string of chatter as he worked through the morning and afternoon. By dinner they had completed the heat pump replacement and the testing.

O'Shea remained on the gantry when Shayne finally went to talk with Esmeralda. If she felt awkward about the night before, she didn't show it in the few times they'd been together during the day. When Shayne joined him at the *Wolf Trap* again, he wore a ready smile. Evidentially everything was all patched up with Esmeralda. Although the ripples might take a while to calm, O'Shea was convinced that with a victory tomorrow, the team would be back on track and all would be forgiven. Toward the end of the day, arena officials came by to perform the preliminary inspection of the *Wolf Trap*. Far from ensuring that everything was permissible, they wanted to be sure that 'Mech would provide a capable challenge. If not, the BattleMech would be scratched from the match.

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Sunday was as tense as any pre-match O'Shea could remember. Esmeralda drove the techs hard all morning, individually inspecting every round before it went into the ammo hoppers. She checked and rechecked the systems until O'Shea was certain she would start wearing out parts simply by testing them.

Just after lunch, she received a package by private courier, followed by arena officials who came to certify and retrieve the BattleMech. The certification process was over quickly. O'Shea worked with the referees while Esmeralda reviewed the contents of the mysterious package. When they finished he went to the office and knocked once before barging in. The sight inside stopped him cold.

Esmeralda was dressing to pilot the *Wolf Trap* to the arena. When O'Shea entered, she was wearing nothing but the shorts most pilots wore. She was partially into her cooling vest, which would have saved some modesty, but not quite. Heavy boots sat next to the chair.

"Close the damn door and your mouth, you fool. You've seen me in less."

I have? Damn, why don't I remember? For the first time in his life O'Shea actually considered swearing off strong drink. The vow was cut short by Esmeralda's shimmy into the vest.

"The door. Shut the damn door." O'Shea stepped inside and closed the door. The office suddenly seemed very small and very personal.

"The, uh, *Wolf Trap* is ready to roll. An escort will lead you to the tunnels and on to the arena. Esmeralda simply nodded at the information. "Pre-fight checks are complete, but you'll want to run them again at the arena." O'Shea almost slapped his head at uttering such a stupid statement. Of course she would run and rerun those checks until the match started. Esmeralda checked the coupling on her cooling vest and finally snapped it closed. O'Shea never thought he'd be happy to see less of her, but he was. "Shayne seems to be back in line and on board. I guess you two made up?"

Esmeralda nodded, stepping past O'Shea to the office chair. Inspecting each boot, she began strapping up. He noticed that her previously broken foot was still heavily bandaged. Seeking some form or conversation to cover up his gawking, O'Shea continued. "Were you expecting the package?"

Esmeralda didn't look up. "Yeah. Remember that knowledge is half the battle. I never go into an arena—" she looked up and transfixed him with a stare, "—any arena without as much intel as I can get."

"What did you find out?"

Esmeralda finished with the first boot and blew out a sigh, leaning back in the chair. "Precious little. I'm fighting a *Crab*. Do you know anything about it?" O'Shea thought hard, but could recall little about the 'Mech and shrugged his shoulders. She knew the basics better than him.

"Energy based," he replied. "Considered lightly armed for its weight, but it still packs one helluva punch, especially since it outweighs you by five tons." Esmeralda nodded.

"Only a fool like Carstairs would accept a match like this. Check that. Carstairs is greedy and maybe a bit desperate, but he's not a fool. He's probably getting rewarded somehow for all of this. My contacts at the arena say it's a 'fair fight' which just means we're in the same general weight class. The bookies are going crazy with odds, all the way from 4:1 against to 7:5 for me to last."

"Last?"

"As we're the lightweight, they're running all sorts of side bets. Nobody expects us to win, so the real action is on how long we last."

"Damn."

"And Carstairs…"

Esmeralda nearly exploded. "He expects us to survive, make the match last at least 3 minutes, and win."

O'Shea let out a slow whistle. "That's a tall order."

Esmeralda laughed mirthlessly. "We do have one thing on our side," she replied as she dug the wounded foot into the other boot. With a slight grunt she got the heavy boot seated over the bandages. "We're allowed to have one comms rider up in the booth. I gather the arena is fairly open, so there's nothing to give away from a bird's eye view. I suspect that a second set of eyes on the pilot's communication channel is supposed to lengthen the match. Carstairs didn't understand how valuable something like that would be, or he'd have told us about it on Friday."

"How did Carstairs get into this business when he seems to know so damn little about it?"

Esmeralda sighed. "From what I can gather, he married most of his money." O'Shea cocked his eyebrow as Esmeralda continued. "He has a head for business, which caught the eye of his future father-in-law, although I gather the old man had a strictly financial relationship in mind. Anyway, daddy dies soon after the wedding, and Carstairs finds himself with limited access to his wife's trust. He's parlayed a small fortune into, well, not much yet, but he's got potential. He seems to be in this for the long haul and he's spent most of his time, effort, and funds on building the stable to this point. Make no mistake; Carstairs is strictly a businessman. He really doesn't know much about the business of running a stable from the BattleMech side of things. That's where I come in. Carstairs is a promoter, hustler, and wheeler-dealer who can line up matches, promote them, and build up hype. And I have to admit he's done a great job of that so far."

O'Shea nodded. Although he didn't have much time to watch the vids, he knew the match was receiving quite a bit of publicity.

"Mind you," Esmeralda continued, "he's done this in absence of any real understanding of what it takes to deliver on all of that hype. Despite our conversations, he doesn't really understand that the *Wolf Trap* is the only 'Mech we have that can enter the arena. Ultimately, he doesn't even care about that. He expects the fight to happen so he can continue promoting and building up the stable. Cash is short and now his wife and her accountants are starting to apply pressure. It's time to start seeing a return on those funds." She paused for a moment, before continuing, "I think that's where Shayne came in."

"Eh? How could that matter?"

Esmeralda laughed and shook her head. "Did you do any research, at all, before you signed up? Never mind, I know the answer. Shayne is actually Carstair's wife's nephew. Evidently the kid bought into the stable with more trust fund D-bills and hope, and Carstair's promise, that we'd somehow turn him into a MechWarrior. His funds are probably paying our salaries and these parts until we can win something back."

"Ahhh, I see."

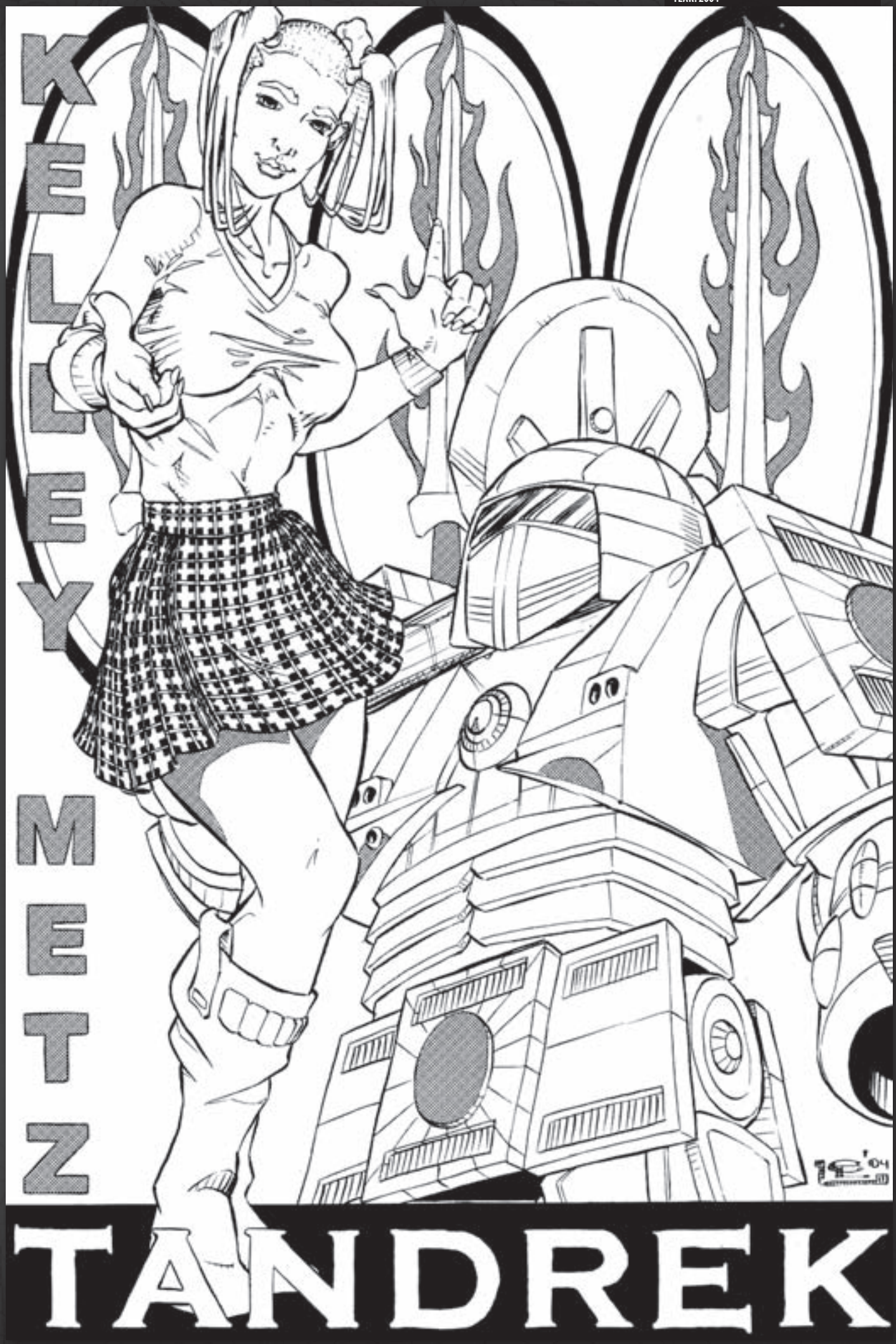
"I doubt it, but you've got the basic picture now. Study it later, because we've got work to do. Get over there, get patched in and get ready to roll. I've got nobody else that I can trust to help out." When O'Shea didn't move, she moved to push him out of the office. Instead, there was a muffled *pop* and Esmeralda fell into his arms with a sharp breath. O'Shea managed to catch her as she fell heavily against him. Without thinking he turned the catch into a carry, sweeping her off her feet and into his arms. Fortunately he was strong enough to carry her, but he wouldn't be able to do so for long.

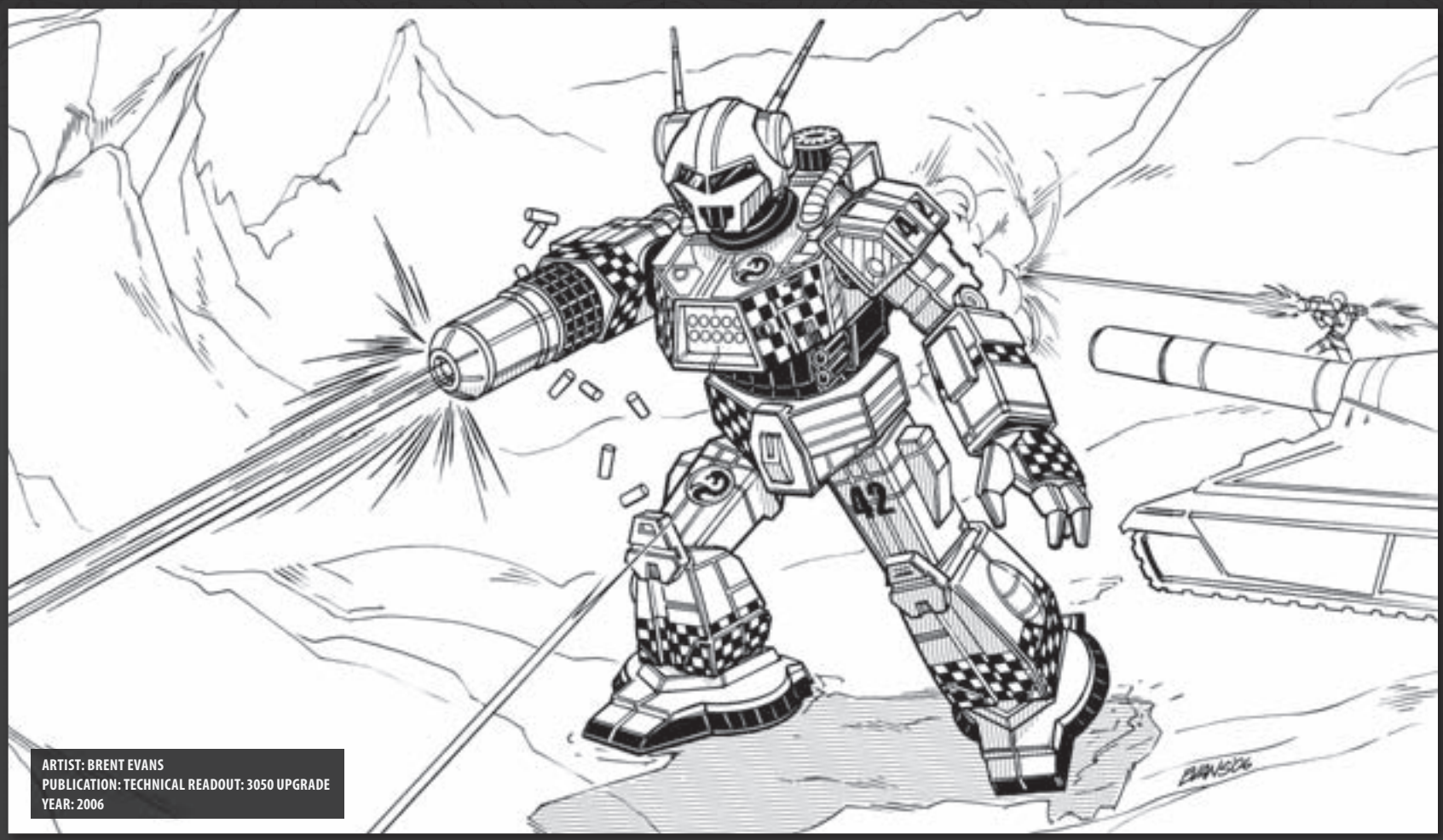
"Put me down, you damn ox. I'm not some baby."

O'Shea moved to the short couch and gingerly placed her down. Beads of perspiration had broken out on her lip and forehead and the color in her face had drained away.

"Get the boot off or they'll have to cut it off," she said through gritted teeth. O'Shea undid the bindings and tried to remove the boot, but Esmeralda went stiff at the first motion.

ARTIST: CHRIS LEWIS
PUBLICATION: MAPPACK: SOLARIS VII
YEAR: 2004





ARTIST: BRENT EVANS
PUBLICATION: TECHNICAL READOUT: 3050 UPGRADE
YEAR: 2006

"Do it," she gasped. O'Shea moved as quickly and gently as he could, sliding the boot off the reinjured foot. There were tears in the corner of her eyes, but Esmeralda didn't quite pass out.

"God as my witness, when you get back, I'm going to break both of your feet just so you know what it feels like."

O'Shea didn't respond. He didn't know what to say.

Esmeralda took a deep breath. "Get one of the techs in here on your way out. Go. Now. Get us out of this mess that Carstairs got us into. I'll get to the arena as quickly as I can and man the booth, but you've got to pilot the *Wolf Trap*.

"But it's Henry's 'Mech."

Esmeralda grabbed the only weapon in reach, the boot, and swung weakly. "It's my stable. I call the shots. Now suit up and haul some ass. Now!"

O'Shea hit the front door running, throwing off clothes as he went. Blowing past the arena officials and disregarding what little modesty he had. He stripped out of his kilt, sliding on a pair of trunk athletic shorts, before grabbing his vest and helmet. Henry shot him a venomous look, but O'Shea didn't notice. In the cockpit he simultaneously finished dressing and ran another set of pre-match checks.

Thankfully he'd performed the checks for Esmeralda as if he'd be piloting the *Wolf Trap*. While the controls were not totally familiar, he knew the basics and the rising panic fueled further education. With his helmet seated, he followed the officials out of the stable and through the underground tunnels toward the arena. O'Shea paid absolutely no attention to the surroundings as he continued to examine the cockpit instruments.

Forty-five minutes later he stopped behind the officials at what he assumed was the arena entrance. He heard muffled sound through the external microphones, echoing off the heavy doors.

"Mic check, 1, 2. Mic check."

"I read you, Esmeralda. How am I coming through?" O'Shea let out a sigh of relief. Sweat had already popped out on his forehead and he felt much hotter than he should. While Esmeralda had been in 'game mode' all day, he'd been performing system checks and serving as a technician. The mad dash to the arena had given time to prepare, but precious little to worry. Now he felt the rush of adrenaline as the duel began.

"Crystal clear," she replied.

"Good, because we're on."

The doors swept back and O'Shea edged forward into the lights and the noise. It was a familiar experience, but grander and more intense than ever before. He didn't realize he was smiling, but the sense of joy and excitement was nearly overwhelming. The arena floor was simple. There were blocks of concrete to provide a bit of cover, but nothing really worth the name. True to Esmeralda's report, there was nothing to block line of sight. He, unknowingly, was directly beneath the booth where Esmeralda was seated. The *Crab* entered from the opposite direction.

O'Shea cycled through the optics magnifying the forward view to get a close look at the *Crab*. It looked, well, like a crab. The head was forward. The legs were bird-like, with reversed knees, giving it a different gait than the *Wolf Trap*. The arms protruded from the side, behind the head and beneath a heavy hood, each ending in a weapon barrel, both of which fired ruby beams toward his end of the arena. Without conscious thought, he'd already aligned the crosshairs of the *Wolf Trap*'s weapons on the other 'Mech and fired. Puffs of smoke from his missiles and autocannon danced along the heavy hood. He returned to normal magnification as the weapons cycled and a cacophony of sounds echoed through the cockpit.

"Damn!"

"Trouble?" was Esmeralda's immediate response. He scanned the instrument panels and turned off the klaxon.

"Heat sinks three and four just went off line."

"Can't be," she replied. "Shayne told me you and he put in the new parts and ran a complete test. They checked out fine." New claxons immediately sounded and were silenced.

"Well, seven and nine just went toes-up, too. You want to tell me why?" He triggered the *Wolf Trap*'s long-range missiles and autocannon, which was answered by the *Crab*'s twin lasers. O'Shea was getting the worse end of the deal, despite a nearly perfect spread of missiles striking his enemy's left arm. Although one laser passed over her shoulder, the other struck the center of the *Wolf Trap*'s chest. The armor held, but it was a solid blow.

After a pause, Esmeralda responded. "Shayne. He must have sabotaged the couplers." Her voice sounded distant. She was either lost in thought or had moved

away from the microphone.

"Where is that weasel?"

"Gone."

"Of course. We'll deal with that later. What else can you tell me about this thing?"

O'Shea tried to angle for another shot, keeping focused on the opponent's left side. The *Crab* kept moving, triggering its large lasers again as it closed. He replied with cannon and missile fire.

"It's bigger than you and more heavily armored. Those large lasers are the biggest threat, but stay away. It's got a couple of other energy weapons if you get close. You're probably faster but this arena isn't going to let you use that speed."

The 'Mechs traded shots, with the *Wolf Trap* taking several shots in the left arm. O'Shea didn't need a claxon to tell him the arm was likely ruined. His autocannon kept striking true, but O'Shea couldn't tell if he was even getting close to piercing the armor of the beast.

The *Wolf Trap* paused beside one of the larger concrete blocks, crouching for some additional cover. "Damn. I'm already getting a ghost on the targeting array."

Some systems behaved differently, but no BattleMech targeting system could long handle the high heat O'Shea was suffering. As the 'Mech's internal temperature continued to rise components continued to falter. A ghost, or false secondary target read would hurt the accuracy of his fire. The visual clue made him aware of how hot it had gotten in the cockpit. Normally the *Wolf Trap* ran relatively cool. Not now. Every time he moved and he fired a weapon, the heat would keep rising. O'Shea doubted he could even use the twin medium lasers now—it wouldn't be worth the heat generated.

The *Crab* approached as O'Shea huddled behind the protective block. They exchanged fire again. His LRMs failed to lock and scattered wildly. His cannon struck the *Crab*'s foot, but it didn't break stride. One laser cored through the block, while the second again struck the *Wolf Trap*'s chest, blasting off what little armor remained.

"Oh, to hell with this."

A warning died in Esmeralda's throat as O'Shea rounded the block and charged. With his opponent moving to close ground, the two closed rapidly. O'Shea ran with the remains of his left arm held high and brought all weapons to bear. The missile launcher still failed to lock, sending the payload harmlessly past as he fired with lasers and cannon. Still he failed to breach the *Crab*'s armor. The *Crab* hit the *Wolf Trap* with everything right in the chest. Armor blasted away, followed by the skeleton beneath. Klaxons shrieked, indicating critical heat build-up, now adding a soft female voice, who repeated, "engine damage" over and over. O'Shea lamented that there was apparently no way to turn her off.

Ultimately, the warning didn't matter. O'Shea brought his left arm crashing down on the *Crab*'s armored top. The left arm snapped at the elbow, dealing minor damage to the hood as it crashed to the arena floor. The *Crab* kicked out, crumpling what was left of O'Shea's left leg. The *Wolf Trap* collapsed heavily on its side. Sparks shot across the instruments and the console, but the smoke was relatively light.

"That's it, O'Shea. It's over."

"The hell you say!" He tried to bring the autocannon in line, but the *Crab* quickly moved out of the way. It dropped both arms toward the *Wolf Trap*'s chest, but did not immediately fire.

"It's over, O'Shea. Power down!"

"No!"

"Yes! Don't you bloody well die on me because you can't bear to lose. Power down!"

"No! I won't. I can't. I might as well go out swinging. The season, the stable, it's finished."

"Oh, no you don't. Don't you leave me with this mess just because you're afraid to pick up the pieces. You lost. Deal with it. You power down. Now."

The *Crab* seemed to be coming to the end of its patience, but it continued to move in a slow circle, keeping away from the cannon. Quietly, however, the *Wolf Trap* fell back as O'Shea complied with Esmeralda's order. The *Crab* raised both hands into the air and backed away before taking a victory lap around the arena floor. O'Shea was still strapped in the cockpit when arena techs came to remove the fallen *Wolf Trap* from the arena floor.

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The engine shielding actually proved easier—and cheaper, Carstairs reminded them—to fix than the severed arm. In all, the damage was fairly light, considering the swiftness of the defeat. Esmeralda and the techs gave O'Shea plenty of space for the next three days, but after that they had to get the *Hunchback* ready for the next match and it took everyone working side-by-side to get the job done.

It took Carstairs less than twenty-four hours to run Henry Shayne to ground. Twenty-three hours for him to decide to call his mother-in-law, who apparently didn't know about the treachery, and an hour for her to give him a contact location. He promised to take care of things, but O'Shea wasn't satisfied. Esmeralda suggested he try a few repair sessions with her spanner and the *Hunchback*'s ammo feed. It took a bit of the edge from his anger, leaving him winded and fuming.

"I take it this was your first defeat," she finally said at the end of the day. O'Shea only glared and she laughed briefly. "Looks can't kill me, O'Shea. Many have tried."

O'Shea held his temper, but barely, and turned to go.

"So, what did you learn?" she asked as he left. "Anything?"

"I learned not to trust the techs or the crew."

"Bah, you learned no such thing. Passion is what drives MechWarriors. We underestimated young Shayne's passion and it cost us. Well," she said with a mischievous smile, "it mostly cost his uncle, but we'll be helping to pay the price."

O'Shea wheeled on her. "How can you make light of this? We were betrayed, both of us. I could have died. Worse, I lost. Badly. The stable may be ruined before it's even gotten a chance to begin. Doesn't that make your blood boil?"

"Of course, man. Are you insane?" She held out open hands. "Am I supposed to stomp around and make everyone miserable because I'm mad? Because I made a mistake? I screwed up, but I learned something. I'll never underestimate that passion again. I'll be better prepared when I see it the next time. And believe me, when I see it the next time, I'll be ready to use it to our advantage. Until then, I'll work like a rented mule to pay for that mistake to you, to Carstairs and to myself. The road just got harder, but it didn't end."

O'Shea sighed and dropped his shoulders. "Are you sure you'll know it?" he asked simply.

Esmeralda nodded and O'Shea turned toward the door. He took a step, but then stopped and looked over his shoulder.

"Then I'll be ready too."

ARTIST: FLORIAN STITZ
PUBLICATION: CLAN EXPANSION BOX SET
YEAR: FORTHCOMING

ARTIST: ALEX IGLESIAS
PUBLICATION: ERA REPORT: 3052
YEAR: FORTHCOMING

ARTIST: DOUG CHAFFEE
PUBLICATION: AEROTECH 2: RECORD SHEETS
YEAR: 2002

THE COLOR OF RAGE

RANDALL N. BILLS

TEHUANTEPEC ESSEX-*CLASS WARSHIP*
INCOMING TO YORK SYSTEM
KERENSKY CLUSTER, CLAN SPACE
23 AUGUST 3063

Six hundred and twenty thousand tons of war-forged metal transitioned out of hyperspace. Terrible energies harnessed by the Kearny-Fuchida hyperdrive in the bowels of the *Essex*-class WarShip *Tehuantepec* finished rotating the vessel back to a three spatial and one-time dimension. The hyperspace field—which formed in the York system 25.81 light-years distant from the launching point before the vessel even began transition—finished its work and collapsed in a glorious annihilation of space dust and red-shifted energy racing away at the speed of light to announce to distant sensors that wolves were baying at the world's doorstep.

War…*real* war…had come to York.

Star Commodore Kris Paik blinked several times to wash away the vestiges of jump disorientation as the vessel firmly settled into the velocity of the York system. He breathed in deeply. The tang of bodies in close proximity, warm machinery humming at work and cleaning astringents filled his nostrils and left its mark on his tongue: *my ship*.

Despite their duties on the bridge of the magnificent three hundred and twenty-seven year-old vessel, he caught surreptitious headshakes, face rubs and even an explosive exhalation as the after-effects of the jump touched every crewman down the ship's six hundred and fifteen-meter length. Their blood unpure, he allowed them their weakness.

"Status report," he spoke, tone flat as planed ferro-carbide armor. Soft. Rage could not be unleashed or it burned uncontrollably, gutting the carrier as quickly as the target. No, rage must be banked and controlled. Focused. An endless source of energy as vast as the fusion-energies within the yellow-white F2V-class star now at their aft as the vessel oriented arrow-straight towards the second of five planetary bodies.

Comms-master Borrine responded immediately, always efficient, despite blood, as an aurora borealis swept the consoles of the bridge, sensors online, detecting near space; electronic eyes a skein beginning to reach across the entire system. "Jump to L1 achieved." A cant of his head as Borrine ran the numbers to verify the computer's output; he never gave erroneous data to his commander.

"250,033 kilometers from orbital insertion." Another pause as the man's eyes swept a plethora of screens that spewed data like a quasar does its beam of x-rays, as the electronic brain verified the proximity and trajectory of every object in near space. "We're clear. Commencing system burn in thirty. Time to orbit, two point eight hours."

Kris' eyes moved to the massive holographic projection that hung in the center of the bridge, pinpricks of light blossoming like stars at a rapid onset of night planet-side as the computer translated the massive data dump into a visual feast for the trained mind. The data reticule over his right eye—synched to the battle computer and its holographic projection—ballooned data tags of additional information as he tracked across the simulation and paused on any given point.

"Not that we need orbital insertion," Talia said, grin preceding her by three strides. "A WarShip entering the atmosphere…now that would be a sight to see, *quiaff*?"

He refused to respond to the rhetorical question. Though he'd chastised her early in their joint career for such lower-caste weakness—despite the lack of a Bloodname, the rights flowed in her veins—her frivolity remained. He'd since relinquished any hope of curbing her baser instincts. This was why, despite her superb performance at his side, he'd never sponsored her. Only the fittest names could be wedded to the future history of Clan Star Adder in the halls of the Bloodname Chapels of the Svoboda Zemylya.

The in-system transit drives came online and massive thrusters at the aft of the *Tehuantepec* engaged, easily accelerating over a half-million tons out of the closely calculated L1 jump point between the second planet and its moon. Nausea momentarily peaked as microgravity gave way to gravity, the magslips on his feet now un-needed as the bridge deck, perpendicular to the direction of travel and the ship's bow, abruptly became "down."

"Nerves of a sphinx raptor, Star Commodore," Talia said. "Caught the *stravag* Spirits with their pants around their ankles."

"You don't trust the computers?" Kris responded.

"*Neg*. Not when it comes to this complex a calculation. To figure when the gravities between a planetary body and its moon will be thoroughly canceled enough to ensure we aren't torn asunder as we jump in-system? Borrine, I trust. You, I trust implicitly, sphinx raptor nerves and all. But the computer…."

He couldn't decide which he found more annoying. That she could be the XO of a starship and still not trust the brains of her craft, or that she would lecture him on points of astrophysics he could relate when he was thirteen. Neither was worth answering.

YORK

World Name: York
Star Type (Recharge Time): F2V (173 hours)
Position in System: 2
Time to Jump Point: 18.79 days
Number of Satellites: 1 (Huntington)
Surface Gravity: 1.3G
Atm. Pressure: Standard (Breathable)
Equatorial Temperature: 35° C (Arid)
Surface Water Coverage: 70 percent
Recharging Station: Zenith, Nadir
HPG Class Type (Clan): A
Highest Native Life: Amphibians
Population Size (3063): 57,100,000
Socio-Industrial Levels: A (Advanced)-B-B-B-C

When Clan Blood Spirit announced it would no longer deal with the other Clans, the Spirits moved to secure York for themselves alone. They claimed the world with relatively little bloodshed, as the Falcons were uninterested in defending one nearly-depleted mine and the Snow Ravens fought a one-on-one Trial of Possession between force commanders. The Star Adders have since breached the unity of York, seizing a small enclave on the world.

Aside from serving as the Blood Spirits' redoubt, York has little to recommend it (except, perhaps, by the standards of the Clan Homeworlds). It is a somewhat warm, large planet with high gravity, a large moon, and frequent tectonic activity. Its impressive mountain ranges, some volcanoes reaching into the gravity-compressed stratosphere, serve to shade continental interiors from rainfall. Much of the population thus settles along the coasts (or coastal mountain valleys, above the flood lines of quake-driven tsunamis).

"You know as well as I we paid for this information in a flood of Adder blood. Our raids over the years mere flesh-wounds, with far too many lost." The rage whirled within, yet tightly leashed. "Dropping a few key satellites during each raid allowed us to map this region of space across years. A level of detail never before gained of the York system, what with the Spirits' death-grip on their last bastion."

"L1's like this can still be fickle." The smile slipped.

An energy spike flared on the projection, drawing his eye and unfolding a data readout. A jump field was forming. An incoming JumpShip—the first of several—began its process of transition in-system, ferrying in troops for a massive assault; they'd be well away from that deadly sphere of energy when it fully formed.

The first of many. The information distracted him from irritation at his XO's oddly muddled thinking. "Even the Spirits will have learned to spread the precious remains of their WarShip fleet to blockade both standard jump points, as well as the standard L1," he continued. "They would never contemplate we had enough data to pull off this much closer jump."

His XO heaved her own sigh. He could practically feel her marshaling her decorum, leashing her tongue, transforming into his second-in-command. "*Aff.*" Smile back in place.

They would scramble a fighter screen in rapid response to the emergence wave that was mere minutes from the planet. A heavy fighter screen, with a host of assault DropShips for support. And they would have a WarShip. Though a bare handful remained, he knew the Spirits well enough. They would never leave the home world without the orbital protection of a capital-class vessel.

The time was coming. The time to teach the Spirits the consequences of meddling in the affairs of their betters. A lesson he would instruct with relish.

The anticipation began to build.

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25 AUGUST 3063

Ancient Star League algorithms spun through the ship's brain as it hurtled through space. Taking into account the delta-v of the *Essex*—along with the assault-class DropShip arrowing towards it from down-plane in comparison to its own trajectory—the computer reached a decision and initiated a spread of bracketing fire, hoping to catch its prey. Plasma explosions detonated in the breeches of the mammoth barrels bristling from the fore-left region of the ship as three class-20 naval autocannons spoke in tongues of piercingly bright light: the color of rage. Streams of shells—each barrel spitting out almost half a ton each of rapid-fire metal—catapulted at hypervelocity, attempting to savage a target over 800 kilometers distant.

Body as rigid as any bulkhead strut, Star Commodore Paik watched the battle, brown eyes black as the void with focus. One of his few eccentricities, he stood in his usual spot at the railing like one of those struts instead of strapped in the command seat.

ARTIST: DOUG CHAFFEE
PUBLICATION: TECHNICAL READOUT: 3055 UPGRADE
YEAR: 2005

Like a fast promulgating disease, explosions rippled across the skin of the distant DropShip as the weapons found their mark; the ship disintegrated in a glorious ball of silent flames.

"Another wave incoming," Talia said from a comms station.

Eyes moved to the holographic display where arrow trajectories showed a score of rising fighters along with another handful of assault DropShips; a dance of pillars of fusion fire, streams of shells and incoherent beams flashing in and out of vision as they energized space dust and debris fields, encompassed the forward viewscreen despite dozens of kilometers distance. How many Clusters have we destroyed? "*Stravag* Spirits!" For days they'd held off a landing. Days where endless fighter and DropShip screens rose to obliteration along the atmospheric interface against the massive tide of Star Adder ships.

"No, commodore. *Stravag* Snow Ravens," Talia responded to his unusual expletive.

He gritted teeth until stars threatened. Knew she was right. The Spirits had always been a small Clan. But after their abhorrent interference in the Absorption War against Clan Burrock, the Adders had punished them. Driven them back until only their homeworld of York offered shelter. For years the Adders further stung them, preparing for this day of full invasion. He knew their production capacity; knew what they could replace and in what timeframe. Knew that their wholesale adoption of the dead Jaguars' abomination technology of ProtoMechs came from desperation…a need for maximum output with finite resources.

"This volume of fighters cannot have come from the Spirits alone," he finally responded.

"*Aff.* The filthy Ravens are at work again. IIChi McFadden must have brokered a deal for the Ravens to ship in additional naval assets." There was no smile this time.

Fingertips and boot soles detected vibrations; a quick scan showed damage schematics lighting up a series of hits along the flank of the ship. Before he could open his mouth, the screen showed the pair of audacious fighters destroyed by his own screen of protecting fighters. "For too long their scheming has soiled the Clan way," Kris ground out. "The Ravens will receive our full attention…when the time is right."

"*Aff.*" came the fervent reply."

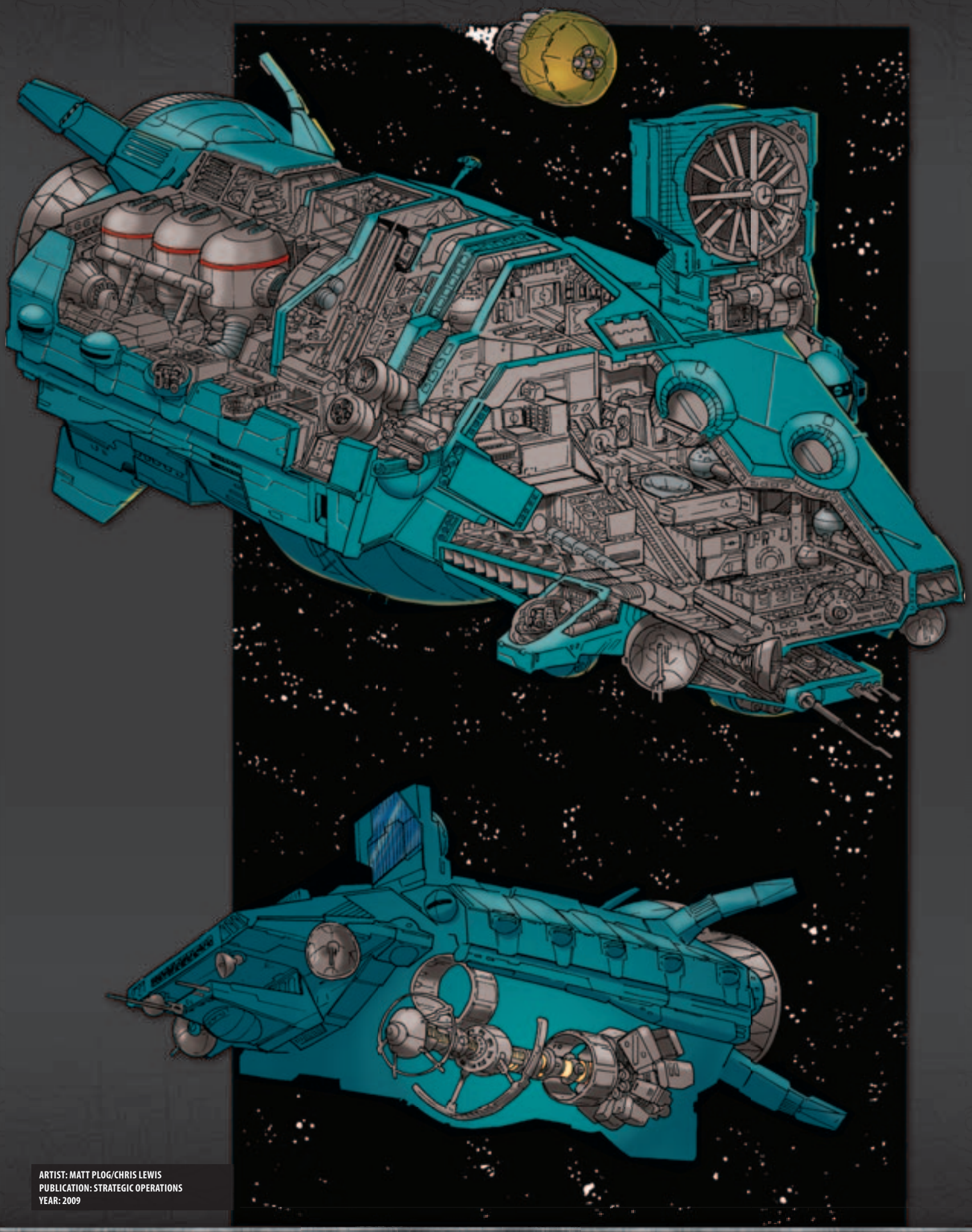
"Now where is the *Blood Fury*?"

Beyond adrenaline-spiked breathing and the staccato of keyboards, silence greeted his request. "How can we have lost it again?" The staccato became machine-gun fire at the calm tone…the calm before a storm.

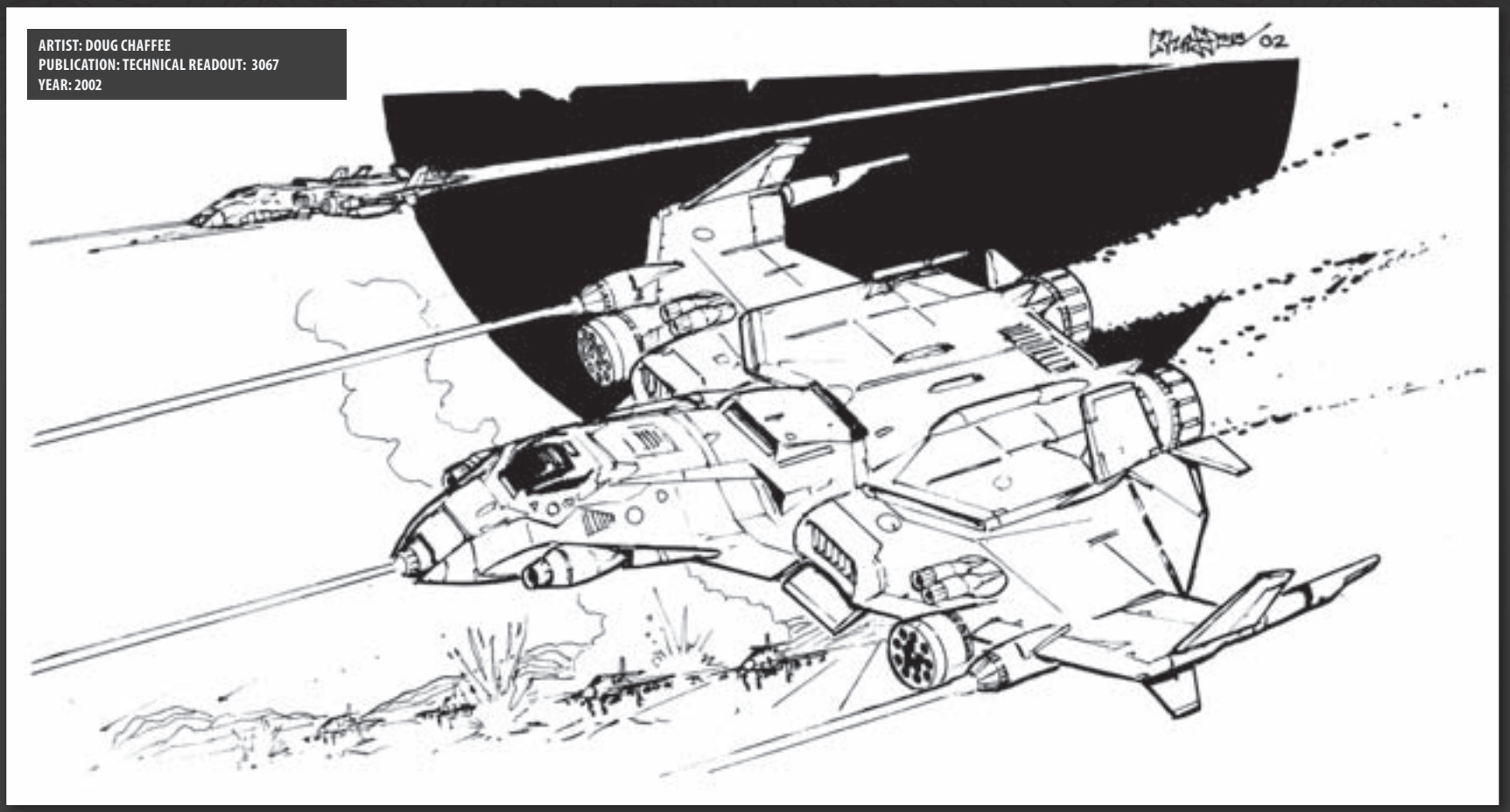
"I believe she has slipped behind planet once more," Borrine spoke, distaste at the vagueness palpable.

"You guess?"

ARTIST: PETER SCANLON
PUBLICATION: BATTLESPACE
YEAR: 1993



ARTIST: MATT PLOG/CHRIS LEWIS
PUBLICATION: STRATEGIC OPERATIONS
YEAR: 2009



"*Aff*, Star Commodore. The newly arrived fighter screen pulled my attention from the WarShip."

Kris swallowed a raging reply as eyes bored into his comms chief with the force of a naval PPC. Yet the man didn't flinch or turn away, taking the brunt of his commanding officer's displeasure. *Why I keep you around*, came the grudging thought through red-rimmed clouds of anger. *I'm in command of one of the largest invasion forces in the modern Homeworlds' era and yet the* savashri *Spirits keep me at bay!*

He breathed until his chest felt full to bursting, then spoke, teeth aching. "Destroy that new fighter screen. Find the *Blood Fury*. I want my troops planet-side within forty-eight hours." *Before the other WarShips protecting the zenith and nadir jump points are able to burn to planet.*

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27 AUGUST 3063

"This time you're mine." He spoke softly, language lazy with a contraction after so many days of constant warfare. In all his years of raids and counter-raids he'd never seen a defense like that thrown up by the Spirits.

"Alpha group preparing for orbital insertion," Talia said. "Commodore," she continued, a pause showing trepidation. "Are you sure this is wise?"

"*Aff*," he responded immediately, ignoring his own questions. "The Spirits have spent their men and ships as water against the sea to keep us at bay. And it is working," he continued, curbing his lazy tongue. "What is more, it has allowed their *Blood Fury* to slip in and out of battle, destroying any hesitant probes for landing. It is time we present the same dedication."

The arrows on the holographic display showed a convergence formation of most of the entire landing fleet—tagged as Alpha group—of DropShips and the army of fighter escorts lining up for an insertion run as blatant as the sun in-system.

"The obviousness of the trajectories."

"*Aff*. For days we've tried to slip some ships on planet. Failures all. It is time the entire invasion moves."

"Time we matched the Spirits'…commitment."

Despite his loathing of the Clan that turned what should have been a relatively easy Trial of Absorption into a bloodbath, he slowly nodded. *Nothing more. I give you nothing more,* stravags.

"Commit."

Commands flew across laser-linked communications and the mass of ships began a heavy-handed burn.

Come out, come out, wherever you are. The words tumbled through his head as he watched the majestic dance of delta-Vs of hundreds of craft as the defending aerospace fighters, finally depleted to a point his experience marked as patches of weakness, burned towards the invasion force to try to stop them one last time.

The Blood Fury *is the prize I want.* At this point, more than touching BattleMechs to ground, he wanted the elusive prey of the captain who'd out-maneuvered him (out-shown, he admitted to himself) for long, long days.

Seconds stretched into agonizing minutes like ferro-carbide armor slowly extruded and then spun in orbital factories he'd inspected. *Where is it?! I've left you a sign like a burning contrail across half an atmosphere!*

"Commodore!" Borrine spoke, voice atingle with excitement.

"I see," he responded as the viewscreen leapt forward with sickening speed to latch onto the elusive craft. Like an Albion viper shark in shallow waters, the *Blood Fury* hove into view, sling-shotting around the planet, bottom of the craft a crimson curtain of fire as she skimmed the upper atmosphere of York. Despite hatred, another nod of respect grudgingly emerged at the piloting acumen. He'd never seen the like before.

"Engage," he commanded, confident this viper shark he would finally catch.

His *Tehuantepec* roared savagely in response, a hail of naval autocannons, lasers, particle projector cannons and capital missiles launching down-vector; a layered skein of weapons fire to try to catch the craft with damage. As though moving by his will, his *Essex* vibrated heavily as the in-system drives ignited, the pilot moving the ship into an intercept pattern before Kris even spoke.

Despite the frantic dance of ships and endless gigajoules of energy and kinetic forces at work, the battle began to slow in Kris' mind, as though he were suddenly out of his body, floating in the void, a witness to the brilliant yet disturbingly silent orchestration of death unfolding across the upper skin of an uncaring planet hurtling through space.

The *Blood Fury* lashed with all its might against a flood of DropShips and aerospace fighters that burned crimson-bright making atmospheric interface. Scores of such craft littered near space, a galaxy of stars burning up as they hit

atmosphere, forcing entry trajectory aborts. All the while his *Essex* hammered at the *Lola III*-class vessel, tearing away armor and defenses.

His vision wavered as his banked rage mounted into a towering, physical entity taking control. *Fight me.* Savashri *fight me!* Despite aching body and jaw as he attempted to force the enemy captain by will alone to turn his sights toward him and give him a glorious fight to the death, the Spirit captain never wavered from his defense. Took the horrific pummeling from the Adder WarShip while it continued to cleave through DropShips, scattering destroyed vehicles and BattleMechs like discarded toys. He'd known this move would result in high losses. But he'd not gambled it would be this much.

"Sir, we've got him."

He battled against the currents of emotions, latching onto Talia's words. He swallowed heavily, throat constricted, copper-tang kissing his tongue (had he bitten his cheek?), before he could respond. "What?"

"The *Blood Fury*. She's finished."

For the first time in what seemed hours, he truly focused on the defending ship, taking in the garish rents and streaming debris. Watched the viewscreen as a lone *Sulla* and several *Hydaspes* fighters finished a daring run against the ship, new destruction evident; the telling blow? Eyes hit the holographic, bringing up schematic displays that tracked damage and potential damage. The ship was listing off its current course, the projection showing an impact with the atmosphere. An impact she was not correcting; an impact that would destroy her.

"She's lost her engines." He quickly looked to the fighters as they streaked away from the ship, display tagging the lead fighter, that lone *Sulla*: Star Commander Tri Paik. Of course. Blood will run true and the Remembrance would add a line for her glory.

"*Aff*," Talia responded, her smile the savage grin of the successful predator.

Another series of explosions washed out the forward viewscreen as another battery of weapons fire found its mark. Sensors showed sympathetic blasts tearing through the interior of the craft as a section the size of several DropShips seemed to vaporize under a mammoth explosion.

"What was that?" He couldn't imagine the craft had enough ammunition left for such a secondary detonation.

"No idea, Star Commodore. Who cares? Close, now."

His ire spiked for a moment and he considered reprimanding her for over-stepping her bounds, but it collapsed as fatigue took over. An anti-climactic ending to the most one-sided battle of his career. Conflicts between WarShips were rare, despite endless Clan raiding. His chance for unmatched glory was gone. He would land his troops, despite heavy losses. He would teach the Spirits the lesson they had long deserved…but his chance at naval glory was lost. Only the ground commanders would receive any glory now.

He clenched the railing until tendons popped, nostrils flaring as his energies flagged and he watched the enemy craft grow in the viewscreen, a reverse canopy of stars below it as his landing flotilla finally began full atmospheric interface.

ARTIST: RICK HARRIS
PUBLICATION: MECHWARRIOR: THE BATTLETECH ROLE PLAYING GAME SECOND EDITION
YEAR: 1991

"Sir!"

"What?" He didn't recognize the voice and turned to find a woman (Jasine?), her face writ large with horror, glancing at him while continuing to type as though trying to verify information.

"I've got a hyperspace field forming around the Spirit craft."

"What?" The fog of impending lethargy still worked its deadly magic.

"Sir…it's begun a jump sequence?"

"What?!" he shouted, surprise stripping away the last of his malaise, the thunder of his voice (a sound never heard on this ship) stunning all into silence.

"What?" he repeated, desperately pulling calm around him like well-worn blanket, yet one shredded unexpectedly.

He watched the woman visibly swallow and grope for words before responding. "They've begun the initiation sequence for a jump."

"That's not possible."

"I've verified the finding. Three times."

For the first time in his career, Star Commodore Kris Paik stood frozen with indecision, the enormity of the surprise robbing him of action.

"Star commodore," Talia said, voice urgent.

He shook his head, uncaring of the weakness shown, the stain on his blood. It brought him back to the here and now. The needs of his ship. "Move this ship now!" he roared.

His crew sprang into action. The heavy vibration under his feet spiked to screams of agony as lateral thrust attempted to curb the velocity of the ship and move it as quickly as possible away while he watched the energy spike—now tracked on the holographic display as a large window next to the enemy vessel—grow with each second.

They must have been planning this for long minutes, he raged. Despite the insanity of the jump, despite its assured failure as gravitic forces would shred the jump field and annihilate the ship when it attempted to enter hyperspace through a warped field, despite tearing out all safety protocols to force the coordinates into the K-F drive computers this far from a standard jump point, it still would have taken at least fifteen minutes to program. Fifteen minutes of knowing they would die, and still they fought with the savagery of a sphinx raptor.

"We're not going to make it," Talia whispered, her voice heard despite the savage vibrations almost throwing him from his feet and the Gs red-rimming his vision, as the *Essex* strained under the worst forces exerted against the vessel in more than three centuries.

God's eye opened.

Horrific energies unleashed themselves along the half-kilometer length of the *Blood Fury*'s Kearny-Fuchida hyperdrive as a sphere of energy attempted to form and pierce the fabric of space. As prophesied, gravity tore at the warp and weave of it, distorting the terrible blight of scintillating energy until the shivering of the field was a visible undulation of energies spinning out of control. The field expanded, racing towards the *Essex* and past in an eye blink.

God's eye closed.

Kris' skull met the bulkhead in a stunning display of stars to rival any borealis,

ARTIST: MATT PLOG/CHRIS LEWIS
PUBLICATION: STRATEGIC OPERATIONS
YEAR: 2009

blood awash in his mouth from a bitten tongue, and he passed into the blackness of unconsciousness.

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Siren alerts brought Kris around. He dry heaved as he spat blood from his mouth and realized he was slowly rotating in micro-gravity (*we've lost engines*?). He blinked rapidly to focus vision that wavered like sunlight through water before snapping into place; he grunted at the migraine spike. Fingers propped his head and found the mother of all goose eggs…but no wetness. He looked slowly around and found a scene of devastation: the command deck lit with the dark red of emergency lighting, bodies and debris adrift, flashes of sparks igniting strobes of pain in his head as several consoles spoke loudly of destruction.

"Star Captain," he said when he could find his breath. Silence greeted his words.

"Talia?" He looked around and found the railing within reach; hissed at creaking ribs as he reached to grab the handhold and pulled himself into a standing position; looked down to find one foot bare of a magnetic slip as he failed to find his usual firm footing.

"Dead." The voice was firm and flat, its usual truth stripping away confusion.

Kris looked to find Borrine settling into a comms station, fingers tapping to discover the damage to his craft, blood on his face ignored. A single nod in the direction of Talia, Borrine's only concession.

He looked over to find her floating body meters to his left, her face an unrecognizable mass of white bone, torn flesh and blood. He glanced around until he found the jagged corner of a console that seemed to mirror the damage.

The room brightened considerably as the holographic display stuttered to life and he set aside emotions for later. His ship had been horribly damaged and she—along with the living—needed him.

"The *Blood Fury*?" He spat another glob of blood into a spiral away from him while he awaited the answer.

"Gone."

"The landing force?"

Weak groans announced the awakening of others that had survived the cataclysmic experience of being so close to a jump.

"Commodore, another two DropShips and at least a dozen fighters were destroyed by the jump field. The rest appear to have grounded on York and are establishing a perimeter."

He nodded slowly. The audacity. The guts. The sheer…dedication. The fighting over the last few days had impressed him, yet his disdain remained. His thirst for personal glory remained also. That was the Clan way, after all, *quiaff*?

His fingers once more found the wound on his head, feeling how close it was to his temple; knowing how close the Reaper had come to removing him from the universe. Yet these Spirits went far beyond glory. They had demonstrated devotion fanatical even among the warrior society of the Clans. A devotion to the survival of their Clan that occluded all personal glory. A glory for the Clan as a whole.

As his ship slowly awakened from its close call, he awakened from his own personal demons. *This isn't about my glory. This is about glory for my Clan. As my Clan star climbs, so shall I. As we punish the Spirits and take control of part of their world for the first time, that glory belongs to every Adder.*

A predator's smile slipped into place and this time full acknowledgment was paid to the Spirits and their battle acumen. He would still punish them for their past sins. But he would do so as a superior warrior to a worthy foe.

"*Seyla*." He spoke the invocation to seal his new understanding.

ARTIST: MATT PLOG
PUBLICATION: AEROTECH 2: REVISED
YEAR: 2004

ARTIST: JIM HOLLOWAY
PUBLICATION: AEROTECH
YEAR: 1986

ARTIST: STEVE VENTERS
PUBLICATION: BATTLETECH REINFORCEMENTS
YEAR: 1986

ARTIST: DOUG CHAFFEE
PUBLICATION: STARTERBOOK: WOLF AND BLAKE
YEAR: 2008

ARTIST: KLAUS SCHERWINSKI
PUBLICATION: JIHAD HOT SPOTS 3072
YEAR: 2007

THREE SIDES TO EVERY STORY

KEITH R.A. DeCANDIDO

WORD AGAINST BLAKE
PIRATE 'CAST BY MARIKO GUARDADO
UNKNOWN LOCATION
13 AUGUST 3072

This is Mariko Guardado, with the latest *Word Against Blake*. If you're receiving this pirate transmission, then you're receiving the truth, rather than the lies spun by Word of Blake.

For those of you new to *WAB*, but who might recognize me, I used to announce the games at Silesia's Coliseum in Solaris City. After the Blakists took over, I was coerced into remaining at the coliseum, pretending to "announce" games that were yet another propaganda tool for the Blakists. But I was able to get away, and now I bring you these pirate 'casts to bring the *truth*.

Today is the 13th of August, 3072, and we have good news from Gibson, thanks to a portable HPG on board one of the Regulan WarShips that has generously provided near-real-time updates. The news? Not only has the Regulan force arrived, but its met no resistance during the inward burn. Let me say that again: they met *no resistance*. Obviously this proves what we've been saying all along: that Word of Blake's hold on Gibson is far weaker than they've tried to have us believe.

But then, that's the standard for the Blakists—their entire empire is built on propaganda. The problem with that is that once you start crying wolf, nobody believes you when the wolf is actually at the door. Which means it's impossible to credit anything the Blakists say, and it's almost to the point where we have to assume the opposite of whatever nonsense they're spewing.

In this instance, it's obvious that the tales of the "impregnable Gibson" are just another tired exaggeration from the Blakists.

I hope to have another report before the day is out, one that will talk of a Gibson that is liberated from the yoke of the Word of Blake.

This is Mariko Guardado with *Word Against Blake*, reminding you to keep the truth burning bright.

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HOURLY NEWS BULLETIN WITH BRONWYN SMITH
PORTENT, GIBSON
13 AUGUST 3072

Greetings, noble followers of the Word of Blake! I am Bronwyn Smith with your hourly news bulletin.

Regulan forces have engaged in a sneak attack on Gibson. Working with fifth columnists who have infiltrated our noble fighting forces on Gibson, the Hussars have made planetfall and are now shooting down civilians and innocents in their mad quest to remove this world from the Sainted Blake's benevolent protection.

Even now, their 'Mechs are storming through Portent, destroying property and taking lives indiscriminately.

The footage you are about to see was obtained from a heroic Blakist who sacrificed his life in order to provide us with these incredibly unpleasant images. We caution all younger viewers, and any who are squeamish, to turn away, as there is considerable violence here.

Watch as the Regulan 'Mech moves straight toward that private residence. Note that this is a house owned by a schoolteacher, Elsa Granelli, as well as her young son Nathan. Nathan is not home, as he is a dedicated Blakist fighting as a recruit in the 49th Shadow Division, who are even now arming themselves to prepare to repel this vicious onslaught.

But what concerns us are the actions of the Regulan 'Mech. Not content to invade our worlds and murder our noble soldiers, but here this 'Mech deliberately

GIBSON

World Name: Gibson
Star Type (Recharge Time): G2V (183 hours)
Position in System: 3
Time to Jump Point: 9 days
Number of Satellites: 2 (Unity, Understanding)
Surface Gravity: 1.0
Atm. Pressure: Standard (Breathable)
Equatorial Temperature: 38° C (Arid)
Surface Water: 59 percent
Recharging Station: Zenith
HPG Class: A
Highest Native Life: Mammals
Population (3072): 4,241,000,000
Socio-Industrial Levels: B-C-B-C-C

One of the most extensively terraformed worlds beyond the Terran system, Gibson was engineered to be as human-friendly as possible. From a world that was originally eighty percent dry land, the Ryan Ice Cartel almost trebled the water coverage. The advertising campaign touting Gibson's newly arable land drew many cultural groups from Terra and beyond. The process accelerated when Gibson became known as a culturally tolerant world of freethinkers.

Gibson's famous tolerance is often said to have initially drawn the Word of Blake refugees from the ComStar Schism in 3052. However, the Word might have been more interested in Gibson's sizable armaments industry, which was a linchpin of the FWLM throughout the Succession Wars. Whatever the case, the Word of Blake proved poor guests to the most generous of hosts, soon seeking to impose Blake's teachings on peoples whose byword was "live and let live."

Since the Jihad broke over the Inner Sphere, the Word's hold on Gibson has only increased, to the consternation of most of the population. Blakist dominance is enforced by a number of Shadow Divisions that regularly rotate throughout the planet.

seeks out this one house, confirms that Ms. Granelli is inside, and then destroys her home and kills her even as she pleads for her life.

Rest assured that this vicious, unprovoked attack on one of our citizens will not go unpunished. The Regulans may think they have the upper hand, but they have not reckoned with the Word of Blake.

I am Bronwyn Smith, and this has been your hourly news bulletin. Hail the Sainted Blake!

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EXCERPT FROM AN AFTER-ACTION REPORT
SERGEANT WALTHER O'RILEY-MADDOX
FOURTH REGULAN HUSSARS
17 AUGUST 3072

Intelligence reports had indicated that a supposed civilian named Elsa Granelli had been feeding information about the Hussars to the Blakies thanks to a sophisticated comm network. While our own contact on the ground—a civilian who provided us with the intel we needed to land safely on Gibson—knew of no such fifth columnist working for the Blakies, our spooks know their shit, so my mission during the invasion of Gibson was to find this Granelli woman, destroy her comm network and eliminate her as well.

Upon achieving planetfall, Corporal Baqui was able to hack into the local address directory, and finding Granelli's residence was a snap. I went to the location alone, figuring one 'Mech could handle it.

I was right in that. I confirmed that this was her house, that she was home, and that her house contained some impressive classified equipment that a schoolteacher on Gibson should never have access to—unless she was working with the Blakies.

The last thing she did before I took her down was ask me why I was doing this. As if the stupid bitch didn't know…

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WORD AGAINST BLAKE
PIRATE 'CAST BY MARIKO GUARDADO
UNKNOWN LOCATION
13 AUGUST 3072

This is Mariko Guardado, with the latest *Word Against Blake*. If you're receiving this pirate transmission, then you're receiving the truth, rather than the lies spun by Word of Blake.

It's still the 13th of August, 3072, and we've received word from the Hussars' HPG that the Word of Blake is using their on-planet propaganda machine to try to paint the Regulans as monsters in an attempt to rally support in their lost cause of keeping Gibson as one of the worlds under their alleged "protection."

This time, they're showing footage of a 'Mech taking down what appears to be a civilian target, a woman they identify as a "schoolteacher."

While it's possible that Elsa Granelli *also* teaches at a school, what she is truly is a high-ranking operative for Word of Blake. Based on telemetry we've received directly from the Hussars, Granelli's home was filled with sophisticated computer equipment akin to that you'd find in an intelligence agency's secret sub-basement.

In other words, once again the propaganda machine is crying wolf. Elsa Granelli is *not* a schoolteacher, she's an enemy agent, as dangerous as any soldier in one of their Shadow regiments.

We'll be bringing you more on the retaking of Gibson soon. This is Mariko Guardado with *Word Against Blake*, reminding you to keep the truth burning bright.

ARTIST: FLORIAN STITZ
PUBLICATION: JIHAD SECRETS: THE BLAKE DOCUMENTS
YEAR: 2008

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HOURLY NEWS BULLETIN WITH BRONWYN SMITH
PORTENT, GIBSON
13 AUGUST 3072

Greetings, noble followers of the Word of Blake! I am Bronwyn Smith with your hourly news bulletin.

As promised, the latest on our troops' efforts to keep Gibson under the protection of the Word of Blake—and those efforts have borne fruit, thanks to the arrival of the 52nd Shadow Division, led by the great *Manei Domini* himself, Precentor Apollyon.

We just obtained this footage, and it shows the warriors of the 52nd emerging from the city of Portent as they engage the Regulan mercenaries and drive them away from our fair city. The *Manei Domini*'s left fist is raised in defiance, reminding the Hussars that they are *not* welcome on worlds that fall under the protection of the Sainted Blake.

It should come as no surprise that Precentor Apollyon has appeared as if from

ARTIST: RICK HARRIS
PUBLICATION: NULL SET
YEAR: 1992

nowhere to ride to the rescue of the followers of the Word. The *Manei Domini* has always been there to rescue the downtrodden. When news of the death of schoolteacher Elsa Granelli reached his ears, he no doubt bent the laws of time and space itself in order to avenge her death.

This is what the Word of Blake's enemies never understand. When you live under the protection of the Sainted Blake, all wrongs against you will be avenged.

I am Bronwyn Smith, and this has been your hourly news bulletin. Hail the Sainted Blake!

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WORD AGAINST BLAKE
PIRATE 'CAST BY MARIKO GUARDADO
UNKNOWN LOCATION
13 AUGUST 3072

This is Mariko Guardado, with the latest *Word Against Blake*. If you're receiving this pirate transmission, then you're receiving the truth, rather than the lies spun by Word of Blake.

At the end of each of these 'casts, I remind people to keep the truth burning bright. It sounds easy, but it isn't. The truth isn't always pretty and it isn't always pleasant.

And today my commitment to the truth forces me to say that the Regulan forces that attempted to take Gibson from Word of Blake have failed. The people of Gibson, rather than being liberated from the Blakists, instead continue to be crushed under their iron fist.

Blakist propaganda would, of course, have you believe that this was all ordained, especially since the tide of battle turned when the 52nd Shadow Division, led by the self-styled "*Manei Domini*" himself, Precentor Apollyon, emerged from the buildings of Portent to rout the Hussars. The Blakists are still trying to sell the notion that Elsa Granelli was an ordinary schoolteacher, and the death of that "innocent" woman brought Apollyon back to Gibson in a flash.

The truth, of course, is, as I said, less pleasant. According to my sources, the 52nd superjumped back to Gibson for a refit following their prolonged fighting on Alphard.

In other words? Dumb luck. The refit wasn't scheduled, and had Apollyon gone elsewhere for the refit, or chosen not to engage in it at all, Gibson would no longer be a Blakist protectorate. *That*, my friends, is the truth.

This is Mariko Guardado with *Word Against Blake*, reminding you to keep the truth burning bright—no matter how hard that might be.

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"M'iko, that Word Against Blake *bit you just recorded?"*

"What about it, Patricia?"

"You can't send it out."

"What? Why not?"

"Are you out of your mind*? Do you know what* idiots *this makes the Hussars out to be?"*

"I don't give a flying fuck about the Hussars, Patricia. The only thing I care about is making Word of Blake look bad. As far as they're willing to admit, this was just a schoolteacher, and if I send this out, everyone will see them for being fools."

"Yeah, or maybe they know *that Granelli was the one feeding the Hussars the intel that got them on-planet safely, Hell, they probably fed the intel to the Hussars that she was helping the Weebs of Blake so that* they'd *do the dirty work of taking her out—then they turned around and used her as a rallying cry."*

"So?"

"So, M'iko, you're helping the Blakists by sending this out! It confirms that their enemies are incompetent morons who kill their own spies because they're too stupid to figure it out. That, plus *being forced to retreat after they practically had the planet in their hands…"*

"I told you, Patricia, I don't care about making the Regulans look good. All that matters is—"

"Is getting your revenge, yeah, I know *you're still pissed at them for fucking with your livelihood, but—"*

"That wasn't what I was going to say, Patricia."

"Fine, what were you going to say?"

"All that matters is the truth. I just spent my last *'cast talking about how the truth isn't pretty and it isn't pleasant. I can't just turn around and censor myself because the truth is inconvenient. The whole reason I started this was to counter the Blakists' lies with the truth."*

"Truth, huh? Like the truth that the Hussars were going to take Gibson? Like the truth that the Blakists' hold on Gibson was weak? You said that the Blakists are like the boy who cried wolf, except you forgot one thing: the boy was right *in the end. And so were the Blakists. Gibson* was *impregnable."*

"What about Granelli?"

"What about her? Christ, M'iko, isn't it better that she be remembered as a schoolteacher who was an innocent bystander in combat than as a woman who betrayed her own son and then was killed by incompetence?"

"I—I don't know. Honestly, both options are pretty shitty."

"Right. So let it lie. Being dedicated to the truth is fine, but it doesn't mean you have to reveal everything*."*

"Let me think about it."

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WORD AGAINST BLAKE
PIRATE 'CAST BY MARIKO GUARDADO
UNKNOWN LOCATION
14 AUGUST 3072

This is Mariko Guardado, with the latest *Word Against Blake*. If you're receiving this pirate transmission, then you're receiving the truth, rather than the lies spun by Word of Blake.

Today, I want to tell you about a woman named Elsa Granelli…

TEACH THE WICKED

PHAEDRA WELDON

BASTROP
HALL
WORD OF BLAKE PROTECTORATE
3 APRIL 3073

The metallic tang of blood woke him.

His ears rang from a recent explosion. Grit sealed his eyes shut. The lack of oxygen inside his lungs forced him to cough—though every instinct told him to be quiet.

They'll hear me.

Stifling a fit of coughing, Lieutenant John W. Traeger took a methodic check of his body, his position, and the condition of the coffee shop he'd been sitting in when the explosion happened. Memories of the last few minutes looped in his subconscious: the young couple by the door admiring a display of merchandise; the older couple seated by the windows overlooking the square sharing a morning paper.

And the little girl smiling shyly at him as she stood with her father by the front counter. In her hand she'd held a small, loved-on teddy-bear. John had winked at her and she'd buried her head against her father's coat.

There was a flash—and then nothing.

And now as his senses re-ignited--he smelled acrid smoke and oil, felt heat and tasted grit soot and sand in his teeth. He was alive.

In the distance he heard the thunder of bombs and he felt beneath him—around him—the vibration of 'Mechs as they clomped through the city. He didn't need anyone to tell him who had attacked—there was no need.

The Shadows had arrived.

Waiting for his sight to adjust to the smoke, John found he wasn't pinned—though the street wall of the building had come in on top of him—the table had broke most of it. Somehow he'd dove beneath at the last minute. He had no memory of moving, of reacting a half a beat behind the initial impact.

As a soldier he understood the action. As a soldier in the Martian Cuirassiers, John had learned about the two types of memory. Zane Cole taught his unit about it--how the mind has its memories, that of smell, and taste and sound. Yet the body has its own—created of intuition and survival.

It was that memory that saved him.

But…for what?

Sure that the coughing had subsided for the moment, John pushed himself up slowly using his hands and elbows. He paused--listening for any patrols. Wobbies only took survivors for one reason.

Re-education.

He shivered at the thought of being *conditioned* to believe any doctrine of poison the Word of Blake concocted. To have that kind of life? And not know it? To be willing to kill a city to make a point? To not know right from wrong?

Death was preferable.

John pushed up again and winced at the sound of rock and debris tumbling from the table that lay across his back. The clacking of rubble echoed in the small cave that was once the place where he and his wife met—twelve years ago.

The place where he'd arranged to meet her today. On their tenth anniversary.

Sarah hadn't shown before the bomb hit. Before the attack. He didn't know if she was somewhere in this ruin or out there…facing the enemy.

She could be stuck in a transport or a taxi, or worse--facing down a squad of Wobbie wackos. There were Shadows here—no other Blakist troops would be so violent.

Another push and he was on his knees. The ceiling was still intact—partially. Still suspended high enough that John was able to stand. His uniform was torn, ripped at his elbows and his shoulder where a nasty gash bled. Checking the rest of his body, he concluded that was the worst of the damage and he reached to his web belt and pulled out a small med-kit.

Quickly he staunched the bleeding with a field bandage and slathered it with antibiotic. The kit had painkillers but he ignored those. This wasn't the time to dull his thoughts. His only purpose at the moment was to get armed, get out of the ruin and get to a safe place—to Sarah.

HALL

World Name: Hall
Star Type (Recharge Time): K1V (192 hours)
Position in System: 3
Time to Jump Point: 5.18 days
Number of Satellites: 1 (Luanda)
Surface Gravity: 1.06
Atm. Pressure: Standard (Breathable)
Equatorial Temperature: 35° C (Arid)
Surface Water: 40 percent
Recharging Station: Zenith
HPG Class Type: B
Highest Native Life: Reptiles
Population (3073): 2,365,000,000
Socio-Industrial Levels: B-C-C-B-B

Situated deep within the Terran Hegemony, Hall was spared the depredations of the Age of War and prospered greatly during the golden years of the Star League. The Amaris Crisis and the Succession Wars that followed inflicted heavy damage on the world, eventually leaving it as a border planet between the Free Worlds League and the Capellan Confederation.

The Fourth Succession War saw Hall become a member of the autonomous Free Tikonov Republic, before being absorbed by the Federated Commonwealth. Generous investment in the so-called Sarna March helped to rebuild Hall's shattered industries just in time for the FedCom's breakup and the formation of the Chaos March to send things into a downward spiral as numerous factions vied to control the planet. Just prior to the Jihad, Hall rejoined the Free Worlds League, and was subsequently swallowed up by the Blakist Protectorate.

An arid world with just two large continents—northern Urra and southern Wass, which contains the world's capital of Harney—Hall is considered one of the most scenic worlds in known space. Hall's large deserts are home to a series of strangely compelling rock formations, consisting of solid walls of rock about five meters thick and sometimes more than two hundred meters long and of varying heights.

He checked his radio—dislodged and smashed by falling debris. From the darkness John doubted any power remained in the shop itself. Luckily his pistol was still in its holster. More ammo nestled in the pouches of his belt.

After wiping his forehead on his arm, the sweat and grime salty on his lips, John moved gingerly over the pieces of wall, shards of glass, broken ceramic and coffee grounds. The counter was still intact and he moved behind it—and came face-to-face with the barrel of a Nakjama. Behind it was the barista, a kid barely out of his teens. He was shaking.

Violently.

John put a finger to his lips and nodded toward the broken windows surrounding him. Either the kid was too scared to care or he recognized John from before—but he lowered the gun and handed it to him.

"Thanks," he mouthed as he knelt behind the bar.

The kid coughed. He had a nasty cut on his forehead and it looked like his lip had busted open. His eyes were red-rimmed and he was crying. "Mister…"

"Shhh," John whispered. He checked the Nakjama and slid it into his belt. Two weapons—better than one. He looked directly into the kid's eyes. "You the only one alive?"

He shook his head and then shrugged. "I don't know. I—I was blown back against the wall." He looked up at the busted wall where coffee urns had once rested. Where? Even John didn't know. "And then I woke up down here. I—the owner had that Nakjama stored under the counter."

John nodded. He was listening...and he was thinking ahead.

"Mister…"

He looked at the boy.

"Who—what's happened? Is it a robbery? Why would anyone do this?"

Putting a hand up to signal silence again, John tilted his head and then pointed at the ceiling with his index finger. "Listen…you hear that?" He was referring to the distant explosions, the screams of civilians nearby, and the vibration of 'Mechs.

The kid's eyes widened and he nodded.

"This isn't a robbery—not like you're thinking," John said. Though it is a robbery of your freedom if you survive. "What you're hearing are Manei Domini."

Oops. Shouldn't have said that.

From the past three years that name was now synonymous with murder. With destruction. And with death.

The Wobbies had conquered every world they'd invaded. And this kid knew that. And now they were on Hall and fighting. Not just in garrison. Fighting.

When it looked like the kid was going to scream, John held up the pistol and aimed it at the kid's face. "Make a sound, and I'll cap you right here. What we have to do is get out of here and get hidden. If they find us, they'll shoot or take us captive."

The kid shook his head violently. "No, no, no…I don't want to be a robot."

"Then do what I tell you to." Every instinctual warning in his body told him not to take the kid. Survival was easiest without him. It would be easier to kill him now—save his soul from imprisonment inside one of their conditioned slaves.

But John had never been one for smart decisions. Look at the one he'd made this morning—to meet his wife for coffee instead of staying with the unit. Now he was cut off and in no way equipped to defend anyone.

If he'd said no to her request—she'd be home and he'd know where to find her.

But now?

He was torn in six different directions.

"You do what I do. I don't think there's anyone left alive in here." *And I don't care at this point.*

And then he turned to his left—and saw the bear.

The one the little girl had been holding a she clutched her father's hand.

John knelt down beside it, reached out, and picked it up. It was soft—covered in dust. He didn't know why he opened his shirt and stuffed it just inside, re-buttoning it to keep it closed and the bear safe.

And he didn't care.

ARTIST: KLAUS SCHERWINKSI
PUBLICATION: A TIME OF WAR: THE BATTLETECH RPG
YEAR: 2009

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The kid nodded and moved into a crouch, copying John's movements. With a glance over the counter he led the kid to the back room where the wall that joined the clothing store was missing. Racks of material, shoes and some furniture lay half-buried around them as they moved slowly, and cautiously.

There wasn't any real door left to the place, so John motioned for the kid to keep low as they stepped out onto the sidewalk.

It was worse than he expected.

More than half of the buildings were little more than mounds of brick, mortar, wire and dust. A cloud of dust and grime hung heavy in the morning air. The smell of oil was overwhelming as the vibration beneath John's feet announced the movements of a 'Mech nearby.

The streets were littered with rubble and bodies, half-crushed automobiles—they looked like the mangled toys of a child cast aside after play in a children's city of building blocks. He saw several downed 'Mechs, on fire, black smoke billowing.

And he recognized their markings.

Martian Cuirassiers.

So his unit had had advance warning—but from the looks of the damage—it wasn't enough. Not enough to stand against a Shadow Division.

Motioning to the kid, he crouched even lower, had his pistol ready and started toward the west side of town—to the spaceport, his unit's ships. But the journey was slow-going as he and the kid spotted battlesuits with Wobbie emblems. John pulled the kid with him into an alcove and slapped a hand over his mouth as the suit used a flamethrower to ignite a few survivors screaming for help from the wreckage of a family car.

A roaring overhead brought them out of the alcove and John looked up to see Word of Blake ships fly over in formation. He saw more bombs dropping in the distance.

Bombs. Or 'Mechs.

The two of them avoided the scarlet robes of the Wobbie ground crews as they mopped up the mess, incinerating bodies as they passed. The smell of burnt flesh clung to the back of John's mouth but he kept going, either dragging or pushing the kid along.

They made it a good kilometer or so toward the spaceport before John saw another of his unit's downed 'Mechs. This one he recognized. It was Cusak's *Javelin*. It was on its side, the cockpit a smoking crater. John stood in its shadow, staring. So many times he'd fought beside this 'Mech, driving the ammo trucks, even helping on its maintenance. To see it like this—John's eyes burned and he clenched his free hand into a fist.

"Oh my god," he kid said on his right. "This is a nightmare."

John nodded but said very little. He retrieved the Nakjama from his belt and handed it to the kid. "You keep this on you—hide in those shadows. I'm going up there," he said as he holstered his pistol.

"No," the kid pulled on his arm. "You can't leave me here—"

But John ignored him, using his good arm and shoulder to pull himself up to the closest ladder rung. Climbing up to what remained of the cockpit was tricky—the metal was still hot in places, and slippery with oil, but after a few minutes or so, John reached the cockpit's edge.

There was little to nothing left of the couch where Cusak piloted the 'Mech. He was somewhat happy his friend had died quickly, and not in the hands of the Wobbies.

But John had an ulterior motive for climbing up—and not to see if his dead friend's body was there. After helping on the 'Mech, Cusak has shown him his secret stash of weapons, his extra insurance policy he'd managed to collect in case he ever found himself in a downed 'Mech.

And still alive.

John picked his way to the edge and slid down, careful not to cut himself on jagged metal or touch still-smoldering slag. The compartment was behind the couch, and from what he could tell, still intact. He paused a second, listening for sounds outside. The battle was winding down—and John didn't have to radio in to his unit to know that Hall was falling.

Would fall.

Had fallen.

And the Shadows were relentless in their pursuit of survivors. He and the kid would be found. The spaceports would be fully armed. All traffic and out monitored. All communication blocked.

There was no point, really.

But he wouldn't give up without a fight.

It took time to get the compartment open, the latch having resettled and warped when the 'Mech was hit. Inside he found an automatic rifle, several small packets of C4 and a small hand-made bomb, one of Cusak's specialties.

John quickly gathered up a spare utility vest, stuffed the pockets with what he could carry and climbed down from the cockpit.

The kid wasn't there.

John looked around the alcove he'd told the kid to stay in but there was no sign of him. He didn't dare call out in case there were any Wobbies nearby. Either the kid had wondered off or he'd been captured.

Settling down behind the alcove so he could check the automatic, John saw a pool of fresh blood. Either the kid's or someone else's, they were here seconds ago. He put his finger in the pool. It was still warm.

If the kid was taken then he'd either be tortured/reconditioned or killed outright. He could see the kid's face in is mind—begging not to be turned into a robot.

Yes, the Manei Domini did resemble robots. Androids. Creatures no longer fully human. He'd seen a Precentor once, years ago. A woman with legs to die for, and arms of cool, smooth silver. To this day he would swear when she looked out from her hood there was no humanity in her eyes.

Just monster.

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What John had to do was make a decision. He could continue heading in the direction of the spaceport and see what condition the ships were in, or he could follow the trail of blood to see what happened to the kid. And if had been taken, kill him. Or he could try to find Sarah. If she was still alive.

It was the best he could do.

John crouched low and used every tracking skill he had to keep up with the drops of blood as they moved around the building by Cusak's 'Mech and down the street. The trail eventually turned back toward the center of town, back the way they'd come.

It would stand to reason the kid could have been wounded during the initial bombing and hadn't noticed he was bleeding until it was too late. Maybe he was panicking, going back to the last place he remembered.

Or there was a more insidious plan.

John was being led to where the Wobbies that found the kid wanted him.

ARTIST: KLAUS SCHERWINSKI
PUBLICATION: JIHAD HOT SPOTS: 3076
YEAR: 2009

John stopped his tracking and hid behind a wall of rubble. He needed to think. To a civilian such thinking would seem paranoid. But John's instinctual memory called out to him. He'd been here before. He'd fought against guerrillas before. He understood the Wobbies' need to control everything about an individual until there was no more individual. Manipulating John to return to the coffee shop would be within their control.

Was this what was happening now?

Or was he being paranoid?

Several minutes passed before he continued tracking the kid's blood. The trail led him back to the ruined coffee shop and a street beyond in the city's square.

Before the morning's destruction, the square had been the hub of traffic, an interconnection of roads, a latticework of traffic lights and pedestrian crossings, the center fountain was fashioned in the likeness of the town's founder and surrounded by a plethora of food stands. John and his wife had frequented the square on his rare visits. Earlier they'd planned on grabbing a quick breakfast and then shopping together.

And after that—the ending to a perfect day.

Now there was little more than chunks of concrete and slices of glass decorating the square. The fountain was a mound of ash and rubble where a 'Mech and crushed it underfoot. A stream of water shot a high in the air as the pressure died. The buildings that protected it from wind and sun were gone. Crushed flesh, bone and twisted metal was all that remained. That and the overwhelming stench of death.

But the square was far from empty.

John moved behind the half-standing walls, his eyes taking in the sight as he found a place to hide.

Two 'Mechs framed the crushed fountain, their upper-torsos twisting back and forth as their pilots scouted the area. Wobbies in battlesuits along with crimson-robed infantry checked bodies, dragged them along and began making piles along the sidewalks.

In the center stood three figures—two dressed in white, the center draped in heavy, crimson robes with gold trim.

The hood of the scarlet robe was pulled over the face like a cowl, hiding his features. The two in white could not have been more different.

One was male, with a silver skullcap. His face was only half flesh—the other half was a network of gears and metal rings like the inner workings of a chronometer. His robe glistened in the sun that tried to peek through the thick smoke.

The other—

John swallowed. The other figure was feminine in a most attractive form. Unhooded, her head was devoid of hair and when she turned her eyes gleamed silver in the sunlight. Her bare arms and most of her legs protruded through deftly-cut slits in her white robe and John noticed most of what he saw was body armor.

She was the most beautiful—and the most terrifying—creature he had ever seen.

The sight that pulled him away from the three was the small corral of people to the right, surrounded by the crimson-robed infantry. John couldn't see everyone clearly—but he did see enough to realize survivors were being held in a Wobbie-made pen.

He needed to get closer. He needed to know what was going on.

Looking down, he realized he was an obvious target. Death would be a welcome end before capture. But if he were taken he would be stripped of his weapons. And he'd need a way to strike back, if only against himself.

How best to hide them?

John removed all that he had and took stock of it, laying it carefully on the cracked concrete ground. Something protruded from is middle and he unfastened his shirt.

The teddy bear stuck its head out—and an idea came to him.

Using a knife from the medkit to rip a hole in the seam of the bear, he set the trigger of the bomb before stuffing it inside the toy. Using the needle and thread to sew up teddy-flesh, he mended it carefully. Sweat beaded down his face and dripped from his nose.

It took half an hour of careful work, but he had a disguised working explosive. He carefully tucked the bear back into his shirt. He had to make sure not to fall on the bear—direct pressure like that would set it off and take out everything in a huge radius. He knew how Cusak's bombs worked. Small package, big delivery.

And if that didn't work, it had a timer.

ARTIST: FLORIAN STITZ
PUBLICATION: JIHAD HOT SPOTS: 3076
YEAR: 2009

It was perfect. If they took a piece of him. He'd take a piece of them.

He had the auto slung over his shoulder as he moved cautiously around the square from building to building. As he neared the department store closest to the fountain's remains, he found he could hear what the three were saying.

"…as easy as you estimated," the white-robed man said as he faced the woman.

She smiled and her eyes seemed to glow on their own. "Ah, Rochart, you're such a pessimist. The battle is over. There was little resistance—especially from the mercenary unit at the spaceport."

"Yes," said the hooded man in the crimson robes. His face was turned away from John. "The resistors. A pity their sacrifice didn't save the city."

"Such is the fate of all who reject the orders of the Master's chosen," the woman said. "The Martian Cuirassiers broke their contract when they refused to make an example of the city. They paid the price."

"They were pathetic," the white-robed man spat. "Useless."

Were pathetic. John closed his eyes. That was the confirmation he needed. The unit was gone. *Death was preferable*, he remembered. *Death to becoming monsters like these*.

"Were we able to salvage any of their 'Mechs?" the hooded man asked.

"Yes," the white-robed man jumped in before the woman could answer. "We have seven."

"Seven?" the hooded man's melodious voice rose just a half-octave. "Out of how many 'Mechs total? My, my, Precentor Rochart. It seems to me that if they were as useless as you complain, then you should have been able to salvage more than seven."

The woman smiled. John remembered seeing that sort of predatory expression before.

On a tigress.

The white-robed man looked less happy.

The hooded man turned then, and John saw his face.

He wasn't sure what he thought he expected—only that what he saw did not match the monster he thought he would see.

The man was tall—taller than the two flanking Wobbies. The face that peered out from beneath the robe had an ethnic color and features to it—Polynesian perhaps? The only cybernetic enhancement John could make out on his face was a glowing green right eye.

As he moved, his right hand resembled more of a metallic claw, and his legs looked to be either cyborg or encased in body armor. He was a daunting figure, imposing.

And he was important.

John quietly pulled his weapon up and braced it against the ruin. He sighted on the man through his scope—fixed it over where his heart should be.

If he had a heart.

"You can try and shoot me," said the hooded man. "But I'm afraid that weapon will not damage my body."

It wasn't until the image in his scope looked directly at him through the targeting sight that John realized he was talking to him.

With a curse he sat up from the weapon. All three of them were facing him. There was no panic on their faces. It was as if they'd all seen nothing more than an unpleasant bug.

Movement behind him told him he'd been spotted by the infantry. Within seconds he was surrounded and he put his hands in the air. The weapon and the vest and web belt were removed and he was marched down the ruin to where the three stood.

He was almost even in height with the hooded man. And this man was even more daunting close up. The woman's eyes were what frightened him the most, and he realized she wasn't bald as he had first thought. A short cap of black stubble covered her scalp, as if she'd shaved her head and the hair had had time to grow back.

"I am Precentor Apollyon of the Fifty-Second Shadow Division. This is Demi-Precentor Setiwah," he nodded to the woman, "and Demi–Precentor Magna Rochart."

Both of them nodded.

John kept his gaze on the tall one, Apollyon. Though he was every bit as dangerous as the other two, there seemed to be a calm about him. As if he had not a worry in the world. "Lieutenant John Traeger, Martian Cuirassiers."

"Ah," Apollyon said in a neutral tone. "So there is a survivor from that mercenary unit. I will commend your comrades, Lieutenant. They fought bravely."

John took a deep breath. "But not bravely enough."

"Brave is brave, Lieutenant Traeger. They were hired to do a job. Despite their failure in that task, they fought bravely."

John cleared his throat. He saw the corralled prisoners behind the Precentor. A mingling of women, men and children. Very small children.

One small child in particular.

The little girl from the coffee shop.

Apollyon noticed his look and glanced back. "Oh, the survivors. A few of them will be joining us, Lieutenant. They'll be conditioned and re-educated and brought into the new world. I'm more fond of the younger ones— they're more pliable and do not take up our resources."

John kept his mouth shut. He wasn't sure what to do—he hadn't imagined the child would still be alive. He had hoped his wife at least—but not her.

Apollyon looked at him. He smiled cordially. "I take it you know about our training program."

"I'd rather die, sir. I would request it of you. Soldier to soldier."

The hooded man shook his head slowly. "I'm no soldier, Lieutenant. I'm a peacekeeper. And sometimes it is better to teach the wicked a better way to live than to give them the solace of death." He frowned at the front of John's shirt and reached out with his clawed hand.

The shirt tore and the Precentor caught the stuffed teddy-bear with a nimble reaction. He frowned at it and then looked at John. "This was your child's?"

"No," John swallowed. "It belongs to that girl." He nodded to her, standing beside a girl maybe five years older than she was. They were clutching each other in terror. "I saw her earlier. I didn't know she was alive."

Apollyon nodded. "She is marked for education. And so will you be." He looked at the infantry. "Bind him."

John winced as his arms were jerked roughly backward and his lower arms were secured tightly to each to each other. His shoulder sang in pain but he used that pain to keep a firm focus on what could happen.

If luck was with him.

He was marched past Apollyon to the corral of people and moved to right beside the two girls and two older men. Six others were held away from the others. Before John realized what was happening he was shoved to the ground and his ankles were bound tightly. He was helpless.

The staccato release of a machine gun broke the silence as two infantrymen opened up on the segregated survivors. They fell as bullets riddled their bodies and blood flecked on John's and the girls' faces. The girls screamed and huddled near him on the ground as the old men began to pray.

Apollyon gave orders to finish things up and bring a transport to move the survivors. The two Demi-Precentors remained nearby as he stepped past the infantry barricade and knelt in front of the little girl. Her eyes, full of tears, widened and she shrunk back from the monster in front of her.

"This is yours, I believe," Apollyon said. His voice was silk, and his demeanor that of a savior. "It is best he remain with you for your journey."

The little girl wasn't sure what to do. John could see she wanted her bear back, wanted her daddy, but she was afraid. She whimpered softly.

The older girl prompted her to take it. And finally she did reach out with small hands and take her treasure back.

Apollyon smiled and stood. And then he walked away and disappeared. The two white-robed Demi-Precentors gave orders. The transport had arrived.

The older girl looked at the little girl and smiled. John smiled at her and caught her eye. "What is his name?"

Her voice was a whisper. "Bear-bear."

John felt his eyes burn as sadness overwhelmed him. "I think Bear-bear missed you…and he could use a hug."

Her smile lit up his heart as she squeezed the bear to her tiny chest as hard as she could.

ARTIST: ALEX IGLESIAS
PUBLICATION: HANDBOOK: MAJOR PERIPHERY STATES
YEAR: 2009

ARTIST: NEIL ROBERTS
PUBLICATION: A TIME OF WAR: THE BATTLETECH RPG
YEAR: 2009

ARTIST: ALEX IGLESIAS
YEAR: 2009

WELL MET THE FUTURE

MICHAEL A. STACKPOLE

VALNYA, TUKAYYID
GHOST BEAR DOMINION
11 OCTOBER 3073

Until you greet your friends' children as adults, you never truly feel your own mortality. Your own children never afford you that luxury. My children were yet just infants. Through them I could see life continuing. They were hope of immortality.

And yet, in a very dark time, not much of it.

Through the years—the years of endless warfare—I'd watched too many sons and daughters die. One of the odd things about our MechWarrior way of life is that when a father dies in a war machine, it's repaired, and the family offers up another member like a sacrifice. In any other line of business, people would run screaming away from the thing that killed a parent; but MechWarriors were drawn like moths to a flame.

You do have hopes, sometimes, that the cycle will be broken. I had long thought my guest would escape.

I'd not seen David Lear in years, many of them. Small like his mother and slender like his father, his bright eyes shared his parents' intelligence. His Capellan heritage had also sharpened his eyes a bit, and when he smiled I recalled his father, Kai, from our early years. The same intensity and good nature.

He'd come straight from the spaceport. His green uniform showed wrinkles from a reentry harness, but he moved with none of the stiffness that burning into an atmosphere imparted to me these days. I would have envied him his youth, but the journey had been the least grueling of the things he'd endured recently.

The young man offered me his hand. "Highness, thank you for seeing me."

I shook it firmly. "Highness long past, Dr. Lear."

David blushed. "Not a doctor yet, Precentor Martial. I need to complete that dissertation."

I covered his hand with mine. "No titles, then. Friends should never be trapped by ceremony. Call me Victor."

"I wish I could." White teeth flashed. "My father would be pleased with your invitation, but mortified if I accepted it."

I laughed. "I imagine he would. Your parents are well?"

The young man nodded. "You would know better than I. I was given communications from both as the ship came down. Were there problems, I suspect you'd have been informed."

I waved him toward the couch in the temporary office our hosts supplied me. "In the old days, ComStar might have told me some things, but we're not terribly given to reading content these days. The Blakists give us more than we can handle."

"They do that with everyone." He nodded, then sat on the close end of the sofa.

I moved behind the chair closest to him. Nothing of the furnishings matched. All of it—provided by the frugal generosity of Tukayyid's new Clan rulers and their Rasalhagian friends—showed wear, but given the privations of the war against the Word of Blake, I was fortunate to have an office at all, much less equipment to fill it. What once would have been described as squalor now seemed unparalleled luxury.

David didn't seem to notice. If even half of what he'd been through in the last two years was true, he must have thought himself back in the opulent days when his grandmother ruled the St. Ives Compact. Those days, so distant now, and the Inner Sphere so different.

I leaned forward on the chair. "I've read all the material your father forwarded. Your arguments, very well reasoned. Concise and incisive, suitably informative. You're an excellent analyst. If you want to come work for me, I'll hire you in a heartbeat."

"Thank you." David glanced down at his hands. "I think you understand that what I'm involved in now is more than a job."

"A cause."

"More than that, even. A vocation, really. A lifelong commitment." He glanced up. "You know. You believe in things. You've made choices, hard choices."

TUKAYYID

World Name: Tukayyid
Star Type (Recharge Time): G6V (187 hours)
Position in System: 4
Time to Jump Point: 7.01 days
Number of Satellites: 2 (Ayyub, Seyyeb)
Surface Gravity: 1.03
Atm. Pressure: Standard (Breathable)
Equatorial Temperature: 40° C (Arid)
Surface Water: 60 percent
Recharging Station: Zenith
HPG Class Type: A
Highest Native Life: Mammals
Population (3073): 3,700,000
Socio-Industrial Levels: B-B-B-C-A

A relatively mild and somewhat arid world, Tukayyid was first settled in the 27th century. Most of Tukayyid's landmasses are comprised of grassy plains controlled by large agrocombines. During House Kurita's rulership of the world, several minority religions came to Tukayyid and set up monastic communities in the mountains, and even under the Crucible Sea. As a result, Tukayyid's population stayed relatively small and the planet possessed a decentralized government, with each corporation running its holdings like a fiefdom.

Everything changed in 3052, when ComStar challenged the Clans to fight a proxy battle on Tukayyid for control of Terra. Some seventy-two ComStar divisions faced off against twenty-five Clan Galaxies in the largest engagement since Kerensky's liberation of Terra. The battle lasted for twenty-one bitter days, but in the end ComStar won a fifteen-year truce from the Clans. Following the battle, ComStar made great strides in restoring the world and attracting large numbers of refugees from across the Free Rasalhague Republic. Tukayyid remained a ComStar staging ground and eventually became its home following the loss of Terra to the Blakists in 3058.

This made the world a primary target during the Jihad, and the Blakists wrought massive devastation on the planet while attempting to destroy their heretical brethren. Unable to watch this horrific assault on their Dominion kin, Clan Ghost Bear launched an assault to cleanse the world of the Blakist taint in 3070. With the approval of the Rasalhague Riksdag, Tukayyid and the remaining Free Rasalhague worlds were swallowed up by the Ghost Bear Dominion. Since then, the Bears have set about rebuilding this shattered world once more.

ARTIST: FLORIAN STITZ
PUBLICATION: JIHAD HOT SPOTS: 3076
YEAR: 2009

I sighed, my shoulders aching as I held myself up. "It's not the choices that are hard; it's the living with the consequences."

"Yeah." David lifted his chin. "The consequences of this choice are huge."

"I suspect no one understands how big. Even the man himself." I plucked a command remote from my desk and flicked the monitor on the far wall to life. A mélange of videos melded one into the other. Shots of combat, with 'Mechs hammering each other competing with shadowy shots of a large man. The legend beneath the images read *Can Devlin Stone be stopped?*

David glanced at the monitor, then smiled. "Those reports aren't the real thing."

"There are undoubtedly many who wish they were." I nodded. "I know this is all Blakist propaganda. Even so, these reports shape perception, David."

"And that's why I've come to you, Precentor Martial." David opened his hands. "People see Devlin Stone and what he's done as a nightmare. It's not. It's a vision. You can make them see that."

"You credit me with a great deal."

"I know what I know. About you. About him." David stood. "He's saved my life more times than I can count."

"For that he is owed great thanks."

David glanced down for a second. "It's funny, but my father used to tell me stories about you. I mean, neither one of us is tall, right; so he wanted me to know that I could do great things just like you. That size wasn't a limitation."

My cheeks burned. "Your father is very kind. He could have found much better role models for you."

"Devlin Stone is the same way you were, sir. One guy against Word of Blake, but he never let limitations stop him." The younger man shook his head. "I watch him act, and I hear echoes of my father's stories about you. Please, sir, meet with him. Listen to his vision. Then decide if you will help."

I scratched my cheek. Devlin Stone had appeared from nowhere. With David Lear he'd engineered a revolt that freed Kittery from the Word of Blake. Not content with that sole victory, they had spread out and liberated other worlds. The battling had been fierce. In the struggle for freedom, Stone had been relentless.

And in peace, he and David had been innovative. They organized their worlds into an administrative district and set up a self-sustaining economy. They defied the Blakist attempts at re-conquest and retribution. Their successes had outstripped that of any other organized resistance. The chance to meet with the architect of such an accomplishment was hard to refuse.

I nodded. "Bring him here. I'll meet with him."

David shook his head. "You have to go to him."

I laughed. "Kittery is a long journey from here, two months minimum, with a command circuit. If these preliminary meetings go well, then perhaps I could make the journey.'"

"You don't understand, Highness, he's closer than you think." David's eyes tightened and I noticed his crow's-feet for the first time. "Devlin Stone is here. He's waiting for you."

▲▼▲

I fear I didn't do a very good job of covering my surprise. *Here? And I didn't know?* That I didn't know bothered me greatly. I admired Stone's ability to move about without notice. That had kept him alive during a time when the Word of Blake wanted him dead. I'd even heard it posited that there was not *one* Devlin Stone, but several. Word of Blake just hadn't gotten around to killing off the last of them.

That neither he nor David trusted me enough to let me know that Stone was coming here, on the other hand, irked me. Such a breach of diplomatic protocol was all but unforgivable—and a capital offense in some circles. That just wasn't how these things were done.

But then, Devlin Stone hasn't been playing by the rules. And he's been successful. Seated in a small vehicle as David drove, I smiled. *Perhaps there is a lesson here for all of us. The time for protocols and conventions may be long past.*

David had found a small house on the outskirts of the city, up in the hills. He'd rented it while his DropShip had been incoming. It had been abandoned for a while—weeds had grown up to hide the realtor's sign. Another four or five years of Blakist problems, and whole worlds would be deserted and overgrown.

Built of river-stone, with a slate roof and tucked back on a wooded lot, the house suggested peace and sanctuary. For a man who had been in constant danger for two years, that sense was invaluable. Yet it probably hadn't been Stone's choice. David picked it out—both for Stone and me. Both of us could use a sanctuary.

I fell in love with the place the instant it came into view. Within a week I would buy the house and yet, ironically, spend less than a month in it over the years. Still, that time was cherished, and I always told myself it was to that house that I would retire.

If I ever got the chance.

David swerved around a furry mound that looked like roadkill. "Forgive my erratic driving. Blakists started hiding improvised explosive devices in animal carcasses about eight months back."

"No need to apologize. I'm surprised, however, that you haven't been in a 'Mech cockpit." I glanced at him. "Given your bloodline…"

David's expression tightened. "Word of Blake thought the same thing. They wanted me fighting for them. Did everything they could to break me down. Resiliency of youth, my ties to my heritage, I don't know, but I remembered who I was. I remembered that I don't like war, that I don't want to kill. Pacifism isn't something you want in a MechWarrior."

"Truth be told, David, I would welcome it in more warriors. Knowing *how* to kill isn't much of an accomplishment. Knowing when it's *necessary* is the trick."

He half-smiled as he pulled into the drive and then around the house. "I'm glad to hear you say that."

"Why?"

He glanced at me curiously, then returned his gaze to the shadowed driveway. "Too many people can only see the enemy, and don't look at what has to happen after the war is won. The end of war doesn't guarantee peace. Peace is much harder work, especially if you want it to last."

He stopped the vehicle and we got out. Dying sunlight poured through the leafy canopy. I paused for a moment, willing myself to think of nothing beyond my range of vision. Green warmth, the rustle of leaves, the chittering of an outraged squirrel, I let all those things take me back to a day when that was the norm. Not that I had ever known many of those days. *Have you ever known any, Victor?*

David led me in through the back door. I didn't notice any alarm system. I didn't see any guards. I wasn't sure if that was good or

ARTIST: BEN NEWMAN
PUBLICATION: MASTERS & MINIONS: THE STARCORPS DOSSIERS
YEAR: 2009

bad. Either Devlin Stone was supremely confident, or foolishly over-confident. Or, worst of all, a fatalist.

David paused inside the doorway of a room that had once been the house's library. Later I would fill the shelves with books, but their empty state now made the room seem cavernous and barren. A small fire burned in a hearth that had been fashioned of the same river stones as the house. It brought a modicum of cheer to the room that otherwise could have been a sepulcher.

The blaze illuminated the giant known as Devlin Stone. Half-golden from the firelight, and half hidden in shadows, he easily could have been mistaken for a Clan Elemental. Brooding and powerful, the kind of man who made you wonder if you wanted to be walking on the same side of the street, or if it was time to get out of his way.

He walked fluidly toward me, his long legs effortlessly shortening the distance between us. Easily half a meter taller than me, he engulfed my hand in his and shook it as David made introductions.

"Precentor Martial Victor Davion, this is Devlin Stone."

I nodded. "Pleased to meet you."

Stone released my hand, then stepped back. "You can call me whatever the hell you want. I'll call you Victor. If you want to stand on ceremony or be miffed, I think we're done."

I hesitated for a moment. All my life I'd hated people paying me deference because of my heritage and rank. And yet here, when a man chose to ignore both, it shocked me. What I had once hated, I'd grown used to, and apparently even expected.

I nodded, once. "As you wish, Mr. Stone."

He grunted, his eyes half-closing. "David says I need you."

"If you didn't think David was right, you wouldn't be here." I shrugged, unbuttoning my jacket. "Do you?"

"Good answer. What I expected." Stone smiled. I didn't quite find it infectious, but it was reassuring to a certain extent. "David sent reports. You know what we've done."

"Very impressive."

"You aren't scared?"

"Should I be?"

"If you're smart enough to read beyond the numbers, yes." Stone nodded grimly. "Because it's not what we've *done*, it's what we're going to do."

An icy trickle ran through my belly. "I didn't think you were a prophet."

"Not a prediction, just fact."

I arched an eyebrow. "Then what are the facts, as you see them?"

"It's like this, Victor." The man's dark eyes brightened. "I'm going to do what no one, not even the Star League, has ever managed to do. A complete and sustained overhaul of human society."

I moved to the fire to warm myself, holding my hands out, my back to Stone. "You'll forgive me, but I've heard those words more times than I can count. Madmen, dreamers, schemers and politicians; they all have a plan to change society. They don't meet with much success."

"Yeah, but some do. There's common elements with the ones who do." Stone appeared at my right shoulder, likewise warming himself. "Every one of them was in favor of sharing and peace. They were anti-greed and anti-war. Fact is, if folks can't kill each other, sharing is the easiest way to get along. That's what we're going to do. Stop them from killing, get them sharing."

I frowned, staring into a vision of fire that would burn on thousands of worlds. It wouldn't take much to ignite those fires, but putting them out would be hell itself. "How will you do that?"

"It's not theory. We've already done it. Tax the heck out of greed, reward sharing, and punish thieves fast and harshly. Make people realize that if they don't work together, they're going to starve. Give them all a stake in what happens."

I crossed my arms. "Quite a tall order for humanity, as spread out as we are."

"You believe that?"

"That's been my experience."

"You're supposed to be smarter than that."

My nostrils flared. "I appreciate that you're measuring me, trying to see the kind of man I am. I don't need the baiting. I'm here to listen. If I didn't think you had a plan, if David's reports hadn't showed me something, I wouldn't be here. You want to fight, let's do it over something substantive, shall we?"

Stone turned to me, nodding. "I hear you. So, okay. You've conquered worlds before. Tell me, what difference did it make to the folks on the ground?"

I'd played *that* rhetorical game before. "Liberation from oppression and fear means a lot."

"You don't want me to play with you, Victor, don't play with me. I don't like to lose, so I don't."

"Then don't ask me a question, just deliver your answer. That's what you want anyway, so let's go."

Stone frowned for a second, then nodded. "You take a world, the faces on coins change. One official language moves to the top of signs, the others shift down. You send your tax money to a different place. Long as your house survived the fighting, life doesn't change much. And the people go on. True?"

"I won't argue the point."

"Good. So, there's an old saying, 'All politics is local.' A person's world usually isn't any bigger than they can see. Maybe as far as they can travel in a day. Beyond that it's *news*. Background noise in their life. It's the stuff that happens to someone else, some sad-sack over in the next region. It just doesn't matter to them."

"I can see that."

"Here's how we do things different. We make it so *everything* matters." He glanced past me to David. "He makes the ideas work."

I looked at David. "Your reports indicated what had been accomplished, but not how it was all done. Perhaps I should have read past the numbers."

David smiled sheepishly. "The Word of Blake completely shattered or subverted the bureaucracies that ran the worlds they conquered. No authority save their own.

Repression was brutal and swift. They fragmented society, isolated groups, ruled through fear. They took the best and brightest, then tossed them into reeducation camps."

The giant laughed. "Not always the best and brightest."

David shared the laugh—clearly an inside joke. "Once we escaped and got rid of the Blakists, we rebuilt Kittery from the ground up. We started with those isolated groups, and showed them how to work together. We claimed ownership of everything that had been abandoned or orphaned. We nationalized a lot of stuff, then leased it back to folks. We used taxes and fines to punish greed, then turned around and funded projects that would benefit everyone. 'No bitching, just better planning,' became the motto."

"I came up with that." Stone punctuated the comment with a wry chuckle. It struck me that the same sound could be more sinister, as the selfish had undoubtedly discovered.

David frowned. "On Kittery it was pretty easy. We'd freed them. People knew who my grandmother had been. Same with my grandfather and father."

Stone growled in a low voice. "The night we escaped, some folks in the town took us in. I didn't know why, until they took us down to the basement. There, in a corner, they had a shrine—candles, joss-sticks. And pictures of David's family, like saints. Up to that point I had no idea who the kid was."

David's cheeks flushed with color. "My family connections bought us some time and credibility. We asked folks to do 'one more thing.' It didn't matter what, but we rewarded those who did. Invest yourself in your community, and you prosper."

"Abuse power and trust, you get slapped down hard. If they were governing, the punishment was worse." Stone's eyes narrowed. "If you're industrious and do well, great. If you help others do well, even better. David indexed taxes not by how much money a business makes, but by its benefit to the community. He factors in how many folks they employ, how much public work they do. You want to do business, you take a Hippocratic oath—promise you'll do no harm. You lie, we take your stuff away and give it to someone else who doesn't."

Militant socialism keyed to altruism. I rubbed my hands together. "You can't entirely eliminate corruption."

"Nope, but you can take the profit out of it."

"You see, Precentor Martial, we require all elected or appointed officials to place their holdings into a blind trust. That trust is their bond. If they can't uphold their duties, if they succumb to corruption, all that is forfeit even before the assessment of criminal penalties. Forfeiture may be mitigated if you give evidence against your co-conspirators."

"But, David, if you do that, you'll never get qualified people willing to run for office."

Stone grunted. "The folks who do will be less qualified than the ones we have now exactly how?"

I had to laugh. "You may have a point there."

ARTIST: FRANZ VOHWINKEL
PUBLICATION: STRATEGIC OPERATIONS
YEAR: 2009

ARTIST: RAY ARRASTIA
PUBLICATION: JIHAD SECRETS: THE BLAKE DOCUMENTS
YEAR: 2008

David opened his hands. "The fact is, Precentor Martial, that the system has worked on Kittery for eighteen months. We've got a dozen more worlds in the conversion process, all of them working together. We know these are extraordinary results under what are extraordinary circumstances. Part of the reason it works is that our army has pulled just about every 'Mech off every world. We've demilitarized the Kittery Prefecture."

Which means you'll be prey once the Word of Blake problem is handled. "Are you sure that's wise?"

Stone cracked his knuckles. "You've seen warfare. If half of what I read about you is true, you've got more scars than I do. Back in the days when each guy would have a rock or stick, fights were small. No collateral damage. Armies would decide where to meet, beat the heck out of each other. Sure, there were massacres and towns got sacked, but we're still talking limited damage. Now some moron pops into a 'Mech, he can sterilize whole cities just because he's having a bad day."

There was no faulting his logic. Greed and avarice had caused more destruction and death than even I could imagine. The desire to become First Lord of the Inner Sphere had prompted countless wars for centuries. As long as one man thought he had more power than another, he could rationalize anything into a *casus belli*. My father was a master of that sort of thing, and marked his wedding to my mother by launching a war.

"So you take the weapons away, reserving them to the central authority. The central authority decides when to deploy them, yes?"

Stone nodded.

"And you're that authority?"

"I am."

"And you think I would endorse an effort that concentrates that much power in the hands of one man?" I shook my head. "How can I do that? Can I trust you? Who are you, Devlin Stone?"

The giant shook his head. "You don't want to know who I am. You just want to know who I *was*."

His reply came forcefully. I realized in that instant that I had thought I was in charge of the interview. David had come to me, but it was not about bringing this man for my blessing or my help.

This is an audition. Not for Stone, but for me.

My eyes tightened. "Why am I here?"

Stone gave me a wry smile. "David said you were clever and very quick." He backed from the fire, clasping those massive, scarred hands at the small of his back. "You're right. I've been pushing you, seeing how you answer. Given a chance, I study my enemies."

"And I am an enemy?"

"I approach everyone as if he is. That attitude has its uses." Stone's face remained half-hidden in shifting shadows. "Lots of people have asked your question. You alone among the Inner Sphere's leaders could understand my answer."

"You underestimate my peers."

"You underestimate how unique you are." Stone shook his head. "You, Victor, you alone have remade yourself. You started as Hanse Davion's son. You fought your way out from beneath his shadow. You could have continued to be like him when you inherited his realm. You fought to change how things were done. You succeeded. On Luthien, you became a different man yet again."

"I died on Luthien." My ribs ached from an old wound.

"And I died on Kittery." The big man's hands tightened into fists. "The Blakists broke me. Killed the old me. They gave me a new name: Devlin Stone. They tried to rebuild me. Didn't take. They were trying to make me into someone. Someone the name just didn't fit.

"I clung to that. I didn't know who Devlin Stone was. Didn't wait to find out. *I* decided who I wanted him to be. I picked and chose. No baggage. No assumptions. You *know* how liberating that is."

A shiver ran down my spine. My past had always trapped me. It had forced me into situations and circumstances. When I died, I had a chance to change things. I *did* change things. I no longer made choices based on what was expected of me by others, but based on what I expected of myself. I defined myself. I defined success and failure. I had no masters other than myself so yes, I did know how liberating that was.

And how dangerous.

Stone's voice softened a bit. "I made Devlin Stone. What you've seen, the stories you've heard, that's me. I take risks. Fortune favors the bold. I aim to be her favorite. But I know my limitations. I rely on my friends, like David."

He smiled and looked at the other man. "He's my conscience. If he says I've overstepped, I step back. If he says I'm going to overstep, I stop. I may be my own master, but I'm not an idiot. I'm neither invincible nor infallible. David is my guide. His word is law."

David smiled. "It's true. I got my hatred of violence with mother's-milk. We do everything we can to minimize death and pain."

"But when something needs killing, I kill it." Stone barked a short laugh. "Not *thing*, some*one* needs killing. Lot of that going around."

"You think I might need killing?" I met his gaze openly, read his expression. He didn't need to answer. If I needed killing, I'd be dead. Not here, not now, but eventually and probably soon.

"Precentor Martial, Devlin identified you as the only person who could understand and who has the vision to see the future—or both futures. One of

peace and the other of unending warfare. What we are going to do is to push beyond the Kittery Prefecture. Call it a revolution, call it whatever you want, we are going to overturn the status quo and provide a safe haven for people who are willing to live in peace. If they want to renounce the gun and work for the general welfare, they will prosper in peace and see that prosperity continue for their children and grandchildren."

I hesitated. What David hinted at was pure madness. It would be an ideological crusade that would remap the Inner Sphere forever. It wasn't the first time this had been attempted, and wouldn't be the last. And, truth be told, the Kittery Prefecture was a promising start. But if they succeeded too well, the nations would unite to crush them. They had to, since the revolution would forever alter their way of life.

Which, to date, is one of warfare and fear.

Would the extinction of that way of life be a bad thing?

Devlin Stone clapped his hands. "Yes. He sees it, David."

I took a step back, my hands coming up. "If you grant that I have vision, know that I see the bad as well. Yes, Word of Blake has so smashed things that you have your opportunity. No doubt about that. But there are forces that *must* crush you. Will crush you."

Stone shook his head. "No. No, they won't, Victor, not if you're with us. With your backing, I go to the Kells. Morgan Phelan Kell, they'll see the wisdom of this. They've fought as hard as you to preserve the Inner Sphere. They'll support us. And Hohiro Kurita, he'll join you. Your sister Yvonne, your brother, they'll at least think about things. If we survive infancy, we have a chance to grow into a shining example."

I nodded slowly, my brain flashing with images, numbers. "We would start through endorsing you as the most effective anti-Blakist movement. We would be coordinating with you."

The giant smiled in a way that would make his enemies weep. "We administer liberated worlds. We reorganize them according to David's plans. We let foreign troops garrison the worlds. We get them integrated and invested in the fortune of the local communities. We invite them to come and stay."

I frowned. "But there's the rub. How do you take their 'Mechs away?"

"Swords into plowshares. A 'Mech is a livelihood. We exchange one for another." Stone opened his hands. "Have you ever known a MechWarrior who didn't want to retire to some quiet little estate, or to open his own bar or get back to whatever his parents used to do? We make that a reality. And we require him to keep his skills sharp, just in case we have to call upon him to defend his home. David said it best."

The younger man smiled. "People want power. We give them responsibility and opportunity."

"And if they overstep?"

Stone ground a fist into his open palm. "Virtue is rewarded. Vice is punished."

I covered my face with my hands. *Could it work?* The Inner Sphere was in such pain and chaos that what it needed had become a glowing opportunity. Stone's read of the leaders wasn't far off my own. There was a chance.

Stone cut through my thoughts. "Afraid it won't work, Victor, or that it will work too well?"

My guts twisted and hands fell. "Lots of nasty people die in revolutions, but the rivers of blood flow from innocents."

The giant exhaled heavily. "Help me make sure that doesn't happen."

Something in the sound of his voice hit me. "Despite our best intentions, innocents *will* die."

"I know." He nodded. "Sometimes I wonder if I was one of the innocents, or one of the ones who needed killing. I'll never know. What I do know is that I need people I can trust; whose judgment I can trust. Whose vision I can trust."

I regarded him openly. "You'll be killed for this."

"It's been tried."

"Compared to Sun-Tzu and his minions, the Blakists are Girl Guides out selling cookies."

Stone chuckled. "Could be. I'm not afraid of dying. Are you?"

I thought for a moment of my children and never seeing them again. My heart ached. Then I thought of the future we would build for them.

"No. I guess not." I smiled, and again offered the man my hand. "And even if I was, this cause would be worth it."

ARTIST: DOUG ANDERSEN
PUBLICATION: MECHWARRIOR COMPANION
YEAR: 1999

ARTIST: LES DORSCHEID
PUBLICATION: MECHWARRIOR: THE BATTLETECH ROLE PLAYING GAME SECOND EDITION
YEAR: 1991

THE DARK AGE

It is the 32nd century. After decades of peace and prosperity, interstellar communication breaks down and wars and rumors of war sweep through the universe. As ancient hatreds and rivalries rear their ugly heads, people who have only known war through history books are suddenly thrust into the dark maelstrom of combat. Some fight for king and country, others for money and power, others for love—all will struggle to defeat those who would see them destroyed, while protecting the only homes they have known.

Welcome to the Dark Age Era.

INTRODUCTION

As with *BattleTech*, the *MechWarrior: Dark Age* (or the second edition of this game, *MechWarrior: Age of Destruction*) game system published by WizKids LLC takes you into the world of the 32nd century (the Dark Age Era), where war has once again become a way of life and various local factions declare for the vast star empires that wage war for control of the known universe.

Just like the various other game systems set in the *BattleTech* universe published by FASA Corporation/FanPro/Catalyst Game Labs—such as *Succession Wars*, *BattleForce* and *BattleTroops*—this game system is not compatible with the original *BattleTech* system, nor is it meant to replace it. It is simply a different, exciting game system set in the *BattleTech* universe.

TO THE FUTURE

The Dark Age Era begins in 3132, roughly 56 years after the current *BattleTech* timeline. The following paragraphs provide a brief overview of events, expanding on the universe timeline provided in this book and acting as a bridge between the history described in *A Time of War* (see p. 6) and the *Dark Age Era* (see p. 16).

3067

At the end of the FedCom Civil War, the various leaders of the Inner Sphere realize that the new Star League was simply a political maneuver to be used against the Clans, and subsequently dissolve the League. Almost immediately, Word of Blake zealots—a reactionary splinter group from ComStar—unleash a jihad against the entire Inner Sphere, using resources they've skimmed from the Free Worlds League for years to build up a mighty secret army, along with covertly hired mercenary units, clandestine operations, assassinations and more. Simultaneously, they flood the HPG network, effectively crashing interstellar communications. Using agents planted years before, they manipulate House and Clan communications and cause enough havoc to effectively launch their holy war. With the Word of Blake out to destroy their opponents (as opposed to the traditional goal of simply taking territory), coupled with the inability to trust their own intelligence, the leaders of the various factions are thrown into chaos, allowing the Blakists to slowly gain ground.

3071-3078

After long years of war, a hero arises from the ashes and decrees a new order. Devlin Stone comes to prominence as a leader of the people, slowly builds an army and pushes back against the Word of Blake. With each new success, more warriors flock to his banner, speeding victory and final triumph as his stature grows to mythological proportions among the general population.

3081

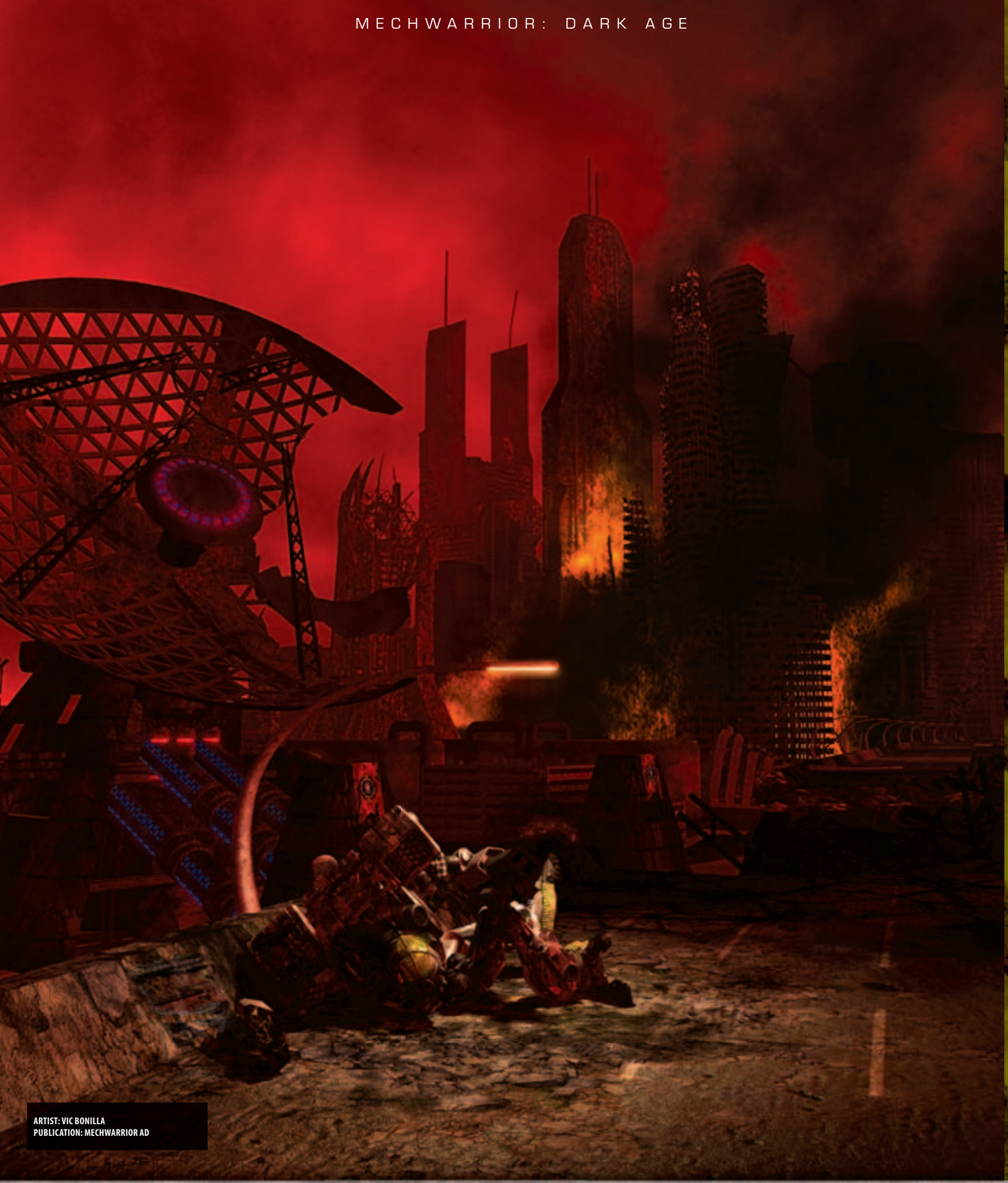
Under the guidance of Devlin Stone, the Republic of the Sphere is born. The new realm soon faces problems, however. Though Stone and other Republic leaders have de facto control of their worlds—Stone has a huge army, the Houses are weakened by having barely survived more than a decade of brutal war, and many citizens of the Successor States view Stone as a hero—the House Lords remain unpredictable in their reactions, with most attempting to negotiate which worlds along their borders will and will not become part of the Republic.

House Liao refuses to participate or cede worlds. The Free Worlds League has multiple delegations to its Parliament that demand to be seated, creating chaos and confusion, with each one willing to give away worlds they do not own. Ultimately, the Free Worlds factions are too weak to hold the planets demanded by the Republic and too interested in fighting each other to oppose the Republic's acquisition of those worlds.

3085

Though officially formed in 3081, it is not until 3085 that all but House Liao formally acknowledge the Republic, sending ambassadorial delegations to Terra. The worlds in Liao space that fall within the Republic's umbrella cite their past independence (Chaos March, pre- and post-) as reason to leave the Capellan Confederation and join the Republic. House Liao does not relinquish rights to them, however, and often rattles sabers suggesting that the Republic invaders will be forced out.

During this same period, from 3085-3093, the Draconis Combine has renewed trouble with reactionary internal elements that protest the loss of worlds, but are eventually put down.



ARTIST: VIC BONILLA
PUBLICATION: MECHWARRIOR AD

3095-3113

Republic forces are called upon to fight on their borders with the Capellan Confederation and the Free Worlds League. The FWL battles involve repulsing "liberation" attacks promulgated by political leaders who try to increase their power by showing they will stand up to the invaders. These attacks are dealt with shortly and sharply. Stone threatens to run Republic troops into the FWL to create a buffer zone of worlds, and the FWL politicians back down.

House Liao approaches the problem differently. Starting in 3104, they engage in revolutionary and terrorist activities on Republic worlds they once possessed. They strike primarily at traitors who ceded the worlds, as this also terrorizes local leaders on the border who have been considering a petition to join the Republic.

In 3111, a Capellan Confederation Warrior House regiment lands on the planet Liao in an attempt to liberate it, but ends up razing the DropPort and most of the surrounding city to the ground. Tens of thousands die.

Horrified at such barbarism, the Republic takes the gloves off. Stone sends in his heaviest units to put down the Liao insurrections in Prefecture V. Unwilling to back away, House Liao counters with a massive push of front-line units across the border.

In early 3113, House Liao forces in the Republic are utterly beaten and forced back into the Confederation. As with the Free Worlds League, the Republic threatens to invade and create a buffer zone, forcing the Chancellor to sue for peace.

3130

Devlin Stone announces his withdrawal from public life. He swears he will return if the Republic, or the rest of the Inner Sphere, ever needs him—then he vanishes.

3132

Hyperpulse Generator Alpha Stations around the Republic and throughout the Inner Sphere suffer attacks from without and sabotage from within, effectively ending interstellar communications for 80 percent of all populated worlds. No group takes responsibility; no clues point to a single perpetrator. Tensions heighten between political and social factions, each suspecting the others of causing the communications breakdown. Fighting breaks out as social pressures reach critical mass. To compensate for the rarity of military-grade BattleMechs, many groups and governments mount IndustrialMechs with weaponry and use these machines in combat. A new battle for control begins, threatening the very existence of the Republic of the Sphere.

THE REPUBLIC OF THE SPHERE

Both the Great Houses and the Clans have survived for centuries, so a mere 56 years cannot see them undone. Almost all the factions present in previous *BattleTech* eras still exist in the Dark Age Era, though a few surprises have been introduced.

The most significant change, obviously, is the formation of the Republic of the Sphere in 3081.

The Republic of the Sphere—usually shortened to the Republic—was formed by Devlin Stone following the final defeat of the Word of Blake forces. With a huge coalition force and ordinary citizens from every faction loyal to Stone and his ideals, he announced to the House leaders that he would form a new realm, taking control of all planets within 120 light-years of Terra (Earth). This task was made all the easier as those core worlds generally despise the Great Houses. Local populations view them as the destroyers of the Star League, and the four

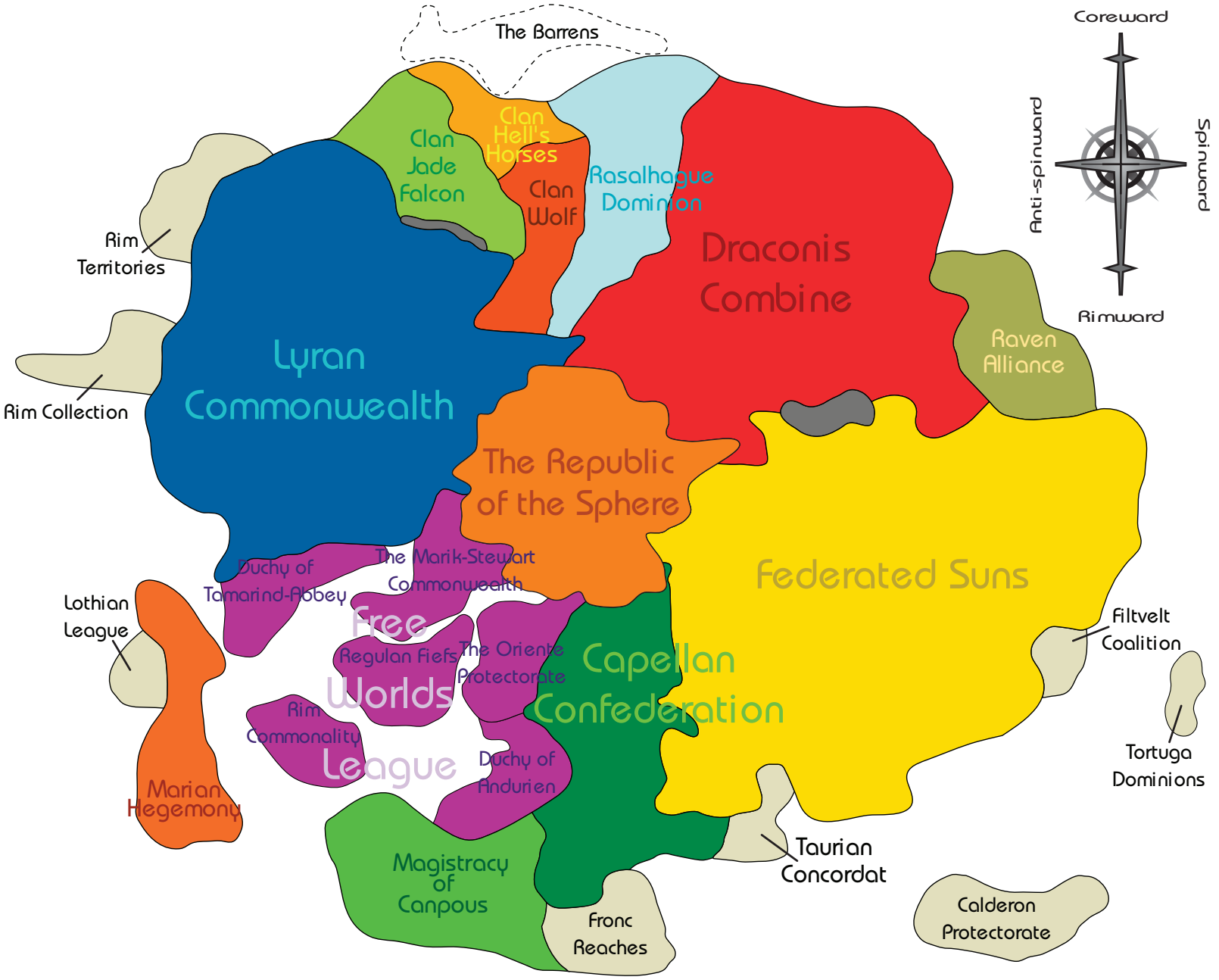
ARTIST: PAUL WESBERRY
PUBLICATION: MECHWARRIOR AD

Succession Wars plus the Jihad saw these worlds more brutalized than almost any others in the Inner Sphere at the hands of those same Great Houses.

Devlin Stone understood that the key to erasing the cultural differences that had led to centuries of war was to mix the populations on the worlds of his new Republic. However, he knew that mass deportation and importation of people was simply impossible on planetary scales. Instead, he instituted numerous programs that gave monetary and political incentives for people to relocate. This caused a small but significant amount of population movement throughout the Republic.

With the factories of war quickly retooled for a peacetime market, the Republic's economy boomed. As unrest surged in the territories of the various Houses and Clans, they were forced to follow suit, paring down their militaries in an effort to match the Republic's prosperity and appease their own masses. All of this led to a "golden age" of peace and prosperity, where an entire generation grew up without knowing war. When the HPG communications grid goes silent, however, and ambitious people seek to gain power by whatever means necessary, this generation finds they must take up the plows that their grandparents fashioned from swords and turn them back to weapons once more.

MAP OF THE INNER SPHERE
AND NEARBY PERIPHERY POWERS



Map compiled by COMSTAR.
From information provided by the COMSTAR EXPLORER CORPS
and the STAR LEAGUE ARCHIVES on Terra.

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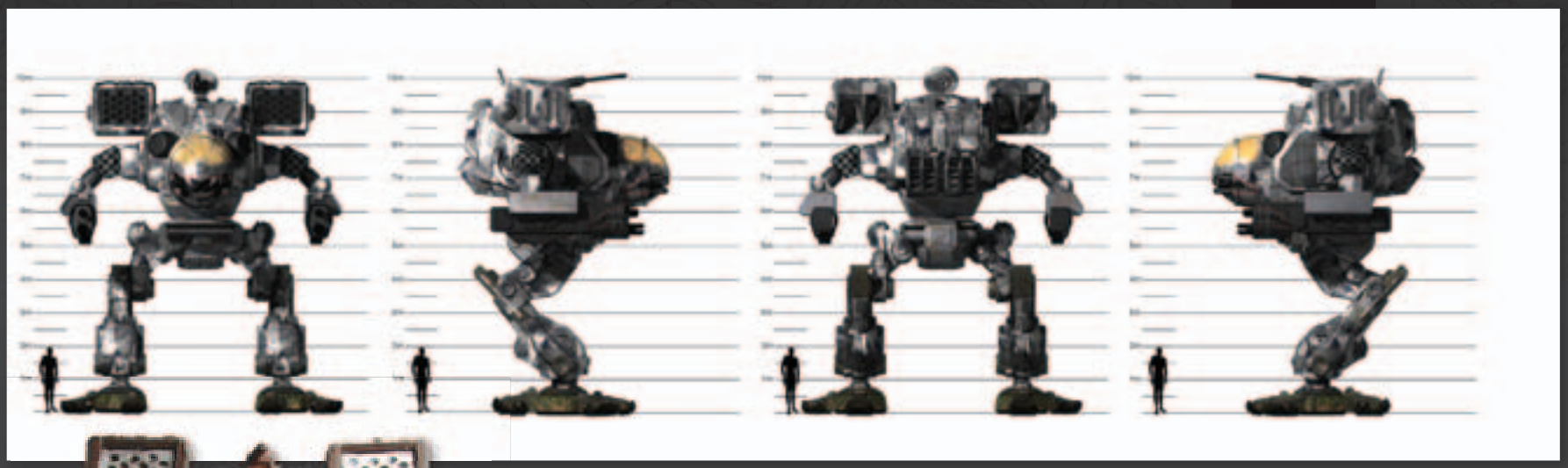
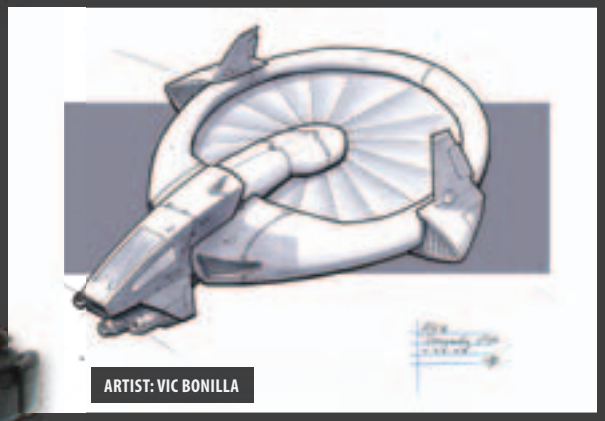
ARTIST: VIC BONILLA

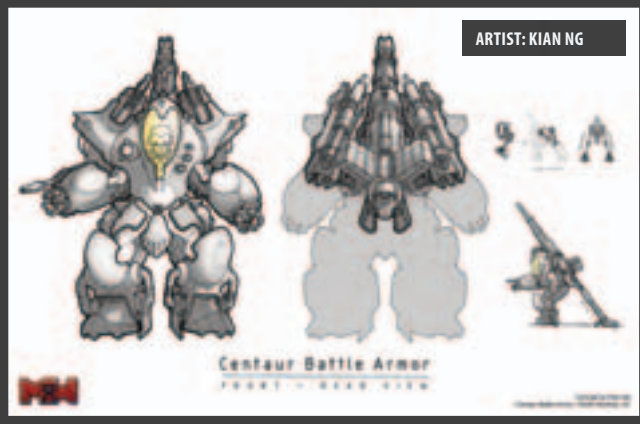


MECHWARRIOR
DARK AGE

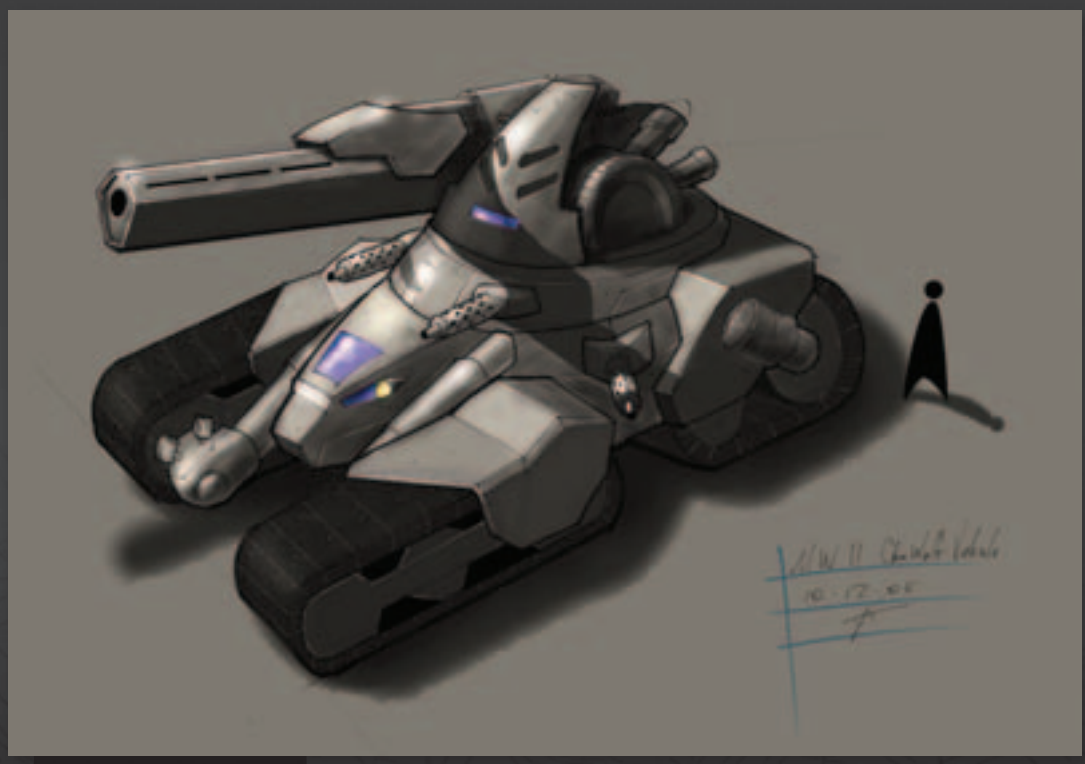


ARTIST: VIC BONILLA

ARTIST: KIAN NG



ARTIST: VIC BONILLA



ARTISTS: VIC BONILLA & BRENT EVANS

ARTIST: VIC BONILLA

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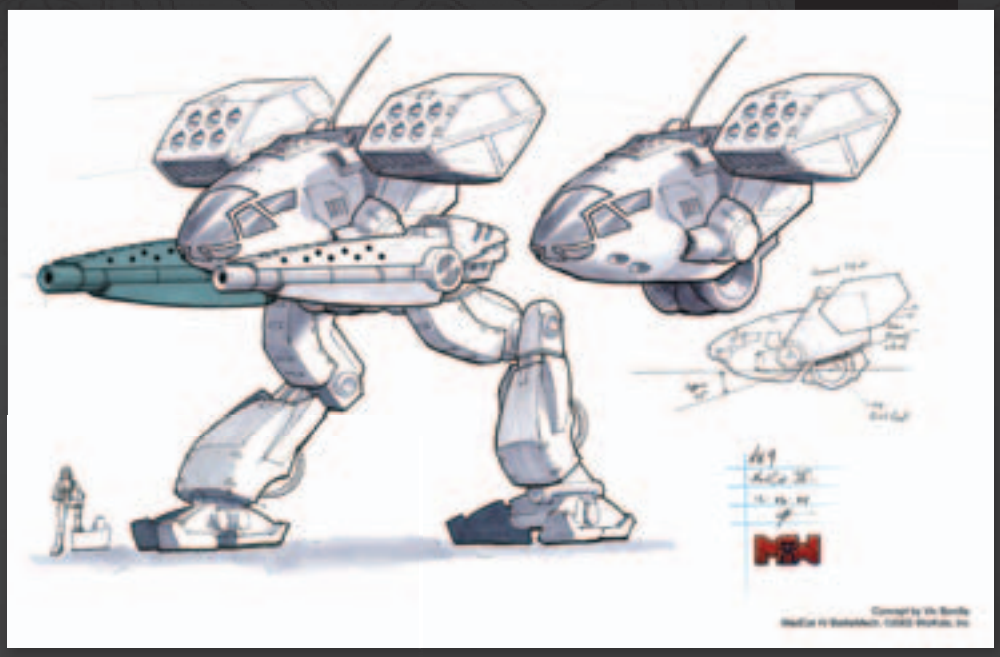
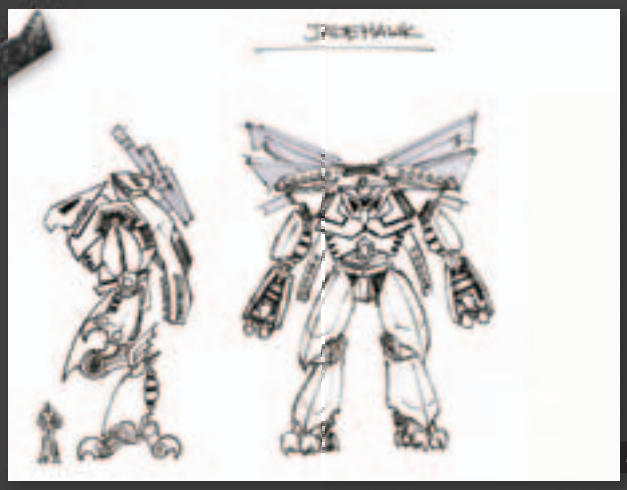


ARTIST: VIC BONILLA



ARTIST: ETHAN PASTERNACK

ARTIST: VIC BONILLA

ARTIST: VIC BONILLA
PUBLICATION: TECHNOLOGY OF DESTRUCTION
YEAR: 2004

END TRANSMISSION

STEVEN MOHAN, JR.

COMSTAR HPG COMPOUND, GUILDED HALLS, GREENE
PROCYON, PREFECTURE X, THE REPUBLIC
7 AUGUST 3132

The coming of a great storm is often heralded by no more than the merest stirring of an uneasy wind. Unfortunately, those who could not tell the difference between a pleasant breeze and the gathering of a storm's massive power were sometimes destroyed by the forces they could not see or understand.

Adept VI-(not really) alpha Patricia Harwell made it a point to always know when the storm was coming.

So she didn't need anyone to tell her what was happening when Precentor Jordan DeSolvo stepped into the HPG's control room, leaned over the screen at an empty workstation, and sucked in a startled breath. She watched his face go white as he placed a trembling hand on the console to steady himself.

Patricia leaned against the wall in a quiet corner of the room, arms folded across her chest, her face empty of all emotion.

Watching.

Anyone watching *her* would've seen a lovely young woman with shoulder-length raven hair wearing white coveralls. The coveralls and the capital "A" at the corner of her adept insignia marked her as a comtech and ComStar had a million comtechs.

No one would've given her a second look.

DeSolvo swallowed, glanced over at her, saw her watching. He scowled. Then he waved her over.

She pushed off the wall with one shoulder and strolled across the room with a decided air of indifference. She wasn't the HPG's tech lead. This wasn't *her* problem.

The control room was fifteen meters in diameter reaching up to a domed ceiling. Consoles and computer equipment ringed the space, paneled in brushed steel. Black leather chairs sat in front of the consoles, three occupied by technicians in ComStar white. The floor was green marble.

Well below the room and underground was the HPG core, a plasma chamber akin to a fusion reactor where microscopic, artificial jump points could be generated. The chamber was the business end of the HPG, transmitting and receiving densely packed radio signals through hyperspace. Overhead, atop the building, was an antenna fifty meters across, which linked the station to its customers: the billions of inhabitants of Procyon. And a hundred meters away, also underground, was the fusion reactor that quietly supplied the HPG with the power needed for its impossible task.

And the task *was* impossible, by the laws of the universe literally impossible, which was why they had to tunnel into *another* universe to send their messages.

Patricia stepped next to DeSolvo. "Another one?" she asked in a low voice.

"We're working on it," he said tightly.

"Why work on it? If it's all just clanking gears and properly calibrated wave guides, if there really is no ghost in the machine, why not *just fix it*?"

He glowered at her.

DeSolvo was a reformer, one of the species of leaders that had cast the great communications company adrift from its technoreligious roots. Patricia wasn't sure what she was, secularist or traditionalist. But she knew she didn't like DeSolvo's prissy self-righteousness. Especially when it fractured under the crushing pressure of repeated failure.

"Maybe," she said, "you don't know nearly as much as you pretend to."

"Maybe," he said, "you'd have a better appreciation of technical problems if you really *were* a technician."

She shook her head. "So, how bad?"

He exhaled heavily and handed her a carefully folded piece of paper.

She opened it and sucked in a startled breath. "Blake's Ghost," she whispered.

She had known the message would be garbled. But the worst part was not the distorted text. It was the message header: "Ms. Katherine McKenzie, 241 Surefire Way, Guilded Halls." Obviously a commercial residence. The subject line said: "Happy 50th Anniversary." But what followed was completely wrong. The text was an eyes-only message for Knight-Errant Ravi Talwar from the Exarch himself.

PROCYON

World Name: Procyon
Star Type (Recharge Time): F5V (176 hours)
Position in System: 2
Time to Jump Point: 14.94 days
Number of Satellites: None
Surface Gravity: 0.97
Atm. Pressure: Standard (Breathable)
Equatorial Temperature: 30° C (Warm-Temperate)
Surface Water: 62 percent
Recharging Station: Zenith
HPG Class Type: A
Highest Native Life: Reptile
Population (3123): 1,980,173,000
Socio-Industrial Levels: A-A-B-B-C

Procyon was settled early, in 2134, and the resource-rich world soon became a stronghold of the various Terran empires—the Terran Alliance, the Terran Hegemony, and the Star League. After more than six centuries of prosperity, respect and glory, Procyon suffered the fate of many Terran-ruled worlds: nuked, gassed and smashed by the marauding armies of the Great Houses.

Following Amaris's ill-conceived (but elaborately planned and executed) coup, Procyon was abused by would-be suitors until it finally fell under the aegis of the Free Worlds League, which ruled it for two centuries. It later switched hands to the Capellans, then the Federated Commonwealth in the Fourth Succession War, and spent a couple of hellish years under a Blakist renegade (who was excessive even by the standards of the fanatics) before being recovered by the Free Worlds.

Procyon is a battered planet, but a populous one that has retained an educated, relatively well-off citizenry. Despite the damage of centuries past, the world has recovered well. The vestiges of the Star League and old wars are crumbling ruins while forests and small cities grow once again across the planet's surface.

The northern supercontinent of Greene is home to the majority of Procyon's cities and agroplexes, along with the capital of Guilded Halls, while to the south the rocky continent of Halbiero contains most of Procyon's major industries. The miniature island-continents that form the heavily wooded Unspoiled Isles stretch along the southern hemisphere to the east of Halbiero.

ARTIST: JOHN HUDGENS
PUBLICATION: TECHNOLOGY OF DESTRUCTION
YEAR: 2004

"Talwar will never believe it was an accident," DeSolvo whispered savagely. "If we're not very careful, if we don't *fix this,* we're going to have Republic interference in ComStar business."

Patricia shook her head. "Why does this keep happening?"

DeSolvo puffed air out of his mouth and shook his head. "We're getting signal modulations we can't correct. Data packets are jumbled. Sometimes the body of one message is appended to the header of another. Sometimes the message is lost entirely. Or its meaning is twisted. Or—"

"Yes, but *why?*"

DeSolvo said nothing. Dark circles ringed his eyes. He'd taken on the look of a hunted animal.

Suddenly Patricia understood. *He has no idea what to do next.*

"Maybe we should say a little incantation," suggested Patricia.

"That's not funny," DeSolvo snarled.

"Well, what do you want me to do about it?" She lowered her voice. "I can't help you on the technical side. You know this uniform is just for show."

He took hold of her elbow and guided her three or four meters further away from the nearest tech. "You have resources I do not, Adept Harwell. And I cannot help but wonder if this matter is," his voice dropped to a barely audible hiss, "sabotage."

The word sent a chill wriggling down Patricia's spine. *Sabotage.* Now there was an ugly thought. Yes, sabotage *might* bring down an HPG. If would have to be an inside job, but yes—

it might be done. She looked around the control room, studying the techs working around them.

Wondering.

Who would do such a thing? All that message traffic. All that *revenue.* Blake's breath, customers would never trust them again. Even if the HPG were restored in a few days, the losses would be incalculable.

Not the least of which might be her career. Because of her job title, her *true* job title, there was a way to look at this that implied it was her fault.

Suddenly toying with DeSolvo didn't seem nearly so fun. "All right," she said softly. "I'll see what I can do."

▲▼▲

The man's commercial truck license said "Conrad Tuttle." The name was as phony as the company whose name was spray-painted across the silver tanker trailer that rode behind his rig. "Signal Energy and Power," proclaimed the truck in meter-high letters of dark blue. (Right over where it said: "Liquid Natural Gas.") It always made Tuttle smile. When you thought about it, it was really funny. *Damn* funny.

Not that anyone was likely to get the joke.

At least not until it was too late.

The light turned green and Tuttle put the truck in gear and turned the wheel hand-over-hand, heading left on Halbiero Avenue. The big diesel growled, momentarily drowning out the synth-pop riff coming out of his radio.

Halbiero was one of the capital's major thoroughfares, six lanes wide and fairly crowded with traffic, though it was just after nine-thirty, so the morning commute was over and the lunch rush hadn't yet begun.

If someone had glanced in Tuttle's cab they would have seen a fortyish man, dark hair thinning, face shadowed with a day's worth of stubble, ten or fifteen kilos overweight, dressed in a long-sleeved red flannel shirt unbuttoned over a white T-shirt. He drummed his fingers in time with the music as he drove. There were naked-woman mud flaps on his tires.

No one would have given him a second look.

But if someone had *taken his pulse* they would've found that it never climbed higher than a cool fifty-eight beats per minute. Which was why the man whose name wasn't Tuttle had been given this assignment.

Because he was one cold son of a bitch.

Ice.

He moved with downtown traffic like the trucker he was supposed to be, passing the ComStar compound on his right, with its Republic troops and a *Wolfhound* standing sentry. He drove under the blue-and-green striped bunting put up to celebrate the day Procyon was liberated from Alisendar Gyrn. The Wantu Tower blocked out the horizon, its face cut into bizarre interlocking curls of purple-tinted glass.

He saw a shiny black limousine pass him in the oncoming lanes, a red-and-yellow pennant decorated with a white starburst flying over the left headlight. Was that Sir Talwar? For a moment Tuttle's pulse fluttered upward. The sudden appearance of a knight-errant was an uncomfortable coincidence.

And Tuttle didn't like coincidences.

He shook his head. The show must go on.

Up ahead, at the intersection of Halbiero and Fourteenth, the light was green. Tuttle popped the clutch and the truck stalled. At first cars lined up behind him. Then they started to shift over into the right-hand lane, passing him by.

He counted off nine seconds, watching the light burn green. On the nine-count he restarted his rig and lumbered forward.

The light turned yellow.

Tuttle hit the gas, racing to beat the red.

Ahead of him a dark green SUV was gliding to the stop in his lane. Tuttle ignored it like it wasn't even there. He watched the needle sweep right as the truck gathered speed. The gas pedal was flat on the floor.

The SUV was idling in front of a light that had made itself cherry red.

Velocity vectors spiraled together in a destructive dance. When physics told Tuttle that the disaster couldn't be undone, he took his foot off the gas and *slammed* on the brakes. His tires screeched in protest as he laid a good centimeter of rubber across reinforced ferrocrete. The smell of burning tires filled his cab.

And then he spun the wheel hard over like he was trying to avoid the collision.

During the whole evolution his pulse never pushed over sixty beats per minute.

Not even when the rig jack-knifed.

▲▼▲

It was Patricia's opinion that Jordan DeSolvo had made his office a refuge, a place of comfort and warmth. His desk was sleek and black, hand-carved from mahogany and topped with a thin layer of smartglass that could call forth an infinite variety of holographic displays. But it was the only overtly technological item in the room.

Behind the desk, DeSolvo reclined in a beautiful high-backed chair upholstered in burgundy leather. Behind him a custom-built blond oak bookshelf curled along the gentle arc of the wall. The shelf framed actual books, mostly technical manuals and treatises on theoretical physics—two of them first editions written by Jerome Blake himself. The carpet was a gentle sea-green, the wallpaper a matching forest green. A fire crackled merrily in the fireplace to the left of the sofa where Patricia sat.

The sofa and the desk formed a triangle with a long wall of ferroglass. That wall revealed the skyline of Guilded Halls, the sky a cold, cloudless blue. Somehow looking out at the city calmed DeSolvo.

In an instant Knight-Errant Ravi Talwar shattered that calm. He snapped a data crystal down on the desk's smartglass surface with a sharp *click*. "Tell me why I shouldn't arrest you right now."

On first glance, nothing about Talwar made him seem particularly imposing. His skin was a deep brown, and his black hair was cut military short. At one meter seventy-five he was on the short side of average and, honestly, he needed to lose a few kilos. His face was wide and plain, his eyes a dull brown.

But when he spoke, his voice carried a quiet authority. A *dangerous* authority.

Patricia flashed him a cold smile. "Well, for one thing this station is sovereign ComStar territory."

ARTIST: TODD LUBSEN
PUBLICATION: TECHNOLOGY OF DESTRUCTION
YEAR: 2004

Talwar gave her a look that suggested that he was not at all amused.

"I think what my colleague means to say," said DeSolvo, "is that it makes no sense to arrest someone for a technical difficulty."

"At least not on sovereign ComStar territory," intoned Patricia. "What you do in the Republic is up to you."

"I have Republic troops stationed outside," Talwar growled.

"To protect the station," squeaked DeSolvo.

Patricia folded her arms. The look on her face wasn't quite a dare. It was true her security team couldn't stand up to BattleMechs, but should Talwar actually try to take the station hall-by-hall, he'd find himself fighting an entirely different sort of battle. But then, a battle like that would reveal secrets better kept. Patricia looked away.

Talwar turned to DeSolvo. "You can't possibly expect me to believe that your technical difficulties are only impacting highly-sensitive messages concerning Republic security."

The precentor fidgeted for a moment, and then he said. "The problem is not as sporadic as, ah, we may have suggested."

"What are you saying exactly, Precentor DeSolvo."

The precentor swallowed. "Seventy-two hours ago we started seeing intermittent problems with data transmissions. It's grown worse over the last few days. Right now it's impacting roughly two percent of our message traffic."

"Two percent of—" began the knight. He shook his head. "Wait. What you're really saying is that you don't have a handle on what this is." Talwar looked from DeSolvo to Patricia. "And you're worried it might be intentional. That's why *you're* here, Adept Harwell."

She nodded.

DeSolvo drew a deep breath. "We've received isolated reports of bombs going off at HPG stations across the Inner Sphere. Terrorist attacks. Just a handful, but—"

"My God," whispered Talwar. His gaze pierced Patricia. "If this is really some kind of protest against ComStar, some kind of political statement—" He shook his head. "Can you stop it?"

"I'm doing the best I can, Sir Talwar," she said. "But surely you know that our security apparatus is limited. ComStar disbanded the Com Guards after the Jihad." She tapped the rank emblem on her collar with the little "A" by it. "I'm just a humble comtech. Most of my security experience has to do with encryption—not counterintelligence."

Talwar watched her for a long moment.

She sat back on the sofa, her arm stretched across its back, watching him watch her, almost managing to look bored.

The silence stretched.

"Tell him what you've learned, Adept," said DeSolvo.

Patricia sighed. "It's not any of our people. I cross-referenced garbled messages with watch rotations. There's no one person who was on duty when all the messages came in. Hell, there's no six people on duty when all the messages came in. If it's an inside job it's a doozie."

"Maybe someone planted a scrambler," said Talwar. "Or removed a key piece of equipment."

DeSolvo frowned. "I don't think so. We've dumped our software and rebooted. Checked every piece of equipment. Scanned for EM fields."

"Besides," said Patricia, "the problem comes and goes. That suggests someone is flipping the effect on and off with some kind of switch."

"You sure seem to know a lot about a problem you can't identify," snapped Talwar.

"We're working hard," said DeSolvo, turning red. "But so far the problem has evaded all analysis."

"It almost seems supernatural," mused Patricia.

DeSolvo shot her a sharp look, then turned to look at the knight. "I'm sure we'll get it in the next few days."

"You'd better," snapped Talwar, "because—"

Whatever the knight was going to say was cut off by a distant bass rumble and a fountain of orange flame rising into the sparkling blue sky.

▲▼▲

Protector Third Class Gary Johnson was the man on the scene when the LNG carrier went over. And he counted himself damned lucky. They had been able to get the driver out. His airbag had gone off, and so he'd come through the accident with little more than cuts and burns. The people he'd hit hadn't fared quite so well, but at least none of them had died. They'd gotten all of them out too.

The biggest break was the truck. It had splashed liquid methane all over the road as the stainless steel tank slid ten meters across ragged ferrocrete. The steel kicked up a shower of golden sparks, but somehow the puddles of methane didn't ignite.

God, Himself, must've been looking out for them on that one.

Johnson immediately called out a general emergency. As senior officer on-scene, he'd commandeered the Republic troops guarding the HPG to secure the area and re-route traffic. Ten minutes later, the precinct captain confirmed his judgment, closing Halbiero in a fifteen block radius and sending him twenty patrol cars and five fire engines. Johnson started evacuating the people in the buildings on either side of the street.

All smart, all by-the-book, all the right thing to do.

That's what Gary Johnson thought—until he felt the rumble vibrate up into his legs from the ground. He had served in Procyon's militia before becoming a peace officer and so he knew that feeling, that *sound*, as soon as he heard it.

Suddenly his mouth tasted dry.

A ConstructionMech modified for battle stepped into the intersection where Fourteenth crossed Halbiero. It was painted an unlikely royal blue and black diesel belched from the exhaust pipe that rose up behind the cockpit like a chimney.

It pivoted, pointing the autocannon in its right arm at the downed tanker trunk.

Johnson jerked the comm up to his lips. "Command Post, Halbiero. Emergency, *emergency*. Need immediate assistance. Under attack from—"

His words were cut off by the brutal rattle of the 'Mech's weapon. For a fraction of a second, heavy-caliber shells gouged chunks out of ferrocrete, punched holes in the shell of the tanker, smashed steel and shattered glass. For a fraction of a second.

That's all it took.

Until the natural gas the truck had been carrying caught and the whole street went up like Armageddon.

▲▼▲

Patricia was off the couch in a second and at the window. Talwar stood right beside her. "Blake's *blood*," she whispered.

Windows on the building across the street were shattered and the grass was charred black. Anything that could burn was burning. The explosion's shock wave had knocked down civilians.

But that wasn't the worst of it.

"We're under attack," said Talwar tightly, putting a comm to his ear.

He was right.

Patricia picked out battlesuit infantry taking cover behind a red IndustrialMech that had been smashed into scrap. A ConstructionMech was trading fire with the Republic infantry, bright lines of laser light slicing into the ContructionMech's blue-painted armor only to be answered by punishing fire from the machine's massive autocannon. The ConstructionMech was backed by its own infantry.

As she watched, a *Wolfhound* in Republic urban camouflage charged forward to help the battlesuit infantry. As it turned to face the ConstructionMech a blue JES II Strategic Missile Carrier ripped into the BattleMech with a flurry of missiles. For an instant the *Wolfhound* was limned by a hard yellow glare.

Then it went down. The thirty-five-ton machine's collapse rattled the earth with enough force that Patricia felt it twelve stories up.

There was a kind of calculus to war, a math every bit as rigorous and challenging as the equations that governed interstellar communications. And this was a branch of mathematics Patricia could do in her head.

"Your guys are losing," Patricia snapped.

Hard lines of fury were written into the soft lines of Talwar's face. "There was some kind accident." He shook his head. "Obviously staged. Local law enforcement pulled my people to—"

"Yeah, save it for your report," snapped Patricia. "We're not Republic soldiers, but I do have a security team. We're not going to give up this facility without a fight." She met the knight's gaze. "If I put a weapon in your hand, will you help?"

She saw the answer in his eyes before he even spoke. "Lead the way."

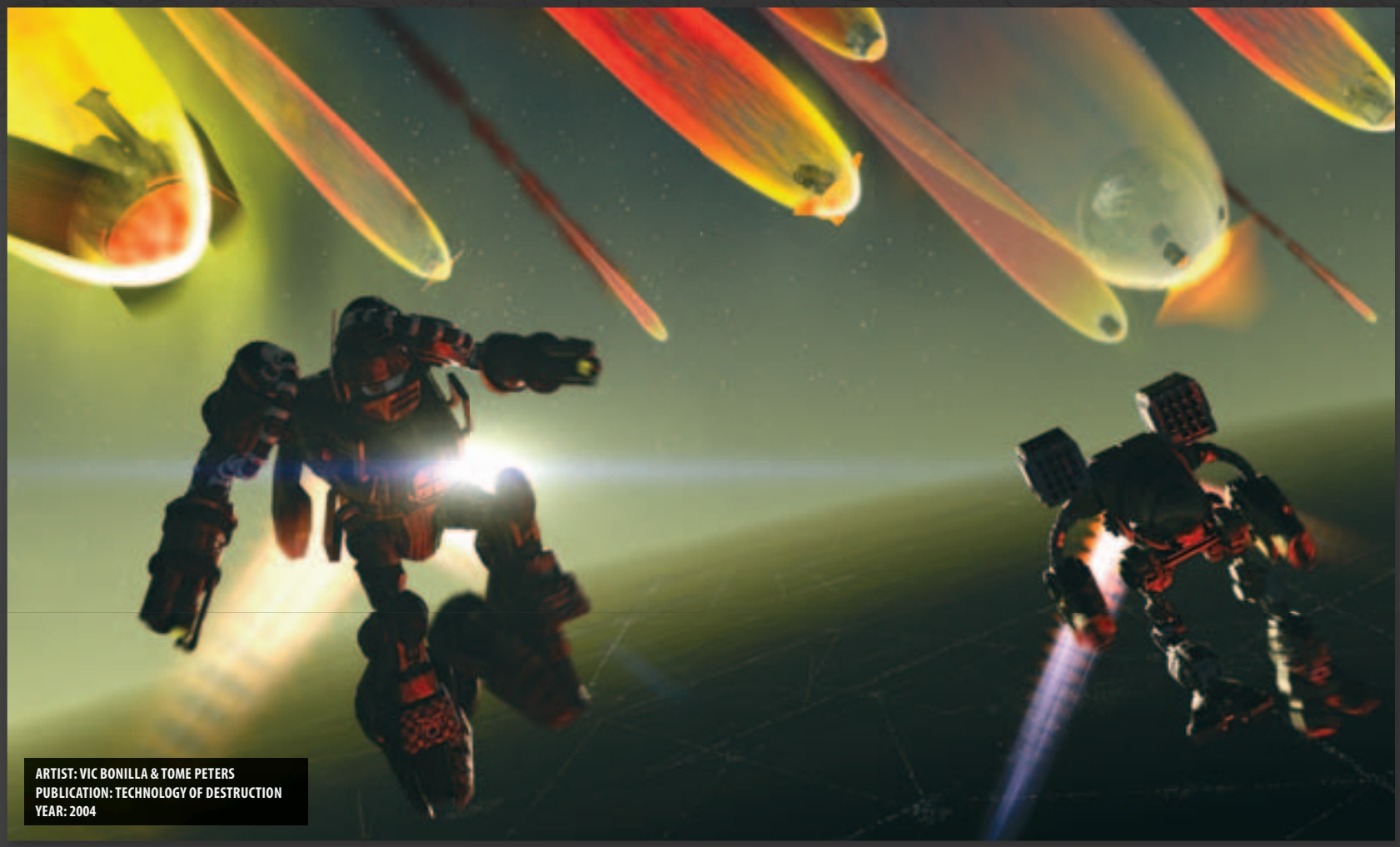
Patricia glanced back at DeSolvo, who flashed her a hard stare.

He knew *exactly* what he was worried about. She was worried about it, too.

But they couldn't let the HPG fall. She raised her eyebrows in a kind of shrug that Talwar didn't see. DeSolvo hesitated and then gave her a shallow nod. And that was that. She shouldered her way out the door.

▲▼▲

Patricia flew down the stairs, Talwar a step behind her. She jumped the last five, six steps and took the



ARTIST: VIC BONILLA & TOME PETERS
PUBLICATION: TECHNOLOGY OF DESTRUCTION
YEAR: 2004

landing in a crouch, before regaining her fleet and plunging down the next flight. "Security alert, security alert," she shouted into her comm. "Provide from the ready locker. Protocol Red and Black."

The *whoop* of a panicked alarm filled the building, echoing off the concrete of the stairwell.

Patricia *ran*.

▲▼▲

Patricia ducked left out of the front door and the cold bit into her flesh. She'd thrown a black composite vest over her coveralls, but otherwise she wasn't wearing anything against the winter chill.

Then a beam of ruby light flashed past a meter ahead of her, the shriek of it shattering the air.

And suddenly she didn't give a damn about the cold.

She sprinted, jumped, and rolled coming up behind a waist-high ferrocrete barrier designed to keep the building from being rammed by a truck packed with high-explosives.

She crouched behind the barrier, fishing a small mirror on a metal handle out of her vest. The air throbbed with violence. The impossible roar of the ConstructionMech's autocannon, the rippling explosion of missiles, the high-pitched cry of lasers.

The softer cries of dying men.

Talwar rolled in next to her. He lay prone, breathing hard. "Hey," he said. "You're cool under fire."

"Thanks," she said.

"Learn that in encryption school?"

Patricia pursed her lips, but said nothing.

Beyond the barrier, a wheeled vehicle raced by. Patricia risked a look and flashed on a Demon medium tank. The tank's gunners sprayed suppressing minigun fire at the attacker's infantry, but it saved its paired Blazefire Longshot medium lasers for the Jessie. Emerald beams stabbed at the missile carrier, missing close left.

But the Jessie got the point. It fired a salvo of missiles at the Demon and then slowly backed down the street and around a corner. The Demon followed.

"Those aren't *my* men," said Talwar.

Patricia glanced right and saw a squad of infantry in Raiden battlesuits taking cover behind the downed IndustrialMech. They were popping out from behind cover just often enough to pop the ConstructionMech's cockpit with laser fire.

They weren't Talwar's infantry. Talwar's infantry was all dead.

"Who cares," said Patricia, "as long as they're shooting the right way."

But Talwar didn't turn away. He couldn't fail to notice that the Raiden armor was painted white. Bone white.

That was going to be trouble.

She inched her mirror over the barrier and turned it. It took her fifteen seconds to size up the situation. Their biggest advantage was time. No doubt Republic reinforcements were racing to their aid. She and Talwar didn't have to win—they just had to win for a little while.

Their biggest disadvantage was numbers.

The Demon and Jessie were paired in a difficult duel. The Jessie was slow but heavily armed, the Demon quick but lightly armed. The Jessie would fall back and try to hit from distance with its LRMs. The Demon would try to dart in and initiate a secondary explosion with its lasers. A tie—but then ties went to the defenders.

The Raidens had the ConstructionMech tied down. The armor around the 'Mech's cockpit was mostly slag—which meant it couldn't charge forward and clean out the nest of Raidens with its autocannon, not without risking a kill shot to the head. Another tie.

The problem was the left side of the board.

Enemy battlesuits were moving forward unchecked by anyone. Two, maybe three of them. Working their way from cover to cover, the leading soldier crouching behind an overturned sedan. He'd probably lost the use of his laser—but Patricia had seen a nasty looking slug-thrower on his hip.

He stepped from out behind the silver sedan, and Patricia swung her laser rifle up, pulled into her trigger. Green fire sparked off the laser built into the suit's right arm. There was a little actinic pop and a whiff of gray smoke. The soldier ducked back behind the sedan.

ARTIST: CHARLES OINES
PUBLICATION: TECHNOLOGY OF DESTRUCTION
YEAR: 2004

That was the first and the last shot they were going to get for free. From here on out the enemy was going to be looking for them behind the barrier.

Patricia pointed left, held up three fingers.

Talwar nodded. He might be pompous, but he grasped the tactical situation at once. Stop the enemy infantry and they won. Let them advance and they lost.

The knight touched his chest and signaled left.

Patricia swallowed. Talwar was proposing a risky strategy. He'd duck left, keeping down, but risking enemy fire. Meanwhile, she had to hold off all three soldiers all by herself. And they had armor—she didn't. But if it worked, the knight would circle around and hit them in the back.

Besides it was their only shot.

Patricia nodded.

Just like that Talwar was gone. Well, he certainly wasn't a man to wait around when something needed doing. Patricia covered his move by popping over the barrier and firing. She caught one of the enemy battlesuits on the shoulder, but then ruby fire sliced past her so close that she felt the heat baking her left side.

She pivoted and snapped a shot in the general direction of the laser and then dove for cover, hoping that her shot bought her two, three seconds. She army-crawled to the end of the barrier and peeked out from behind it, still on her stomach.

One of the enemy soldiers was racing forward.

She fired, slicing into his knee. The shot must've locked up the joint, because the suit toppled forward. Patricia took one more shot at the soldier's torso and then she was back behind the barrier and moving left.

Just as a small missile smashed into the ferrocrete five meters from where she'd been. There was a horrific explosion, close enough for the bass roar to make her ears ring and then a thousand blades were slicing into her flesh.

She looked down. Shards of broken ferrocrete had cut her, none very big, but all painful. She popped up over the barrier and fired again, chasing the guy sheltering behind the silver sedan away but not before he fired his slug thrower at her in semi-automatic.

A shot hit her in the chest and knocked her down.

Where the hell was Talwar?

She sat down behind the barrier, breathing hard. Wouldn't be able to do this much longer.

Where. Was. Talwar?

And then she heard the rapid-fire shriek of a laser.

Followed by silence.

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The ConstructionMech was stalking down Halbiero chased by laser fire from the Raidens. A massive explosion somewhere in the distance signaled that the Jessie had met an untimely end.

A gray haze clouded the road, fed from a dozen fires and the fog of expended ordnance. It smelled bitter—and sweet. Patricia tasted grit on her tongue. Her chest ached where she'd been shot and she was bleeding from a score of cuts.

She owed Talwar her life.

She stood alone with the knight looking down at the dead terrorist behind the silver sedan.

"We make a pretty good team," said Talwar.

"I'm glad you were there," she admitted.

"You're not new to combat."

Patricia said nothing.

"A security chief trained in commando tactics," said Talwar softly. "The mysterious appearance of Raiden battle armor." He shook his head. "ComStar has reconstituted the Com Guards."

"We have to protect our holdings," said Patricia softly.

"Right," said Talwar. "But after Word of Blake used their version of the Com Guards to launch the Jihad you can't afford to let anyone know. Half the worlds in the Inner Sphere would be terrified of a resurgent ComStar military."

"So what are you going to do?" she asked.

Talwar crossed his arms over his chest, furrowed his brow, buried his chin in his chest. "It's not really up to me. Or you. I think it's a matter for the Primus to discuss with the Exarch."

Patricia nodded. "Of course. We have a bigger issue to worry about anyway. Like who's trying to disrupt interstellar communications." She knelt and picked up the dead man's slug thrower. She studied it carefully and then handed it butt-first to Talwar. "I don't see any markings. Do you?"

He looked at it for a minute and shook his head. "No." He handed it back.

Patricia looked down. "Look. I just wanted to say. Whatever this is, whatever this all is, you saved my life today." She looked over at him. "I'll always owe you for that."

He met her gaze. "I was just doing my job," he said softly. "But maybe this moment can serve as a bridge of understanding between our two governments."

"Maybe," said Patricia thoughtfully.

Talwar glanced down at the dead terrorist.

Patricia swept the slug thrower up and jammed it against the knight's skull. Pulled the trigger. The weapon roared and Talwar jerked. Then his body toppled to the ground.

Patricia carefully knelt down and replaced the weapon in the dead terrorist's hand.

"But then again, maybe not."

▲▼▲

After cleaning up, she stood with DeSolvo in the HPG control room. The elegant room hummed with power as techs worked to bring the HPG back to life. Techs called out numbers, calibrated sensors, rerouted power.

"Other than cutting power, the terrorists didn't manage to do any damage," said DeSolvo. "Once we reboot, we should restore communications." He looked away. "You did an excellent job, Adept."

"Not just me," she said softly. "Ravi Talwar deserves some of the credit."

"And did our knight—" DeSolvo paused, carefully choosing his words. "Did he finally see things our way?"

"We never got a chance to talk about it," said Patricia coolly. "Sadly, he was killed in the terrorist attack."

The color drained out of DeSolvo's face, but he nodded and said nothing.

"Ready for transmission," called out one of the techs.

"Proceed," said DeSolvo.

"Waiting for video test transmission," called out a technician.

DeSolvo pointed at a screen and he and Patricia stepped over to the console. For a moment there was only black and then the screen blinked—and there was nothing but gray static.

"What's going on?" DeSolvo snapped.

One of the comtechs leaned forward and swallowed. Sweat beaded on his forehead. "I, I don't know, sir. It l-looks like the core has burned out."

DeSolvo wheeled around, his face drained of color except for two high spots of color on his cheeks, his mouth hanging open.

It occurred to Patricia that the coming of a great storm was often heralded by no more than the merest stirring of an uneasy wind. She reached out and touched the crackle and pop of static on the screen.

And felt the chill breeze of destruction waking.

FORESTRYMECH

JUPITER BATTLEMECH

FENRIR BATTLEARMOR

LEGIONNAIRE BATTLEMECH

RYOKEN MK II BATTLEMECH

HATCHETMAN BATTLEMECH

KAGE BATTLEARMOR

Republic of the Sphere

Dragon's Fury

Banson's Raiders

Steel Wolves

Swordsworn

Spirit Cats

Highlanders

MECHWARRIOR
FIRE FOR EFFECT

ARTIST: CHARLES OINES

ARTISTS: VIC BONILLA & PAUL WESBERRY

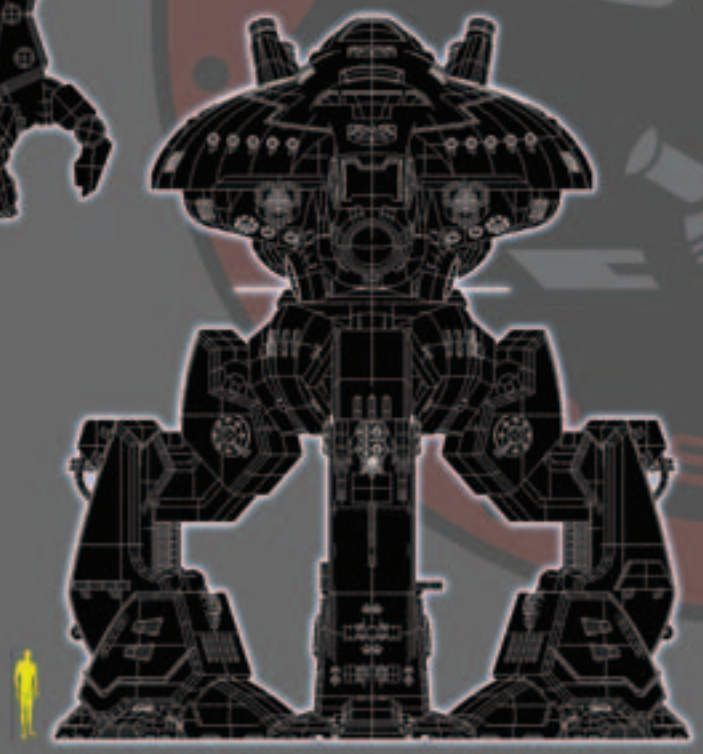
ARTIST: VIC BONILLA

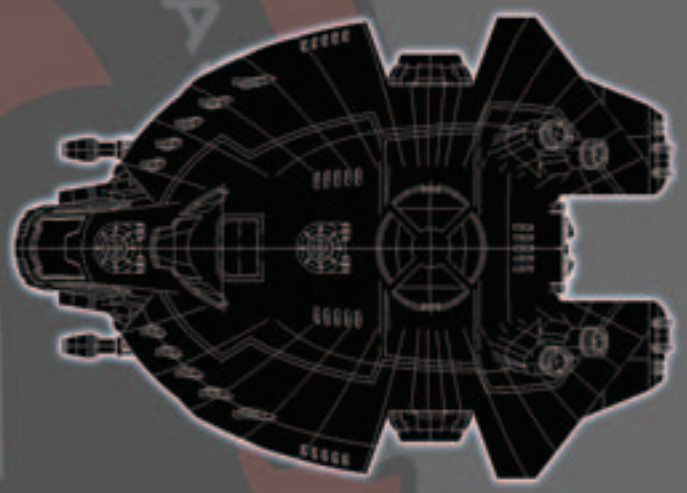
ARTIST: VIC BONILLA

Variant A Loadout
Model: ARS-VA-C
Codename: Zeus
Commander: "Clotho"
Additional Armament:
2 Extended-Range Particle Projection Cannons
3 Short-Range Missile 6-Racks

Variant B Loadout
Model: ARS-VB-C
Codename: Hera
Commander: "Hermes"
Additional Armament:
1 Heavy Gauss Rifle
3 Extended-Range Medium Pulse Lasers

Variant C Loadout
Model: ARS-VC-C
Codename: Hades
Commander: "Phobos"
Additional Armament:
2 Medium-Range Missile 20-Racks
1 Ultra Autocannon/10
1 Tight-Stream Electromagnetic Pulse Weapon





Rhodes Project BattleMech:
Ares Colossal Class

General Loadout
Chassis: Specialized Endo-Steel
Power Plant: 375 Light Fusion

Torso Armament:
2 Long-Range Missile 5-Racks
2 Extended-Range Medium Lasers

Leg Armament:
2 Anti-Personnel Pods
1 Extended-Range Small Laser
1 Short-Range Missile 2-Rack

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ARTIST: VIC BONILLA

COMPUTER GAMES

Few properties lend themselves better to electronic entertainment than the concept of piloting a giant walking 'Mech in combat. Since 1988, the *BattleTech* license has had a grand tradition in electronic gaming history. Worked on by hundreds of talented designers, programmers and artists, and enjoyed by millions of gamers, *BattleTech* would push the boundaries of computer and video games from 1988 up until the present. A literal "Who's Who" of software companies have been involved in a tale of software development that rivals the political machinations of the Inner Sphere.

Jordan Weisman, creator of the universe and boardgame, was instrumental in launching the *BattleTech* computer games. Directly involved in every version before *MechWarrior 4*, he then moved on to an advisory role, as well as directly overseeing the Virtual World Entertainment work.

BATTLETECH: THE CRESCENT HAWKS INCEPTION

1988, Publisher: Infocom
Developer: Westwood Associates
Platform: MS-DOS

The first *BattleTech* PC game, *The Crescent Hawks Inception* followed the exploits of 18-year-old Jason Youngblood and the formation of the Crescent Hawks in the Lyran Commonwealth. Fighting against forces of the Draconis Combine, the first *BattleTech* game was an RPG that featured an manga art style for character close-ups.

In some ways, Inception is a nod to the *MechWarrior* RPG, as many encounters can happen to your pilot outside the safety of a 'Mech.

BattleTech: The Crescent Hawks Inception is notable for being one of the first titles published by Infocom that was not a text adventure. The computer could resolve combat automatically, or the player could fight each round. Developer Westwood Associates stuck with a turn-based, RPG formula for the game, but the foundation was being laid for greater things.

MECHWARRIOR

1989, Publisher: Activision
Developer: Dynamix
Platform: MS: DOS

The first BattleMech simulator, *MechWarrior* was a sensation when released in 1989. The first title to feature a first-person perspective from the cockpit, *MechWarrior* was a surprisingly flexible game.

Playing the role of Gideon Vandenberg, leader of the mercenary unit Blazing Aces, *MechWarrior* let the player travel the Inner Sphere and work for any of the five Great Houses. The player could barter for contracts, deal with salvage, and choose whether or not to follow the main story line. The player was free to explore the Inner Sphere, or follow clues and clear the name of his family, before the Fourth Succession War began to rage.

Using flat shaded polygons and running on an improvement of the earlier Dynamix "Arctic Fox" engine, *MechWarrior* featured eight classic 'Mech chassis: *Locust, Jenner, Phoenix Hawk, Shadow Hawk, Marauder, Warhammer, Rifleman* and *BattleMaster*. The title provided solid game play, with some limited AI. Several mission types were featured, and planning was necessary to deal with extended deployments where ammo and replacement parts would be scarce. BattleMech load-outs could not be changed, but weapon systems could be knocked out and had to be replaced or repaired.

The next time 'Mechs appeared in a first-person environment, they would be in a very different guise.

BATTLETECH: THE CRESCENT HAWKS REVENGE

1989, Developer: Westwood Associates
Publisher: Infocom
Platform: MS-DOS

The Crescent Hawks Revenge was Westwood Associates' follow-up title to *Crescent Hawks Inception*. Instead of focusing on an RPG title, *Revenge* dealt with 'Mech combat and was one of the first implementations of *BattleTech* rules in a game. The player could control up to three lances of 'Mechs, call in air support and artillery, and deal with tanks and infantry.

Taking place during the War of 3039, and then leap-frogging into the Clan Invasion, this title recognized the expanding digital *BattleTech* universe with nods to Activision's *MechWarrior* as well. *Revenge* featured the largest contingent of playable 'Mechs in any game, covering the majority of *Technical Readout: 3050*. Heat was a major issue in this game, and pilots left in the "overburn" mode would end up shut down on the battlefield.

Completion of the game unlocked a scenario editor that let the player choose his own forces and the enemy forces on any of the game's single-player maps.

Revenge has an important place in game history as developer Westwood Associates began to move away from turn based games. *Revenge* is generally recognized as the first Real Time Strategy game; Westwood would continue the combat concepts begun here and expand them in *Dune II*, and then reach blockbuster appeal with *Command & Conquer*. *Revenge* also featured a persistent game world, where mission outcomes affected what 'Mechs and pilots were available for future missions.

BattleMechs would have to wait almost ten years before they reappeared in a strategy/war game of this nature.

BATTLETECH CENTER: SYSTEM 1

1990, Developer: Environmental System Projects/Incredible Technologies
Platform: LBE Center

First appearing at North Pier in Chicago, Illinois, the BattleTech Center was the first multiplayer, networked BattleMech simulation. The *BattleTech* Center was the pioneering concept in Location Based Entertainment by *BattleTech* founders Jordan Wiseman and Ross Babcock. Each cockpit featured more than 104 controls that actually had an impact on the simulation. Weapons grouping, night vision, IFF toggles, independent torso control, and more were featured in these six-player networked games. For the first time, the enemy was man; the entire concept of the BattleTech Center was that the Fourth Succession War raged on and team battles would settle the score. The game featured a basic death match and team death match style.

The custom cockpits ran under an interesting amalgamation of hardware. Featuring bit-mapped sprites, Clan 'Mechs were first introduced at the *BattleTech* Center. The distinctive outline of the *Mad Cat* was used in signage, and the *Vulture, Loki* and *Thor* were the other featured chassis in the game. Each 'Mech had several different variants to match pilot styles. While the fiction of the Center was rooted in 3025, the game art was firmly planted in 3050. Players would end a game and receive a printed score sheet that detailed the highlights of the battle.

With the introduction of the BattleTech Center, the arms race of more and more impressive 'Mech simulations began. Publisher Activision would look at the success of *MechWarrior* and the potential of the BattleTech Center, and start the next major evolution of 'Mech combat.

MECHWARRIOR

1992, Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: Activision
Platform: SNES

BattleTech made its first appearance on a gaming console with the port of *MechWarrior* to the Super Nintendo Entertainment System. Using the same plot from the PC version, console players get to experience a similar system of bidding for mercenary contracts as they attempt to clear their family name.

BattleMech selection included the *Nexus, Fujin, Raijin, Crusader* and *Ragnarok*. Damage locations were simplified to arms, legs, torso and head. The bit-mapped sprites fought the player in the SNES's mode 7 3-D environments. The 'Mechs would be folded into the *BattleTech* canon with *Technical Readout: 3058*.

BATTLETECH CENTER/VIRTUAL WORLD BATTLETECH SYSTEM 2/3

1992, Developer: Virtual World Entertainment
Platform: LBE

Tim Disney and Charlie Fink joined with Weisman and Babcock to retool the BattleTech Center into Virtual World. The LBE hardware underwent its first major overhaul, moving to a 68000-based, microprocessor-based system. The cockpits still relied on an ArcNet network, and missions were served from Macintosh-based Operations Consoles. The gaming experience was extended with the introduction of 2-D Mission Reviews at the end of the game in addition to printed score sheets. 'Mechs became flat shaded polygons, and the system was upgraded to reliably support eight-player games. System 2/3 would have a reliable multi-player frame rate of 18-20 fps.

The *Avatar* and *Sunder* were introduced to the public in this software release. The final software release featured a version of Indirect Fire for missile systems—the only appearance to date of Indirect Fire in a *BattleTech*-based game.

The System 2/3 version of *BattleTech* drove Virtual World to expand to more than thirteen sites in six different countries around the world. The type of multi-player gaming featured at these sites would blossom with Internet gaming later in the decade.

Virtual World BattleTech continued to offer groundbreaking software with the later implementation of SiteLink that allowed cockpits from different locations to link up for multi-player games. Sites were linked with dedicated ISDN lines to accommodate the bandwidth of the network traffic for lag-free games. SiteLink was added to Virtual World in 1993, spearheaded by Greg Corson.

BATTLETECH: A GAME OF ARMORED COMBAT

1994, Developer: Extreme Entertainment
Publisher: Sega
Platform: Sega Genesis

BattleTech returned to the consoles in 1994. *BattleTech: A Game of Armored Combat* was an action title that featured the player piloting a *Mad Cat* from a third-person isometric perspective. Similar in style to the popular *Strike* series from Electronic Arts, *BattleTech: A Game of Armored Combat* featured a push through the Inner Sphere as part of the Invading Clans under the direction of Colonel Ward. Combat went from Alshain, Satalice, Ridderkirk and Avon, against Elementals and 'Mechs—both Clan and Inner Sphere—including the *Marauder, Stormcrow, Thunderbolt, Wasp, Wolverine* and *Uller*.

Several of the developers of *BattleTech: A Game of Armored Combat* would see this as their entry into the *BattleTech* universe. Producers/game designers Denny Thorley and David Luehmann would see it as their introduction to the battlefield of the 31st century. They would be major players in the future of *BattleTech* as electronic entertainment in the coming decade.

BattleTech: A Game of Armored Combat was ported to the SNES under the title of *BattleTech: 3050* by Malibu Games, and published by Activision in 1994.

Developed at the same time by Extreme was *BattleTech: Gray Death Legion* for the Sega CD. Utilizing the Sega CD hardware for sprite scaling and a 3-D mode similar to the SNES Mode 7, this was the next cockpit-based viewpoint seen on a console system. Extreme closed its doors before the title was released, after which Thorley joined Jordan Wiseman to found FASA Interactive and develop titles based on FASA's catalog of pen-and-paper original products.

MULTI-PLAYER BATTLETECH EGA

1994, Developer: Kesmai
Platform: MS-DOS

Using a heavily modified version of the original *MechWarrior* engine, Kesmai took *MechWarriors* online for the first time via Genie. At this time, if players went online, they were still using modems with blazing high speeds of 1200 or 2400 baud.

Kesmai's version of *BattleTech* divided players up into the classic Houses and let them battle it out for control of planets for the glory of their Houses. Games were still primarily death match and team death match missions. Kesmai's version of *BattleTech* would face a major challenge with the next Activision release for the PC the following year.

Multi-player *BattleTech* fans would form one of the first dedicated online gaming communities that would predict the online Quake Clans and the eventual rise of MMORPG titles in the 21st century.

MECHWARRIOR 2: 31ST CENTURY COMBAT

1995, Developer/Publisher: Activision
Platform: MS-DOS/Windows

Activision raised the bar on 'Mech combat with this groundbreaking game in 1995. Originally developed as *MechWarrior 2: The Clans* and featuring bit-mapped cockpit art with flat shaded polygon environments and 'Mechs similar in style to LucasArts' popular X-Wing and TIE Fighter simulation series, *MechWarrior 2: The Clans* got as far as CES previews using a full-up foot pedal and dual hand control setup that began to rival what was seen at Virtual World Centers. Activision decided to scrap this bit-mapped approach and pushed with a new vision of *MechWarrior 2* that featured all flat shaded polygons. With the restructure of the game, the other four Invading Clans were abandoned, and the game focused on Clan Wolf and Clan Jade Falcon. The narrative also shifted from an open-ended game of the first *MechWarrior* to a rigid mission-based structure. It is the first in a three-game license with FASA that will introduce millions to the *BattleTech* universe.

Clan Jade Falcon and Clan Wolf are locked in the Refusal War after the Clan Invasion, and the game is played from both perspectives. The 'Mech complement contains most of the Clan 'Mechs from *Technical Readout: 3050*. The friendly rivalry between Activision and Virtual World was apparent in this title, as one warehouse that a player discovers is filled with "VWE Cockpits."

MechWarrior 2 was the last MS-DOS title for *BattleTech*, and the first using new Windows 95 technology. The title was given a second Windows-based release. It was also one of the first 3-D games that started to make use of new Graphics Accelerators. Besides being a bona fide hit title, *MechWarrior 2* went on to become one of the largest OEM pack in titles in history for demonstrating new Graphics Cards. *MechWarrior 2* allows for complete customization of a 'Mech load-out, and when it finally went online with Net-Mech, tweaked player load-outs led to one-shot kill contests.

Artists at Digital Domain initially did the pre-rendered CG opening and end movies, but some final rendering was actually provided by FASA's own computers, under the supervision of Jamie Marshall.

During the 1994 Virtual World Cup in Las Vegas, Activision was a major sponsor as Virtual World players from around the world competed. Activision showcased *MechWarrior 2* at the event. Many players forlornly looked at the opening movies and dreamed of a day when game play could match that vision. They didn't need to wait too long.

Tim Morten led the charge at Activision, involved with both incarnations of *MechWarrior 2,* and continued with the series at Activision.

MECHWARRIOR 2: GHOST BEARS LEGACY

1995, Developer/Publisher: Activision

Platform: MS-DOS/Windows

The first *MechWarrior* expansion pack features Clan Ghost Bear. Sixteen additional missions were added to the *MechWarrior 2* lineup and *Technical Readout: 3055* 'Mechs began to be seen for the first time.

MECHWARRIOR 2: NETMECH

1996, Developer/Publisher: Activision

Platform: Windows

In 1996, the promised multi-player expansion of *MechWarrior 2* hit the shelves. Using the Kali gaming service to begin with, players could take *MechWarrior 2* online and duel with friends and enemies. No persistent game world was created, and NetMech was later folded into the standard release of *MechWarrior 2*.

MECHWARRIOR 2: MERCENARIES

1996, Developer/Publisher: Activision

Platform: Windows

The last title in the Activision *MechWarrior* series saw a return to some of the concepts of the original title. Taking place in 3044 and leading up to the Clan Invasion, this *MechWarrior 2* sequel focuses on the Inner Sphere pilot. Pilots can once again barter for missions as in the original *MechWarrior*, but with a more limited mission structure. Since the game featured an Inner Sphere focus, heat was more of an issue in this title than in the Clan-based titles.

The friendly rivalry with VWE drew to a close as Activision's license expired. *MechWarrior 2* ended up being ported to the new Sony Playstation and Sega Saturn in the "Extreme Arcade Edition" in 1997, the final Activision title. "Extreme Arcade Edition" was developed by Quantum Factory, and features simplified mission structures and power-ups that are available within the mission. Players are treated to the famous *MechWarrior 2* intro movie for the first time in full screen, high resolution.

With *MechWarrior 2: Mercenaries* in the hands of players, the race was on for the next giant robot combat game, and the surprising contestants were none other than Activision and Virtual World. Activision continued to use the *MechWarrior 2* engine in its popular I-76 titles; eventually, it became the core of their *Heavy Gear* titles.

TESLA BATTLETECH

1996, Developer: Virtual World Entertainment/FASA Interactive

Platform: LBE

The fourth generation of the VWE LBE cockpit system shifted development to a PC-based cockpit. Running on Division Ltd. graphic cards, the art in *Tesla BattleTech* was stunning for its time. Whereas the System 1 and 2/3 cockpits had two monitors surrounded by LED displays, the Tesla cockpit featured a main display that used an Infinity Optics system to provide more depth to the image, and six more secondary and multi-function display monitors that heightened the realism of the LBE experience.

The *Owens* was first introduced to the gaming public in this software release. The *Strider* and *Raptor* were also designed, but were never implemented in the cockpits. Their only true appearance came in the rendered pictures by VWE in *Technical Readout: 3058*. Introduced for the first time was the use of Clan 'Mech names and Inner Sphere names for those Clan 'Mechs to differentiate 'Mech variants. *Tesla BattleTech* was the first game in which a player can pilot a *Mad Cat* in one mission and a *Timber Wolf* in another mission with a different weapon load-out. While not accurate with regard to game fiction, it proved to be a clean solution to differentiate variant 'Mechs to the public.

Development on the new system was not without its tribulations. VWE first used its *Red Planet* title to iron out the network bugs of this multi-player system, and then attacked *BattleTech*. Design issues arose when the title drifted more toward engineering than to raw game play. The concept of coolant flushes was added in *Tesla BattleTech*, but game play was changed to a much slower pace. Where it was possible to get six or more kills in a System 3 game, the initial release of *Tesla BattleTech* found a player lucky to get two or three kills in a single mission. Despite the amazing graphics and 3-D surround sound, *Tesla BattleTech* got saddled with the moniker "ButtonTech" because of the amount of button pushing related to managing a 'Mech rather than actually fighting. T.J. Wagner emerged from the VWE staff to lead a second release of the title that focused more on combat and less on engineering. Wagner continued at the forefront of *BattleTech* games for the next several generations.

A daring new concept lay at the heart of *Tesla BattleTech*, however; the new FASA Interactive CEO Denny Thorley had the idea that the games available at Virtual World Centers should provide an experience like going to a movie theatre, and available at the counter should be a version of the Pod game playable on the PC. That title would become *MechWarrior 3*.

MULTI-PLAYER BATTLETECH: SOLARIS

1997, Developer: Kesmai

Platform: Windows

On the PC side, Kesmai continued to refine their *BattleTech* title into *BattleTech: Solaris*, which refined the online play mechanic they had developed to center on the dueling arenas of Solaris VII. The pride of each House is on the line in these battles, and a virtual gambling system was also introduced. *MPBTS* had to compete against *MechWarrior 2* online games, and the new generation of First Person Shooters that started to storm the ever more reliable Internet game space.

MECHCOMMANDER

1998, Developer: FASA Interactive

Publisher: Microprose

Platform: Windows

BattleTech returned to its strategy roots with this Real Time Strategy game, which was FASA Interactive's launch title. Frank Savage and Mitch Gitelman led a team that attempted to translate the excitement of the tabletop into real time. A point-and-click interface made it possible to issue real-time commands to up to three lances. Heat was removed from consideration, as designers determined that a MechWarrior would deal with heat, not a 'Mech Commander. A considerable portion of the game was dedicated to 'Mech salvage and re-arming and redesigning 'Mech load-outs. Pilots gained experience as they survived battles and became better pilots and gunners. The opening cinematic became one of the best of its era. The game featured pre-rendered sprites in an isometric view. *MechCommander* changed the RTS genre and created a new genre called Real Time Tactical (RTT).

MechCommander covers the battle of Port Arthur between forces of the Federated Commonwealth and Clan Smoke Jaguar. Originally, the game was intended to focus on the battle of Coventry, but publisher Microprose grew

PUBLICATION: VIRTUAL WORLD ENTERTAINMENT PROMOTIONAL MATERIAL
YEAR: 1997

concerned about possible confusion between the use of the planet Coventry vs. the British city of the same name. The fiction of the game changed as a result.

As *MechCommander* came together, another *BattleTech* strategy game quietly emerged at FASA Interactive. *BattleTech* co-creator Ross Babcock and former Infocom staffer Joel Berez hatched the concept of *Computer BattleTech*. A true turn-based war game, *Computer BattleTech* was envisioned as the direct translation of *BattleTech, Fourth Edition* to the PC. *Computer BattleTech* had a hard time competing within FASA Interactive against *MechCommander* and eventually was shut down, marking the last work by Babcock on *BattleTech*. Microsoft approved the release of the alpha build of *Computer BattleTech* to the general public in August of 2007.

MECHWARRIOR 3

1999, Developer: FASA Interactive/ Zipper Interactive
Publisher: Microprose
Platform: Windows

Internally the race was on at FASA Interactive to beat the Activision *MechWarrior 2* team to market with the next giant robot combat game. Tim Morten led the Activision team on *Heavy Gear*, utilizing another iteration of their *MechWarrior 2* engine. At FASA Interactive, Greg Corson led a team that was porting the *Tesla BattleTech* engine using the new Microsoft Direct X graphics renderer. Activision had the advantage at the beginning, using an established engine, while FASA Interactive struggled to get a handle on the evolving Microsoft architecture.

The race came to a head at the E3 conference of 1997, where Microprose showed FASA Interactive's *MechWarrior 3* behind closed doors. Producer Tim Gerritson led the project that at this point had a demo of a *Vulture* that could scale a mountain and destroy a bridge. The 'Mech graphics from the Tesla version were intact, and environmental graphics were being developed. Weapons effects were placeholders at this time. Microprose continued to push FASA Interactive for a finished title, but FASA Interactive continued to have difficulties getting the simulation to work with parameters under the Direct X renderer.

Shortly following the 1997 E3, internal development of *MechWarrior 3* ceased at FASA Interactive, and Microprose turned to industry newcomer Zipper Interactive and their robust 3-D engine from *Death Drome*. *MechWarrior 3* became an interesting title, blending the original FASA Interactive design with a slimmed-down Zipper Interactive design. Core FASA Interactive design elements, including a movable targeting reticule, 'Mech art taken from *Tesla*, and some of FASA Interactive's pre-rendered cut scenes, finished the game. The game itself features part of the Second Star League push during Operation Bird Dog and the attack on Smoke Jaguar space. The concept of a Mobile Field base is implemented and lets a player re-arm and repair during a mission. BattleMechs are fully customizable, but supplies are limited to salvaged and discovered parts.

Many of the FASA Interactive *MechWarrior 3* team were let go; those that remained vowed not to repeat earlier mistakes. They would get some much-needed payback in their next title, *MechWarrior 4*. Adding ammunition to that battle were the forces of industry giant, Microsoft.

MECHCOMMANDER: DESPERATE MEASURES

1999, Developer: FASA Interactive
Publisher: Microprose
Platform: Windows

MechCommander proved enough of a success to warrant an expansion pack titled *Desperate Measures*. The expansion pack featured missions located on the planet Cermak. This name was a nod to the street on which the FASA and FASA Interactive offices were located.

MECHWARRIOR 3: PIRATES' MOON

1999, Developer: Zipper Interactive
Publisher: Microprose
Platform: Windows

Pirates' Moon continued the *MechWarrior 3* franchise into its first expansion pack. By now, the expectations of additional maps and 'Mech chassis were met. Developed without a large amount of FASA Interactive support, the expansion pack was light on story and featured no new cinematics. Zipper kept a connection to FASA Interactive, however, and supplied the graphics engine for the first *Crimson Skies* title for the PC.

FASA Interactive was acquired by Microsoft, which had begun to expand its internal gaming studios to support the development of its new venture, the Xbox. FASA Interactive and Virtual World parted ways at this point. CEO Denny Thorley did not join the move to Redmond, and stayed in Chicago to start Day 1 Studios. FASA Interactive was re-branded FASA Studios at Microsoft. In the purchase, Microsoft gained the right to the *BattleTech* property.

At Microsoft, David Leuhmann took over management of the *BattleTech* properties, as two titles were fast-tracked. *MechWarrior 4* and *MechCommander 2* started development in earnest.

MECHWARRIOR 4: VENGEANCE

2000, Developer: FASA Studios
Publisher: Microsoft
Platform: Windows

With the backing of Microsoft, the FASA MechWarrior team set out to create what would be, in their minds, the ultimate 'Mech-based game. The story follows the original treatments of the FASA Interactive *MechWarrior*, with extensive use of live actors in the cinematics. The development team was a mix of programmers and designers who cut their teeth on the LBE version of *BattleTech*, led by T.J. Wagner. Thirteen of the team of forty-nine developers traced their experiences back to VWE System 2/3, *Tesla* and the aborted *MechWarrior 3*.

MechWarrior 4 featured many of the concepts introduced in previous games, including limping 'Mechs and coolant, and included for the first time active sensor and radar suites. A change to the design for customization of 'Mechs led to some controversy in *BattleTech* circles. Since *MechWarrior 2*'s release in 1995, players had been used to unlimited freedom in putting whatever weapon system on whatever 'Mech they wanted in any position. This led to some "game breaking" designs that caused problems in multi-player games from unbalanced 'Mechs. The *MechWarrior 4* solution was the introduction of "hard points" on a 'Mech chassis. Now only certain weapons could be mounted on certain 'Mechs in certain areas. This change made game play more balanced, but many players did not like this departure from the original pen-and-paper game.

Set against the backdrop of the FedCom Civil War on Kentares, *MechWarrior 4* went on to be one of the biggest titles of 2000 and garner many awards.

MULTI-PLAYER BATTLETECH: 3025

2001, Developer: Kesmai
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Platform: Windows

Kesmai's previous online games, *MPBT* and *MPBT: Solaris*, had gained a considerable following online. An extensive online community had grown up around these titles and eagerly awaited the next version. Kesmai was purchased by industry giant Electronic Arts in 1999, and work was ongoing on this flagship title. Focused on squad-based 'Mech combat prior to the Clan Invasion, heat was a major issue in game play, and the online component was very robust. The game made it as far as a public beta in 2001, when Electronic Arts cancelled the title.

MECHCOMMANDER 2

2001, Developer: Fasa Studios
Publisher: Microsoft
Platform: Windows

The *MechCommander* team from FASA Interactive expanded and started work on the 3-D sequel to their previous title. *MechCommander 2* took many of the concepts of *MechCommander* where the designers had originally wanted to go. The 3-D engine freed the player to zoom all over the battlefield and view combat from any perspective. In this title, the FedCom Civil War continues to rage on Carver V.

MechCommander 2 benefited from the increased production value Microsoft could provide at the time, and many *BattleTech* game assets were shared with *MechWarrior 4*, key among them sound and weapons effects. The sound and look of battle in the two games are identical, as FASA Studios attempted to make the *BattleTech* universe cohesive for the first time. A player who fires a PPC or Gauss rifle in *MechWarrior 4* can expect the same sensory feedback in *MechCommander*. To demonstrate the strength of their XNA Build Software, Microsoft released the source code of *MechCommander 2* to the general public in August of 2006.

MECHWARRIOR 4: BLACK KNIGHT

2001, Developer: Cyberlore Studios/FASA Studios
Publisher: Microsoft
Platform: Windows

The first expansion pack for *MechWarrior 4* set a tone that hadn't been seen in *BattleTech* games since the *MechWarrior 2* franchise at Activision. Splitting development with Cyberlore Studios, *Black Knight* tells the tale of a mercenary unit fighting against the protagonists of *MechWarrior 4: Vengeance*. In an interesting twist true to the nature of the fictional world of *BattleTech*, there are no clearly defined heroes. The heroes in one game become the villains in the next.

MECHWARRIOR 4: CLAN 'MECH PAK

2002, Developer: Cyberlore Studio/ FASA Studios
Publisher: Microsoft
Platform: Windows

The first expansion pack aimed at *MechWarrior 4: Vengeance* and the upcoming *MechWarrior 4: Mercenaries*, this title was exactly as named: new Clan 'Mechs and Clan weapons for the *MechWarrior 4* engine. The *Cauldron-Born, Arctic Wolf, Kodiak* and *Masakari* joined the ranks in this release. The *Masakari* was the winner of a fan site survey done online to choose 'Mechs for the release.

MECHWARRIOR 4: INNER SPHERE 'MECH PAK

2002, Developer: Cyberlore Studio/ FASA Studios
Publisher: Microsoft
Platform: Windows

The flip side of the *Clan 'Mech Pak*, the *Inner Sphere 'Mech Pak* featured even more weapons and 'Mechs to add to the *MechWarrior 4* pot. The *Dragon, Highlander, Hunchback* and *Zeus* appear in *MechWarrior 4*, the *Zeus* being the winner of the online fan contest this time. With these two software releases, *MechWarrior 4:Vengeance* and *MechWarrior 4: Mercenaries* have access to over 44 'Mech chassis, the most 'Mechs available for play since *The Crescent Hawks' Revenge*.

MECHWARRIOR 4: MERCENARIES

2002, Developer: Cyberlore Studios/ FASA Studios
Publisher: Microsoft
Platform: Windows

Revisiting themes from the original *MechWarrior* (1989) and *MechWarrior 2: Mercenaries* (1996), *MechWarrior 4: Mercenaries* was the feather in the cap of *BattleTech* games up to this point. Free to join the Kell Hounds, the Gray Death Legion, the Northwind Highlanders or the infamous Wolf's Dragoons, a player can barter his or her way across the Inner Sphere as part of a mercenary unit forging their own legend. Set against the backdrop of the FedCom Civil War

in 3064, all the stops were pulled out for this *BattleTech* title. BattleMechs from this title and the *MechCommander* titles are featured in *Technical Readout: 3060*.

The *MechWarrior 4* engine was refined and the level of 'Mechs available for play was the largest yet, especially after the hooks left in the game for future expansions. In the two years since the implementation of the "hard point" system, the game had become a huge success online, with multiple leagues available for play. Many of the older MPBT players had migrated to Web-based groups, touting their successes. An interesting development soon came along, courtesy of *MechWarrior 4* licensee Tsunami Visual Technologies. Showcased in the Tsumo Multi-Game Motion System, a dramatically simplified *MechWarrior 4* begins to appear in arcades. The Tsumo Multi-Game Motion System features a simple motion platform to couple movement with onscreen actions. *MechWarrior 4* is featured in a stripped-down version where the pilot fights wave after wave of enemy 'Mechs. The game is networkable for up to eight players simultaneously.

MechWarrior 4: Mercenaries ends with the conclusion of the FedCom Civil War and plants the seeds for the ominous events that lie in wait for the *BattleTech* universe, courtesy of the Word of Blake. Those stories and fights would be part of another platform, however. With the conclusion of the *MechWarrior 4* series, FASA Studio turned to work on a pair of games for Microsoft's new Xbox title, revisited *Shadowrun*, and began work on *MechWarrior: Prime*. As part of the promotion for *MechWarrior 4: Mercenaries*, FASA Studios partnered with their old friends at VWE, creating a version of *Mercenaries* that could be played at E3 on VWE pods. This led to yet another iteration of LBE software.

PUBLICATION: MECHCOMMANDER
YEAR: 1998

BATTLETECH: FIRESTORM

2002, Developer: FASA Studios/Cyberlore Studios/Virtual World Entertainment/ Gameleap

Platform: LBE

The latest iteration of LBE software was developed with possibly the largest contingent yet of developers responsible in one way or another for this title. The custom Division graphics cards and PCs were pulled from the VWE cockpits and replaced with high-end Alienware PC Gaming rigs. Using the proprietary VWE hardware for MFD and controls, the *MechWarrior 4: Mercenaries* engine was ported to the cockpits. With Infinity Optics mirrors and surround sound, this version of *BattleTech* became the most realistic a pilot can imagine. Game play was tweaked again from the *MechWarrior 4* engine to provide a different experience for the LBE player. Korean developer Gameleap was instrumental in getting the *MechWarrior 4* engine to work with the VWE hardware.

MECHASSAULT

2002, Developer: Day 1 Studios/ FASA Studios

Publisher: Microsoft

Platform: Xbox

BattleMechs had last appeared on a gaming console in 1997, and in 2002 they returned in a big way. Denny Thorley had approached Microsoft about creating a game designed from scratch specifically for consoles. The result was *MechAssault*, Day 1 Studios' premiere title, which takes the player into third-person combat piloting a 'Mech as a Wolf's Dragoons MechWarrior. *MechAssault* is an action-based shooter whose roots go all the way back to *BattleTech: A Game of Armored Combat* for the Genesis. It uses the device of Inner Sphere and Clan 'Mech names to differentiate 'Mech variants in the game; for example, while the *Uziel* and *Belial* share geometry, their weapon load-outs are different.

MechAssault reunited many of the original FASA Interactive employees. Tom Dowd and T.J. Wagner led teams that had more *BattleTech* experience than possibly any other team assembled at that time. Some had experience on VWE cockpit games, *MechWarrior 3*, *MechCommander 1* and *2*, and the *MechWarrior 4* series. *MechAssault* had a truly outstanding pedigree.

MechAssault was unleashed as one of the launch titles for the nascent Xbox live service. It staked a claim to that service that earned it great reviews, awards, and a dedicated fan base that few other titles of the original Xbox enjoyed.

MECHASSAULT 2: LONE WOLF

2004, Developer: Day 1 Studios

Publisher: Microsoft

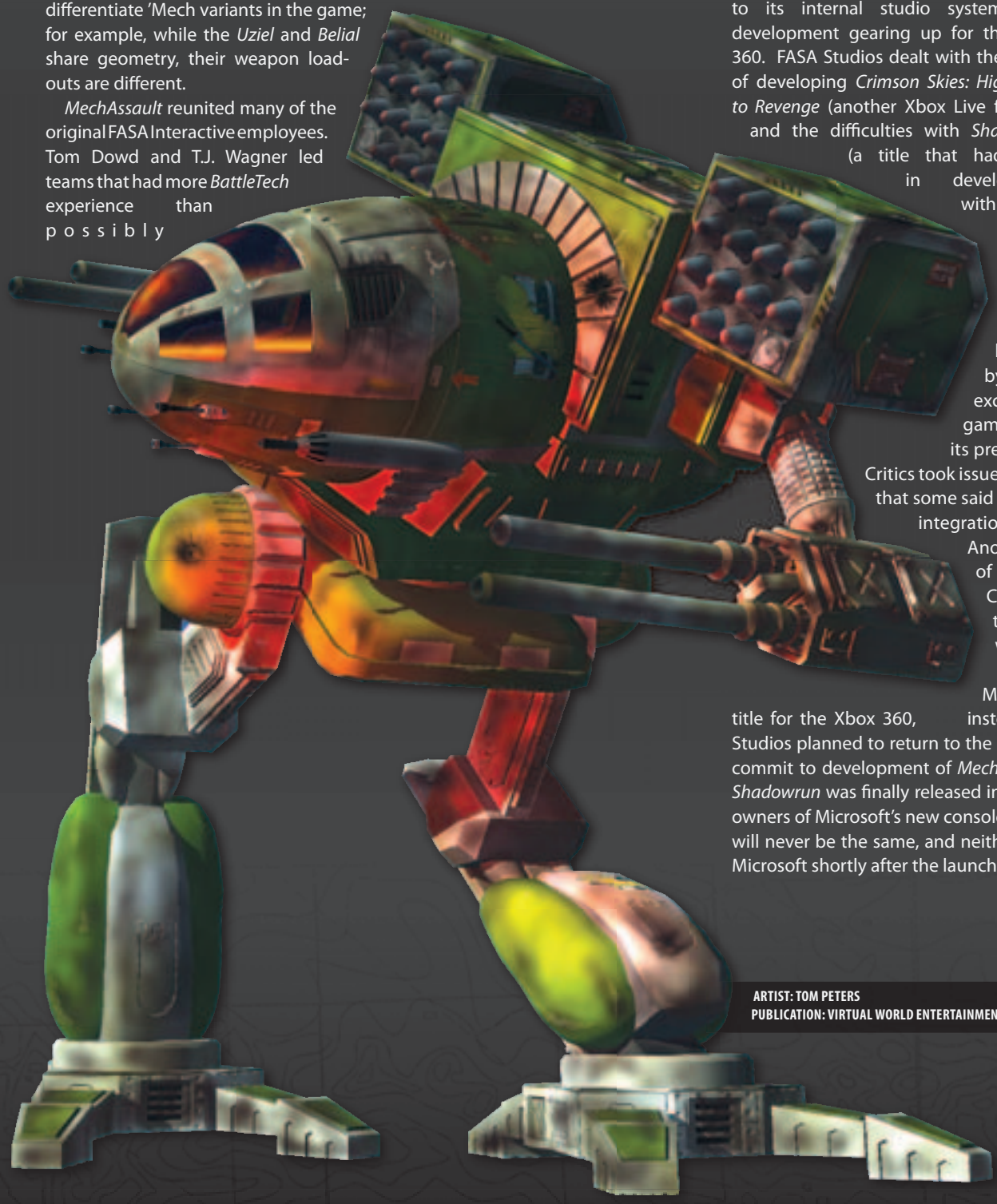
Platform: Xbox

The journey of the lost Dragoons continued in this Xbox title by Day 1 Studios. While *MechAssault* focused on 'Mech combat, *Lone Wolf* opened the game world to let the player fight in battle armor or tanks, hang from aircraft, and pilot 'Mechs.

Microsoft was undergoing changes to its internal studio system, with development gearing up for the Xbox 360. FASA Studios dealt with the fallout of developing *Crimson Skies: High Road to Revenge* (another Xbox Live favorite) and the difficulties with *Shadowrun* (a title that had been in development with FASA Interactive as far back as 1997). Day 1 forged on, with T.J. Wagner producing, David Luehmann managing for Microsoft, and Denny Thorley as president.

These changes meant that *Lone Wolf* would be the last major *BattleTech* game released by Microsoft. *MechAssault 2: Lone Wolf* had excellent graphic detail, and the action-based game play was even better than in the original. Like its predecessor, it was a major success on Xbox Live. Critics took issue with some licensed rock music, and game play that some said was a nod toward "Grand 'Mech Auto" with the integration of the neuro-hacking element to the game. Another criticism came from the implementation of truly giant robot bosses within the game. Coupled with the licensed rock music, many felt that *MechAssault 2* stepped too closely in line with other action-shooter games of the time.

Day 1 eventually pitched *MechAssault 3* to Microsoft, but Microsoft declined to pick up the title for the Xbox 360, instead focusing on FASA Studios' *Shadowrun*. FASA Studios planned to return to the air with another *Crimson Skies* title, and to fully commit to development of *MechWarrior: Prime* for the PC and Xbox 360. When *Shadowrun* was finally released in June of 2007, it was the first title that allowed owners of Microsoft's new console to play PC players at the same time. Xbox Live will never be the same, and neither will FASA Studios, which was shut down by Microsoft shortly after the launch of the title.



ARTIST: TOM PETERS
PUBLICATION: VIRTUAL WORLD ENTERTAINMENT

MECHASSAULT: PHANTOM WAR

2006, Developer: Backbone Entertainment
Publisher: Majesco Entertainment
Platform: Nintendo DS

The most recent entry in the *BattleTech* universe is fought on the Nintendo DS. Up to four players can battle wirelessly with this version of *MechAssault*. With players fighting for the Lyran Alliance, this title is probably the lightest when it comes to fitting into the *BattleTech* fictional universe. Utilizing the 'Mechs featured in the first *MechAssault* title, the player has the ability to neuro-hack as in *MechAssault 2*. This is the first title set in the 32nd century. *Phantom War* had the smallest release of any *BattleTech* title to date, and shared none of the development teams of the previous titles.

FANDOM

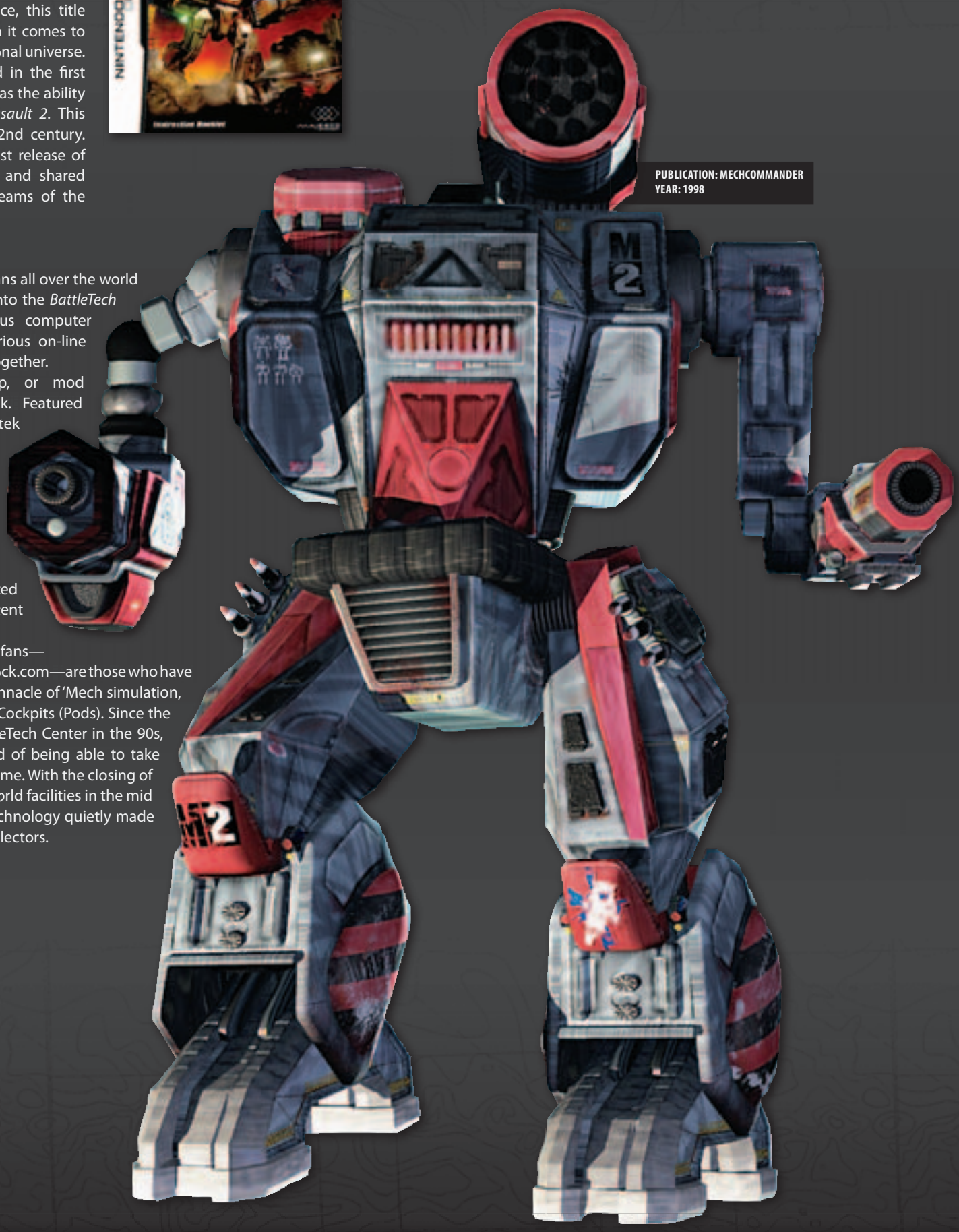
Just like the board game, fans all over the world have immersed themselves into the *BattleTech* universe through the various computer games, with a legion of various on-line communities binding them together.

One such on-line group, or mod group, is known as Mektek. Featured at www.mektek.net, Mektek has produced studio quality "fan mods" for the PC games *MechWarrior III* and *IV*. The "*MekPaks*", a completely free fan-made expansion to Microsofts' *Mechwarrior IV*, have given the associated on-line community and organized leagues new studio grade content for years.

Another class of *BattleTech* fans—centered around www.mechjock.com—are those who have acquired and collected the pinnacle of 'Mech simulation, the BattleTech Virtual Reality Cockpits (Pods). Since the opening of the Chicago BattleTech Center in the 90s, *BattleTech* fans have dreamed of being able to take the ultimate BattleTech toy home. With the closing of the privately owned Virtual World facilities in the mid nineties, the BattleTech VR technology quietly made it into the hands of private collectors.

TO THE FUTURE...

Since 1988, the *BattleTech* universe has been featured in 34 different computer and video games. It has inspired countless imitators, including Earth Siege, Star Siege, Heavy Gear, Armored Core, Gun Griffin, Steel Battalion, and Chrome Hounds, to name but a few. The gamers of the 21st century can hardly wait to be taken back to the battlefields of the 31st century. Only time can tell when that will happen.



PUBLICATION: MECHCOMMANDER
YEAR: 1998

BATTLETECH FIRESTORM

MECHWARRIOR 3

MECHWARRIOR 3: PIRATE'S MOON

MECHWARRIOR 4: MERCENARIES

MECHCOMMANDER INTRO

MECHCOMMANDER 2

MECHCOMMANDER

TESLA BATTLETECH

BATTLETECH
VIRTUAL WORLD
NO GUTS, NO GALAXY!

MFD
MFD
MFD

TEST PILOT PROGRAM
BATTLETECH
V.G.L.

BATTLETECH
FIRESTORM

BATTLETECH
BATTLETECH
BATTLETECH

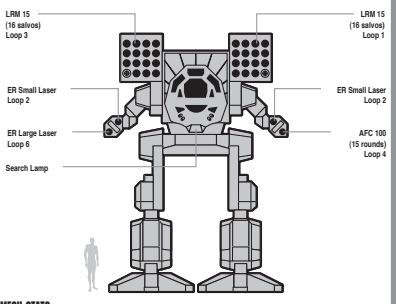
Pilot: Viper

Adrenalin.
Made fresh daily.
VIRTUAL WORLD

BATTLETECH

VIRTUAL WORLD ENTERTAINMENT/
BATTLETECH CENTER PATCHES

MADCAT



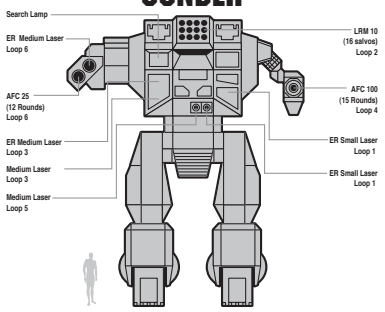
MECH STATS

Tonnage	75	0-100 Kph (in seconds)	4.2
Armor points	2195	100-0 Kph (in seconds)	4
Reservoir Size (Liters)	2800	Top Speed Normal	175
Number of Heat Sinks	28	Top Speed Super Charged	220
Torso speed (deg/sec)	80	Top Speed Gimped	62
Torso Limit (degrees)	90		

COOLANT LOOPS

LOOP 1	LOOP 2	LOOP 3	LOOP 4	LOOP 5	LOOP 6
LRM 15	ER Small Laser	LRM 15	AFC 100	Generator D	ER Large Laser
(16 salvos)	ER Small Laser	(16 salvos)	(15 rounds)	Myomers	
Generator A	Generator B	Generator C			
	Sensors				

SUNDER



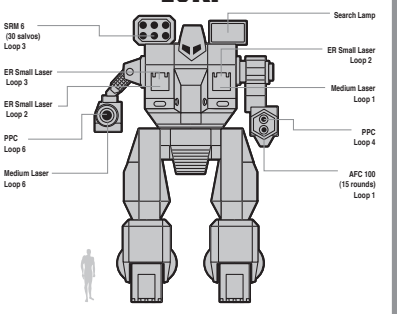
MECH STATS

Tonnage	75	0-100 Kph (in seconds)	4
Armor points	2215	100-0 Kph (in seconds)	6
Reservoir Size (Liters)	1400	Top Speed Normal	143
Number of Heat Sinks	14	Top Speed Super Charged	182
Torso speed (deg/sec)	70	Top Speed Gimped	38
Torso Limit (degrees)	100		

COOLANT LOOPS

LOOP 1	LOOP 2	LOOP 3	LOOP 4	LOOP 5	LOOP 6
ER Small Laser	LRM 10	ER Medium Laser	AFC 100	Myomers	ER Medium Laser
ER Small Laser	(16 salvos)	Medium Laser	(15 Rounds)	Medium Laser	AFC 25
Generator A	Sensors	Generator C		Generator D	(12 Rounds)
	Generator B				

LOKI



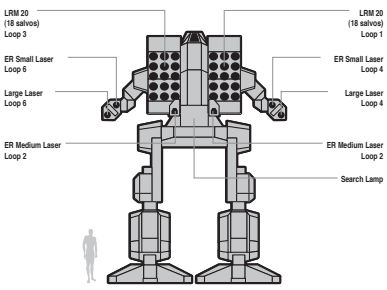
MECH STATS

Tonnage	75	0-100 Kph (in seconds)	4.5
Armor points	1940	100-0 Kph (in seconds)	4.5
Reservoir Size (Liters)	100	Top Speed Normal	143
Number of Heat Sinks	11	Top Speed Super Charged	182
Torso speed (deg/sec)	60	Top Speed Gimped	40
Torso Limit (degrees)	110		

COOLANT LOOPS

LOOP	LOOP 2	LOOP 3	LOOP 4	LOOP 5	LOOP 6
AFC 50	ER Small Laser	ER Small Laser	PPC	Generator D	PPC
(30rounds)	ER Small Laser	SRM 6		Myomers	Medium Laser
Medium Laser	Generator B	(30 salvos)			
Generator A	Sensors				

VULTURE



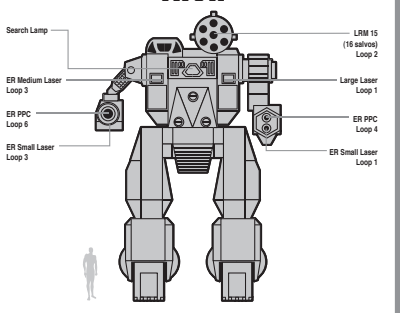
MECH STATS

Tonnage	75	0-100 Kph (in seconds)	4.7
Armor points	2025	100-0 Kph (in seconds)	3
Reservoir Size (Liters)	2400	Top Speed Normal	175
Number of Heat Sinks	24	Top Speed Super Charged	235
Torso speed (deg/sec)	50	Top Speed Gimped	62
Torso Limit (degrees)	130		

COOLANT LOOPS

LOOP 1	LOOP 2	LOOP 3	LOOP 4	LOOP 5	LOOP 6
LRM 20	ER Medium Laser	LRM 20	ER Small Laser	Generator D	ER Small Laser
(18 salvos)	ER Medium Laser	(18 salvos)	Large Laser	Myomers	Large Laser
Generator A	Generator B	Loop 3			Medium Laser
	Sensors	Generator C			

THOR



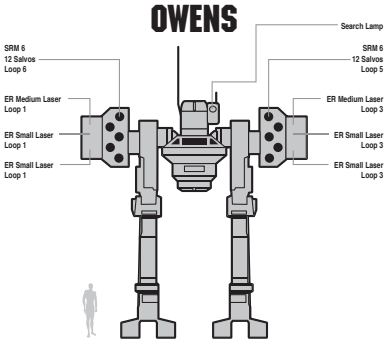
MECH STATS

Tonnage	75	0-100 Kph (in seconds)	4.5
Armor points	2110	100-0 Kph (in seconds)	4.5
Reservoir Size (Liters)	3800	Top Speed Normal	143
Number of Heat Sinks	38	Top Speed Super Charged	182
Torso speed (deg/sec)	60	Top Speed Gimped	40
Torso Limit (degrees)	110		

COOLANT LOOPS

LOOP 1	LOOP 2	LOOP 3	LOOP 4	LOOP 5	LOOP 6
Large Laser	LRM 15	ER Medium Laser	ER PPC	Generator D	ER PPC
ER Small Laser	(16 salvos)	ER Small Laser		Myomers	
Generator A	Generator B				
	Sensors				

OWENS



MECH STATS

Tonnage	25	0-100 Kph (in seconds)	4.2
Armor points	760	100-0 Kph (in seconds)	5
Reservoir Size (Liters)	1500	Top Speed Normal	154
Number of Heat Sinks	15	Top Speed Super Charged	265
Torso speed (deg/sec)	0	Top Speed Gimped	63
Torso Limit (degrees)	0		

COOLANT LOOPS

LOOP 1	LOOP 2	LOOP 3	LOOP 4	LOOP 5	LOOP 6
ER Medium Laser	Second Set Of	ER Small Laser	SRM 6	Generator D	SRM 6
ER Small Laser	Myomers	ER Small Laser	(12 salvos)	Myomers	(12 salvos)
ER Small Laser	Generator B	ER Medium Laser			
Generator A	Sensors	Generator C			

◀ 'MECH STAT CARDS FROM VIRTUAL WORLD ENTERTAINMENT'S *BATTLETECH COCKPIT OPERATIONS MANUAL*

▼ VIRTUAL WORLD'S POSTER FOR 'TESLA' BATTLETECH

'TESLA' BATTLETECH SCREENSHOT

PUBLICATION: 1ST SOMERSET STRIKERS
YEAR: 1995

ADAM STEINER

ANDREW STEINER

NICOLAI MALTHUS

KRISTEN REDMOND

The *BattleTech* animated series aired in 1994, produced for syndication by Saban Entertainment. It ran for 13 episodes and was noteworthy for its blending of traditional animation techniques with computer animation (for the battle scenes).

The series followed the adventures of Major Adam Steiner and the 1st Somerset Strikers, a freelance military unit on a mission to fight the Clan invaders in 3050 and liberate Major Steiner's homeworld of Somerset from the clutches of Clan Jade Falcon.

A line of toys were released in support of the cartoon by Tyco.

This is the Inner Sphere—thousands of planets colonized by humankind. Once it was united under the Star League, but for the last three hundred years it has been consumed by savage wars. Until a new enemy appeared—mysterious invaders known as the Clans. Powerful and ruthless, they struck like lightning, attacking every sector at once. But they made one big mistake: they attacked my home planet! Now, in the spirit of the Star League, ancient enemies have reunified

. . . and we're gonna take back our galaxy!

JOYRIDE MECHWARRIOR TOYS

BATTLETECH COMIC BOOKS

BATTLETECH CHECKS

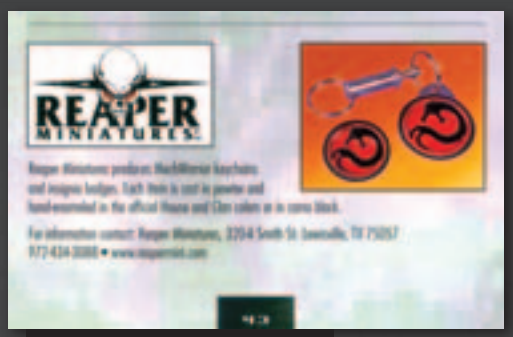
BATTLETECHNOLOGY MAGAZINE

BATTLETECH SHIRTS

BATTLETECH PLASTIC MODEL KITS

BATTLETECH BOOK GAME

K'NEX MECHWARRIOR MAD CAT KIT



BATTLETECH KEY CHAINS

VIDEO GAME STRATEGY GUIDE

BATTLETECH AUDIO BOOKS

HEAVY METAL BATTLETECH DESIGN AND RECORD SHEET SOFTWARE

K'NEX MECHWARRIOR KITS

SKYE
RANGERS

ROYAL BRIGADE

MECHFORCE
GERMANY
FORTES FORTUNA IUVAT

HIGHLANDER

MARIK
MILITIA

OPERATION
GALAHAD
3028

MECHCOMMANDER

MULTIPLAYER BATTLETECH
SOLARIS

ARES COLOSSAL CLASS
RHODES PROJECT

COMMANDER'S EDITION™
BATTLETECH
TRADING CARD GAME
INNER SPHERE

LONG RANGE TARGETING SYSTEM
Command • Enhancement
Play Long Range Targeting System only on a 'Mech. That 'Mech deals one-half its non-missile damage (rounded down) to the target it is attacking, even if that 'Mech is blocked.
Playing Long Range Targeting System does not count as a deployment if revealed the turn you play it.

WHITWORTH WTH-2
'Mech • Inner Sphere • Davion • Kurita
Missile 1
Jump (-1 attack; +1 initiative)
The WTH-2 features highly accurate long-range missile fire.

RAMPAGE!
Mission
Play only if unblocked.
Scrap one card from your Stockpile and roll a die: 1-6, one of your attacking 'Mechs gets +(1-6) attack.
"The rampaging Quickdraw emerged from the roiling smoke, discharging a full weapons barrage at the first Clan 'Mech it saw."
–General Craigie, 1st Lyran Guards RCT
Illus. Jeff Laubenstein

TREBUCHET TBT-5N
'Mech • Inner Sphere
Missile 1
Overheat 2: +2 attack
An adequate 'Mech for both long- and short-range fire support.
Illus. Mark Poole

DRAGON DRG-1N
'Mech • Inner Sphere • Kurita
The Dragon is fast but insufficiently armed for a heavy 'Mech.
Illus. Chris Moeller

DEATH FROM ABOVE
Mission • Inner Sphere
Choose one of your 'Mechs with Jump. Roll a die: 1, that 'Mech receives 1 damage and return Death From Above to your hand after mission; 2-6, roll one die. If your 'Mech is 60 tons or more, roll an additional die. Your 'Mech and an engaged 'Mech opponent controls each receive that much damage.

GRAND TITAN REVISED T-IT-WGM
Unit • 'Mech • Inner Sphere
Missile 1
Overheat 3: +4 attack
Anti-Missile (Prevent 1 damage from each missile fired at a Unit in a group that includes Grand Titan.)

The BattleTech Trading Card Game was published by Wizards of the Coast between 1996 and 1998. It included the original edition, a Commander's Edition two years later, as well as five total expansions that encompassed the storyline from the Clan Invasion of 3049 until the Trial of Refusal against the Clan invasion of the Inner sphere in 3061.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BattleTech is much more than a board game. Vibrant, strong and still growing after twenty-five years, the fictional universe and the valiant struggles of its dynamic human characters, set against a far-future battlefield, have endeared it to millions of fans and will continue to do so into the future.

To convey the universe to the *BattleTech* community (as well as demonstrate how players can take that universe and integrate it into the game system), a host of different lines of rulebooks, sourcebooks, scenario packs, campaign packs, box sets, and so on, have been published over the last 25 years.

As players read through the bibliography or encounter *BattleTech* sourcebooks and rulebooks beyond this book, they will encounter books that bear the title "*BattleTech*" and other products that bear the title "*Classic BattleTech*." What's the difference? *BattleTech* was originally published by FASA Corporation. When FASA Corporation closed its doors the *BattleTech* property was purchased by WizKids LLC, who licensed the rights to continue to produce books in the same vein as FASA Corporation to FanPro LLC. WizKids leapt the timeline forward to create *MechWarrior: Dark Age*, a collectible miniatures game (see p. 238), set 65 years into *BattleTech's* future, at that time. To help ensure there was no brand confusion, the word "Classic" was added to the *BattleTech* title, though the game and its fictional setting remained the same. To celebrate the 25th anniversary of *BattleTech*, Catalyst Game Labs, the current publisher of *BattleTech* books, has secured the rights to revert "*Classic BattleTech*" to "*BattleTech*." However, regardless of what title a book bears, it's all *BattleTech* and it's all part of the skein that has been woven of a fantastic universe that's fun to visit at the table top and between the pages of any of its book.

The following is a complete bibliography of products—whether novels, rulebooks, sourcebooks, game aids and so on—published by FASA Corporation, FanPro LLC, WizKids LLC or Catalyst Game Labs for the *BattleTech* universe.

STORY FICTION

DECISION AT THUNDER RIFT

William H. Keith, 1986 (reprint, 1992)
BT Dates: 08/01/3024 to 11/30/3024

The formation of the Gray Death Legion from the remains of Carlyle's Commando's on Trell I is detailed in this book, which also gives an account of Duke Ricol (the "Red Duke"), a Kurita noble, and his effort to seize the Lyran world.

THE SWORD AND THE DAGGER

Ardath Mayhar, 1987
BT Dates: not given (pre-Fourth Succession War)

Maximilian Liao places a double on the throne of New Avalon in an effort to take over House Davion and the Federated Suns, but is thwarted by Ardan Sortek, commander of Prince Hanse Davion's personal guard.

MERCENARY'S STAR

William H. Keith, 1987 (reprint, 1992)
BT Dates: 10/01/3025 to 08/30/3026

Grayson Carlyle continues to build his Gray Death Legion and takes his first mission as a mercenary commander after journeying to Galatea, the so-called Mercenary's Star. The new mission takes the Legion to Verthandi, another Lyran world recently overrun by minions of House Kurita's Duke Ricol, where they train the local resistance and ultimately drive out the Combine conquerors.

THE PRICE OF GLORY

William H. Keith, 1987 (reprint, 1993)
BT Dates: 12/01/3027 to 04/01/3028

After capturing Sirius V from the Capellans for House Marik, the Gray Death receives a landhold on Helm, but the Legion is betrayed, framed, and attacked as ComStar and an ambitious Free Worlds noble attempt to seize their new home. In the struggle, the Legion uncovers a Star League facility packed with lostech and information that becomes known as the Gray Death Memory Core.

THE SPIDER AND THE WOLF (GRAPHIC NOVEL)

Gideon & Scott Oehler, 1986

Comic book detailing adventures of the Black Widow Company of Wolf's Dragoons and a mission of revenge against Anton Marik.

SHRAPNEL: FRAGMENTS FROM THE INNER SPHERE

Various, 1988

A collection of 15 mostly character-driven short stories covering various aspects of the *BattleTech* universe in the 3025-3030 era, including Solaris VII, Tormano Liao, Cranston Snord, Natasha Kerensky, Duke Ricol (of GDL fame) and the Gray Death Legion.

WARRIOR: EN GARDE (THE WARRIOR TRILOGY, VOL. I)

Michael A. Stackpole, 1988 (reprint, 1998)
BT Dates: 11/27/3026 to 06/05/3027

The preamble to the Fourth Succession War begins with the Kell Hounds escorting the Lyran Commonwealth's Archon-designate Melissa Steiner to a secret meeting with Hanse Davion, Prince of the Federated Suns. Also featured are Justin Allard's adventures on Solaris VII in a scheme to infiltrate House Liao.

WARRIOR: RIPOSTE (THE WARRIOR TRILOGY, VOL. II)

Michael A. Stackpole, 1988 (reprint, 1998)
BT Dates: 10/10/3027 to 02/14/3029

The wedding of Melissa Steiner to Hanse Davion sparks the beginning of the Fourth Succession War with assaults by the Lyran and Federated realms on their neighbors. House Liao's Capellan Confederation is hardest hit.

WOLVES ON THE BORDER

Robert N. Charrette, 1988 (reprint, 1996)
BT Dates: 03/09/3023 to 05/27/3028

Wolf's Dragoons battle House Kurita on the Davion border in this Fourth Succession War book that also delves into Takashi Kurita's obsession with the Dragoons and the epic conflict between Minobu Tetsuhara and Jaime Wolf.

WARRIOR: COUPÉ (THE WARRIOR TRILOGY, VOL. III)

Michael A. Stackpole, 1989 (reprint, 1998)
BT Dates: 03/03/3029 to 12/01/3029

The conclusion of the Fourth Succession War sees the devastation of House Liao from the inside and out and the formation of the Federated Commonwealth despite efforts by ComStar and the other Inner Sphere realms to stop them. Myndo Waterly becomes Primus of ComStar.

HEIR TO THE DRAGON

Robert N. Charrette, 1989 (reprint, 1996)
BT Dates: 05/17/3018 to 06/18/3040

Covering key events in the life of Theodore Kurita and his ascent from a shunned heir to his father, the Coordinator, and his position as *Gunji-no-Kanrei* of the Draconis Combine. The storyline ranges from the closing years of the Third Succession War through the War of 3039, and covers Theodore's bargaining with the Yakuza and ComStar to keep his realm alive in the face of resurgent enemies.

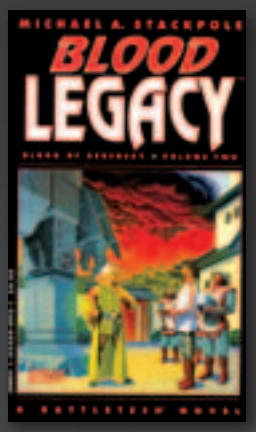
LETHAL HERITAGE (BLOOD OF KERENSKY, VOL. I)

Michael A. Stackpole, 1989 (reprint, 1995)
BT Dates: 05/19/3049 to 01/12/3051

The first year of the Clan invasion, starting with the overwhelming assault on the Periphery and the capture of Phelan Kell by Clan Wolf in The Rock system, to the death of ilKhan Leo Showers at the Radstadt space battle. Other major battles detailed include the capture of Turtle Bay and the razing of Edo by the Smoke Jaguars, the fall of Trell I and Sudeten to the Jade Falcons, and Rasalhague's capture by Clan Wolf, as well as the first Inner Sphere victories on Twycross and Wolcott.

BLOOD LEGACY (BLOOD OF KERENSKY, VOL. II)

Michael A. Stackpole, 1990 (reprint, 1995)



BT Dates: 1/31/3-51 to 03/17/3052

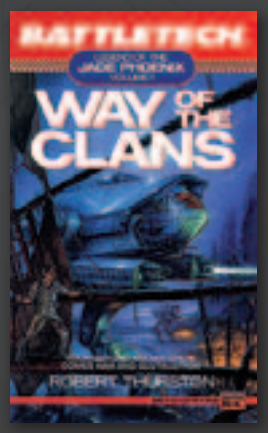
During the lull following the death of the Clan invasion's first ilKhan, both sides regroup. Wolf's Dragoons summons the Inner Sphere leaders to Outreach, where they train to fight a common enemy. Meanwhile, Khan Ulric Kerensky of the Wolves ascends to the position of ilKhan, and continues to lead the invasion in late 3051. ComStar, after first aiding the invaders, launches plans to counter the Clan threat. Major events: the battles for Luthien, the bloodless capture of Gunzberg, and the taking of Alyina that leaves Kai Allard-Liao trapped behind enemy lines. The Clans unveil their goal to seize Terra. Justin Allard is assassinated by agents of Romano Liao.

LOST DESTINY (BLOOD OF KERENSKY, VOL. III)

Michael A. Stackpole, 1991 (reprint, 1995)
BT Dates: 01/05/3052 to 06/17/3052

The Clan invasion is brought to a standstill when ComStar wins a 15-year truce at the battle of Tukayyid. Romano Liao and her husband are assassinated by Candace Liao. Sun-Tzu announces his betrothal to Isis Marik. Phelan earns the Ward Bloodname as a Warrior of Clan Wolf. Kai escapes Alyina after helping the Clans defeat ComStar agents executing their disastrous Operation Scorpion. Anastasius Focht kills Primus Myndo Waterly, creating the ComStar/Word of Blake schism. Hanse Davion dies of a heart attack.

WAY OF THE CLANS (LEGEND OF THE JADE PHOENIX, VOL. I)



Robert Thurston, 1991
BT Dates: Not given (pre-Clan invasion)

This novel tracks the rise of Aidan, a promising trueborn MechWarrior of Clan Jade Falcon, through his training as a child to his winning of a Trial of Position under false pretenses.

BLOODNAME (LEGEND OF THE JADE PHOENIX, VOL. II)

Robert Thurston, 1991
BT Dates: Not given (pre-Clan invasion to the early days of the invasion)

This novel continues tracking Aidan as he reveals his false identity as a freeborn to get a shot at fighting for and winning the Bloodname of Pryde.

FALCON GUARD (LEGEND OF THE JADE PHOENIX, VOL. III)

Robert Thurston, 1991
BT Dates: Not given (but including the Battle of Tukayyid in 3052)

Aidan Pryde receives command of the Falcon Guards, disgraced after their defeat on Twycross, and turns them around in time for the famous Battle of Tukayyid, where he is finally killed battling the Com Guards.

WOLF PACK

Robert N. Charrette, 1992
BT Dates: 3053 to 3054, no specific dates given

Wolf's Dragoons fight a civil war after Colonel Jaime Wolf's command seems to lapse. Spurred on by Elson Novacat, a key figure in the opposition, the Dragoons fight among themselves all over Outreach, though the majority of the actual battle is confined to the "Outback". Meanwhile, Coordinator Takashi Kurita, after an attempt on his life by ISF head Subhash Indrahar, commits *seppuku* with the aid of his son, *Gunji-no-Kanrei* Theodore Kurita, establishing Theodore as the new Coordinator of the Draconis Combine.

NATURAL SELECTION

Michael A. Stackpole, 1992
BT Dates: 02/15/3054 to 11/13/3055

The Red Corsair, a Falcon agent posing as a Periphery bandit, raids several worlds along the Clan front in a drive that threatens to repudiate the Clan truce if the truth of her origins is discovered, but is thwarted by the Kell Hounds and an old militia commander. Melissa Steiner-Davion is assassinated on Tharkad while Victor is trying to tend to this crisis.

IDEAL WAR

Christopher Kubasik, 1993
BT Dates: 05/19/3054 to 03/03/3055

The Word of Blake's acquisition of a holding on Gibson is complicated by subversives from the nearby Principality of Regulus in the Free Worlds League. Also shown is the inception of the Knights of the Inner Sphere.

MAIN EVENT

Jim Long, 1993
BT Dates: 04/23/3054 to 07/19/3055

This novel details the formation of the Black Thorns mercenary unit, beginning on Solaris VII and ending with their first true battle against the Jade Falcons on Borghese, thwarting an attempt by elements of the local government to surrender their world to the Clans.

ASSUMPTION OF RISK

Michael A. Stackpole, 1993
BT Dates: 12/19/3055 to 04/29/3056

Kai Allard-Liao thwarts an effort by Tormano Liao to instigate war between the Free Worlds League and the Federated Commonwealth in an effort to undercut support for Sun-Tzu's Capellan Confederation, using Peter Steiner-Davion as a pawn. Skye is in a state of unrest. The same man hired to kill Melissa Steiner-Davion assassinates Ryan Steiner on Solaris VII, at Victor Steiner-Davion's order.

BLOOD OF HEROES

Andrew Keith, 1993
BT Dates: 03/31/3056 to 04/13/3056

The Gray Death Legion is attacked on their homeworld of Glengarry by Skye separatists hoping to neutralize them as a threat. With his father away, Alex Carlyle, son of Grayson Carlyle, leads the unit's defense.

FAR COUNTRY

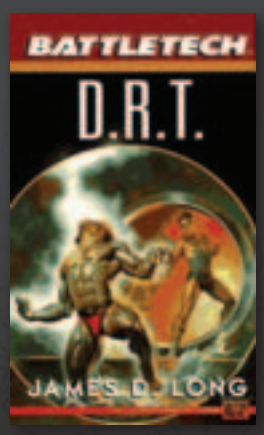
Peter Rice, 1993
BT Dates: 11/07/3056 to unknown

A misjump carries a DCMS crew and their attached mercenaries to a world populated by a lost ancient Combine culture and a bird-like race of intelligent primitives.

D.R.T.

James Long, 1994
BT Dates: 10/01/3056 to 11/06/3057

The Black Thorns defend Wolcott against a Clan Nova Cat assault, taking heavy losses, but winning a full Trinary of Clan OmniMechs.



CLOSE QUARTERS

Victor Milán, 1994
BT Dates: 06/30/3056 to 12/02/3056

Chandrasekhar Kurita, a progressive corporate mogul loyal to Theodore Kurita, hires the mercenary unit Camacho's Caballeros to defend his holdings on Hachiman against threats from the ISF and the Yakuza. Shadow dealings between Kurita and the Clans' merchant caste are touched upon.

TACTICS OF DUTY

William H. Keith, 1995
BT Dates: 03/05/3057 to 04/21/3057

Still recovering from the trauma of commanding the defense of Glengarry in the so-called Second Skye Rebellion, Alex Carlyle and Davis McCall of the Gray Death Legion become involved in a popular revolt against the Davion-backed government on nearby Caledonia. The GDL firmly moves into the pro-Katherine camp and Grayson Carlyle is gravely wounded.

BRED FOR WAR

Michael A. Stackpole, 1995
BT Dates: 05/20/3057 to 01/01/3058

Victor's attempt to put a double in place of the dying Joshua Marik prompts a Marik-Liao invasion that serves as a pretext for Katherine's secession of the Lyran realm from the Federated Commonwealth, creating the rift that divides Steiner and Davion.

I AM JADE FALCON

Robert Thurston, 1995
BT Dates: 07/01/3057 to 12/31/3057

The continuing recovery of the Falcon Guards from the shame of their defeat on Twycross brings them full circle during the Refusal War against Clan Wolf. Natasha Kerensky is killed in personal combat against Star Commander Joanna of the Falcon Guards.

HIGHLANDER GAMBIT

Blaine Lee Pardoe, 1995
BT Dates: 08/08/3057 to 01/01/3058

The Marik-Liao invasion of the Sarna March following the revelation of a double being substituted for Marik's son by Victor Steiner-Davion spurs many efforts to undercut potential FedCom supporters, including the Northwind Highlanders, who were won over in the Fourth Succession War. Loren Jaffray, a Capellan Death Commando and descendant of a Highlander, is sent to Northwind to facilitate the neutralization of the Highlanders. Instead, Loren defects to the Highlanders, and helps the mercenaries secure their world's independence from all the big players.

STAR LORD

Donald Philips, 1996
BT Dates: 04/01/3057 to 08/30/3057

A crazed Blakist with a blood tie to Amaris the Usurper puts into motion plans to attempt an overthrow of the entire Inner Sphere with the aid of Periphery bandits, but is thwarted by an unlikely group of misfits backed up by the Knights of the Inner Sphere.

OPERATION EXCALIBUR

William H. Keith, 1996
BT Dates: 04/26/3057 to 01/03/3058

Under a hiring ban after the events on Caledonia (*Tactics of Duty*), the Gray Death are once more called into action to defend the vital world of Hesperus II against a renegade general bent on carving his own fiefdom out of the Isle of Skye.

HEARTS OF CHAOS

Victor Milán, 1996
BT Dates: 12/24/3056 to 04/26/3058

The Black Dragon Society launches an assault against the FedCom world of Towne in an effort to spark war between the Combine and the FedCom. Camacho's Caballeros, a mercenary force hired by industrialist Chandrasekhar Kurita, is sent in to thwart this invasion before it can succeed.

MALICIOUS INTENT

Michael A. Stackpole, 1996
BT Dates: 12/11/3057 to 06/17/3058

Vlad Ward assumes command of the surviving Crusader Wolves after their narrow defeat by the Falcons in the Refusal War. Striking an alliance with the Falcons' new Khan, Marthe Pryde, his Wolves and the Falcons strike out to prove they are strong enough to avoid Absorption. The Falcons strike as far as Coventry, while the Wolves hit the Smoke Jaguars.

BLACK DRAGON

Victor Milán, 1996
BT Dates: 06/10/3058 to 07/01/3058

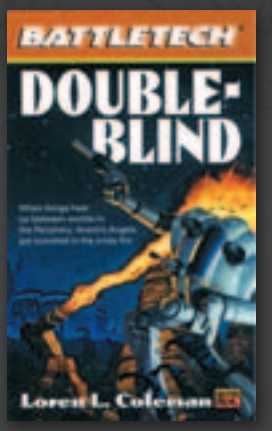
Camacho's Caballeros thwart an attempt by the Black Dragon Society to assassinate Coordinator Theodore Kurita as he recognizes his illegitimate son, Franklin Sakamoto, in a public ceremony on Luthien.

IMPETUS OF WAR

Blaine Lee Pardoe, 1996
BT Dates: 04/30/3058 to 09/09/3058

The Northwind Highlanders undertake a mission for the Draconis Combine after recovering from the events that followed the Marik-Liao invasion of the Sarna March. The mission takes them into the Deep Periphery, to the Smoke Jaguar supply world of Wayside V, in search of information on the Clan homeworlds. The operation brings the Nova Cats into play as well, including a reference to a Nova Cat vision of future cooperation with the Inner Sphere mercenaries.

DOUBLE-BLIND



Loren L. Coleman, 1997
BT Dates: 03/17/3058 to 08/27/3058

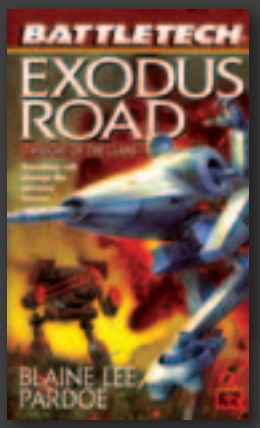
Avanti's Angels, a small mercenary company, becomes embroiled in a Word of Blake Toyama faction plot to provide advanced technology to the Marian Hegemony for attacks against the Magistracy of Canopus, an effort to stymie the growing Capellan alliance with the Periphery realm. Demona Aziz, head of the Toyama faction, is killed by Sun-Tzu Liao. Also covered are the steps Sun-Tzu Liao takes to win over the Magistracy as a new ally for his Confederation, and the courting of Naomi Centrella.

BINDING FORCE

Loren L. Coleman, 1997
BT Dates: 02/21/3058 to 08/09/3058

The Capellan Confederation uses its Warrior House Hiritsu to invade and capture Kaifeng, the breadbasket of the three-planet Sarna Supremacy, in an effort to consolidate gains won in the invasion of the former Sarna March of the Federated Commonwealth.

EXODUS ROAD (TWILIGHT OF THE CLANS, VOL. I)



Blaine Lee Pardoe, 1997
BT Dates: 05/02/3052 to 11/15/3058

This novel details efforts by a Com Guard spy to win over a disaffected warrior of Clan Smoke Jaguar named Trent, and determine the whereabouts of the Clan homeworlds, particularly the Smoke Jaguar capital of Huntress. ProtoMechs make their first, brief appearance. The first several chapters, set in 3052, add details to the Battle of Tukayyid.

GRAVE COVENANT (TWILIGHT OF THE CLANS, VOL. II)

Michael A. Stackpole, 1997
BT Dates: 09/30/3058 to 09/01/3059

In the wake of the Battle of Coventry, leaders from across the Inner Sphere gather to conceive the reformation of the Star League as part of a bold plan to end the Clan threat once and for all. The first Whitting Conference sees the formation of the new Star League and the planning for Operation Bulldog and Task Force Serpent, both part of the Inner Sphere's concentrated effort to annihilate Clan Smoke Jaguar, to prove the new League is real in the eyes of the Clans. Battles on several Smoke Jaguar-held worlds, and the mass defection of several Nova Cat units to the new Star League after only token struggles, are also detailed as part of Operation Bulldog. Victor Steiner-Davion departs the Inner Sphere after the fleeing Jaguars.

THE HUNTERS (TWILIGHT OF THE CLANS, VOL. III)

Thomas Gressman, 1997
BT Dates: 08/12/3058 to 01/03/3060
Task Force Serpent undertakes the perilous trek to strike at Clan Smoke Jaguar's capital world of Huntress. Morgan Hasek-Davion is murdered en route, and the Task Force encounters pirates as well as a Ghost Bear fleet.

FREEBIRTH (TWILIGHT OF THE CLANS, VOL. IV)

Robert Thurston, 1998
BT Dates: 06/18/3058 to 05/09/3059
A freeborn warrior of Clan Jade Falcon is sent to the Jaguar homeworld of Huntress on a mission for the Watch, to check on experiments in LAM technology at the Falcon outpost there, but is captured by the Jaguars instead.

SWORD AND FIRE (TWILIGHT OF THE CLANS, VOL. V)

Thomas Gressman, 1998
BT Dates: 01/03/3060 to 03/13/3060
Task Force Serpent, now under the command of General Ariana Winston of the Eridani Light Horse, arrives on Huntress and battles the Clan forces there to a brutal victory, despite the unexpected surprise of the Jaguars' new ProtoMechs.

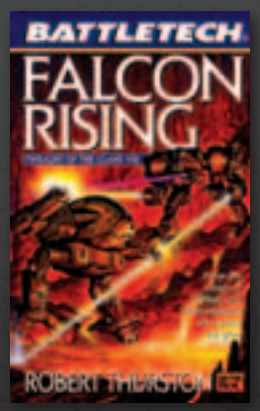
SHADOWS OF WAR (TWILIGHT OF THE CLANS, VOL. VI)

Thomas Gressman, 1998
BT Dates: 03/13/3060 to 04/09/3060
Task Force Serpent sustains a second wave of fighting against the Smoke Jaguars as the elements of the Clan who fled from Operation Bulldog arrive on Huntress. Winston dies in the last of the fighting as Victor Steiner-Davion arrives with relief forces.

PRINCE OF HAVOC (TWILIGHT OF THE CLANS, VOL. VII)

Michael A. Stackpole, 1998
BT Dates: 04/09/3060 to 12/15/3061
Victor Steiner-Davion leads the survivors of Task Force Serpent and his relief forces to win the Great Refusal against the Crusader Clans, killing the Clans' ilKhan Lincoln Osis and with him the last of the Smoke Jaguars. Victor returns to find his throne on New Avalon usurped, and accepts the title of Precentor Martial of ComStar.

FALCON RISING (TWILIGHT OF THE CLANS, VOL. VIII)



Robert Thurston, 1999
BT Dates: 12/31/3059 to 07/29/3061
The Steel Vipers, in an attempt to drive the hated Jade Falcon Clan from their shared occupation zone in the Inner Sphere, are themselves expelled when the Falcons hit back harder than expected. Star Captain Diana, a freeborn, is allowed to win a Pryde Bloodname.

THREADS OF AMBITION (THE CAPELLAN SOLUTION, BOOK I)

Loren L. Coleman, 1999
BT Dates: 06/25/3060 to 06/13/3061
The beginnings of the war to reclaim the St. Ives Compact are detailed here when Sun-Tzu Liao uses his post as First Lord of the reborn Star League and a staged attack against Isis Marik, his betrothed, as a means to instigate the conflict.

THE KILLING FIELDS (THE CAPELLAN SOLUTION, BOOK II)

Loren L. Coleman, 1999
BT Dates: 02/25/3062 to 09/27/3062
Sun-Tzu's war with St. Ives culminates in the capture of the capital of the Compact itself, which ultimately breaks the will of St. Ives. Also mentioned in this novel are the use of Periphery troops from the Taurian Concordat and the Magistracy of Canopus to secure Capellan positions, and the dismissal of Isis Marik by Sun-Tzu.

GHOST OF WINTER (MECHWARRIOR SERIES)

Stephen Kenson, 1999
BT Dates: 04/11/3060 to 05/02/3060
A lost Steel Viper depot on Kore in the Periphery becomes the focus of a battle between the infamous Ryan's Rebels pirate band and the defenders of Kore.

ROAR OF HONOR (MECHWARRIOR SERIES)

Blaine Lee Pardoe, 1999
BT Dates: 01/02/3062 to 06/25/3062
A small Clan Ghost Bear unit on Toffen fights off an effort by Clan Wolf to claim the world.

BY BLOOD BETRAYED (MECHWARRIOR SERIES)

Blaine Lee Pardoe & Mel Odom, 1999
BT Dates: 01/15/3059 to 08/05/3059
A new MechWarrior in Able's Aces, a merc outfit working for the Rim Collection, takes on the Morrison's Extractors pirate band while avenging the death of his brother before him.

DAGGER POINT

Thomas Gressman, 2000
BT Dates: 07/15/3061 to 03/22/3062
The Eridani Light Horse is battered by a Capellan assault on Milos as Sun-Tzu Liao's war to reclaim the renegade St. Ives Compact continues.

ILLUSIONS OF VICTORY

Loren L. Coleman, 2000
BT Dates: 08/10/3062 to 08/31/3062
Sparked by a rivalry taken too far, 'Mech-scale riots break out on Solaris VII as a result of rising tensions between Steiner and Davion loyalists, aggravated by the machinations of some of Solaris City's elite stable masters.

PATH OF GLORY

Randall N. Bills, 2000
BT Dates: 06/12/3061 to 12/20/3062
Clan Nova Cat attempts to integrate with House Kurita after being Abjured (exiled) from the Clans. The start of the Ghost Bear/Draconis Combine War in 3062 is dealt with.

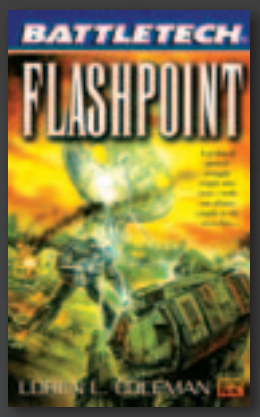
MEASURE OF A HERO

Blaine Lee Pardoe, 2000
BT Dates: 10/23/3062 to 02/09/3063
Archer Christifori leads the Thorin Planetary Militia against the 15th Arcturan Guards in this flashpoint battle of the FedCom Civil War, crippling the Guards on both Thorin and Muphrid as Victor Steiner-Davion makes his call to arms.

INITIATION TO WAR (MECHWARRIOR SERIES)

Robert N. Charrette, 2001
BT Dates: 11/26/3061 to 05/06/3062
A young militia MechWarrior becomes embroiled in the internal politics of Epsilon Eridani, one of many worlds torn asunder in the Chaos March.

FLASHPOINT



Loren L. Coleman, 2001
BT Dates: 10/08/3062 to 12/10/3062
One of the first battles of the FedCom Civil War erupts when the planetary militia on Kathil and the 8th FedCom RCT come into conflict as each unit proclaims its authority over the defense of the vital Federated Suns world and its strategically valuable shipyards. The Kathil CMM wins the day.

TEST OF VENGEANCE

Bryan Nystul, 2001
BT Dates: 10/19/3062 to 08/12/3064
The Ghost Bear/Draconis Combine War and the Hell's Horses invasion of the Ghost Bear Dominion are described through the point of view of a Ghost Bear Elemental *ristar*. Hell's Horses Khan Malavai Fletcher is deposed.

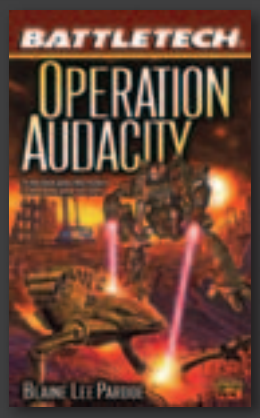
CALL OF DUTY

Blaine Lee Pardoe, 2001
BT Dates: 02/03/3063 to 05/10/3063
Rhonda Snord's Irregulars face off against Archer's Avengers over the world of Odessa, a stepping stone toward Tharkad in the FedCom Civil War.

PATRIOTS AND TYRANTS

Loren L. Coleman, 2001
BT Dates: 12/25/3061 to 12/20/3063
The FedCom Civil War begins with the apparent assassination of Arthur Steiner-Davion. Also covered is a brief conflict with the Draconis Combine by Davion units in the Draconis March and Victor's triumph over Adam Steiner after a near brush with death.

OPERATION AUDACITY



Blaine Lee Pardoe, 2002
BT Dates: 05/23/3064 to 02/27/3065
This FedCom Civil War book deals with efforts by Archer Christifori and General Adam Steiner to contain the Jade Falcons after the Clan exploits the civil war by striking at the Alliance. The operation seizes a series of worlds inside the Falcon OZ.

THE DYING TIME (MECHWARRIOR SERIES)

Thomas Gressman, 2002
BT Dates: 04/16/3065 to 08/25/3065
The Gray Death Legion's last mission, to save Hesperus II from falling out of Lyran hands and under the sway of Free Skye, succeeds at a terrible cost, including the lives of the famous merc unit's original founding members.

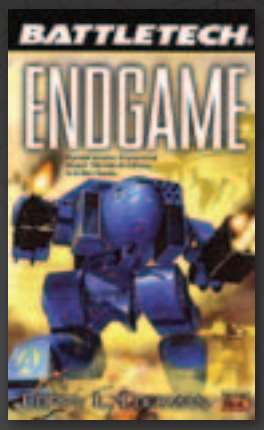
IMMINENT CRISIS (MECHWARRIOR SERIES)

Randall N. Bills, 2002
BT Dates: 04/27/3065 to 05/24/3066
Set against the backdrop of the FedCom Civil War, this novel details events on New Syrtis involving the 8th Syrtis Fusiliers and the pull of both sides in the conflict.

STORMS OF FATE

Loren L. Coleman, 2002
BT Dates: 03/06/3064 to 02/21/3065
Omi Kurita is assassinated as Victor Steiner-Davion leads a rebellion against his sister, Katherine. As the FedCom Civil War continues on, attacks on the Clan front are also detailed as well as another Star League conference, where Victor again thwarts Katherine's efforts to be elected First Lord.

ENDGAME



Loren L. Coleman, 2002
BT Dates: 06/26/3065 to 04/24/3067
Shaking off the blow to his resolve created by Omi Kurita's murder, Victor leads his loyal forces to a final victory against Katherine on New Avalon, ending the FedCom Civil War.

GHOST WAR

Michael A. Stackpole, 2002
BT Dates: 11/13/3132 to 03/02/3133
Beginning a new storyline in the aftermath of the HPG network crash, Ghost Knight Mason Dunne investigates who is using the chaos to seize power on Basalt as the readers are introduced to the new status quo.

A CALL TO ARMS

Loren L. Coleman, 2003
BT Dates: 10/26/3130 to 03/19/3133
Achernar possesses one of the few working HPG stations left in the Republic, and the Steel Wolves have come to claim it. Raul Ortega of the local militia joins forces with the mysterious Tassa Kay and the Swordsworn to save his homeworld.

THE RUINS OF POWER

Robert Vardeman, 2003
BT Dates: 04/03/3133 to 05/12/3133
Baron Ortega of Mirach fought alongside Devlin Stone in the Jihad but now dedicates his life to peace. His son Austin gets caught up in the fight when a rebellion breaks out.

A SILENCE IN THE HEAVENS (PROVING GROUNDS TRILOGY, VOL. I)

Martin Delrio, 2003
BT Dates: Nov 3132 to Jun 3133
Countess Tara Campbell and Paladin Ezekiel Crow defend the world of Northwind against the invasion of the Steel Wolves, led by Anastasia Kerensky.

TRUTH AND SHADOWS (PROVING GROUNDS TRILOGY, VOL. II)

Martin Delrio, 2003
BT Dates: Nov 3133 to Feb 3134
The Steel Wolves make another attempt on Northwind. Jacob Bannson blackmails Paladin Ezekiel Crow with a devastating secret. Tara Campbell defeats Anastasia Kerensky again but she escapes.

THE LEGEND OF THE JADE PHOENIX TRILOGY

Robert Thurston, 2003
An omnibus reprint edition of the three Legend of the Jade Phoenix novels: *Way of the Clans*, *Bloodname* and *Falcon Guard*.

SERVICE FOR THE DEAD (PROVING GROUNDS TRILOGY, VOL. III)

Martin Delrio, 2003
BT Dates: Feb 3134 to May 3134
Tara Campbell chases Ezekiel Crow to Terra to face him once and for all for his betrayal of her, Northwind and the Republic. Anastasia Kerensky leads the Steel Wolves in a daring attack on Terra.

BY TEMPTATIONS AND BY WAR

Loren L. Coleman, 2003
BT Dates: 08/11/3132 to 09/23/3134
The Capellan Confederation enters the Dark Age storyline as Chancellor Daoshen Liao plots to regain worlds lost to the Republic. The infamous Black Paladin offers his help against the local insurgency.

FORTRESS OF LIES

J. Steven York, 2004
BT Dates: 09/01/3134 to 12/25/3134
Aaron Sandoval, Lord Governor of Prefecture III, plots to build his power base in the crumbling Republic. He sends his nephew Erik to negotiate with the leaders of planets in the path of House Liao's invasion.

PATRIOT'S STAND

Mike Moscoe, 2004
BT Dates: 04/03/3134 to 09/02/3134
A mercenary force raids the sleepy world of Alkalurops, prompting the locals to send a delegation to Galatea to hire some defenders. The ragtag group of warriors that results must turn a bunch of farmers and citizens into a fighting force when Hansen's Roughriders return.

FLIGHT OF THE FALCON

Victor Milán, 2004
BT Dates: 03/04/3134 to 08/21/3134
Eager to carve out a piece of the Republic for themselves, the Jade Falcons descend from their territory under the command of Malvina Hazen and her brother Aleksandr. Countess Tara Campbell helps coordinate the defense when the Falcon invasion targets Skye.

BLOOD OF THE ISLE

Loren L. Coleman, 2004
BT Dates: 09/08/3134 to 12/23/3134
When the Falcons return to Skye, Tara Campbell seeks allies with some unlikely factions: Anastasia Kerensky's Steel Wolves and the Lyran Commonwealth. Despite the defenses arrayed against them, Malvina Hazen and the Jade Falcons seize Skye.

HUNTERS OF THE DEEP

Randall N. Bills, 2004
BT Dates: 06/19/3134 to 11/01/3134

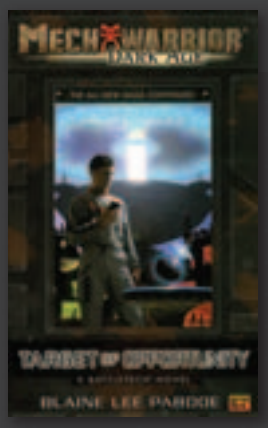
OvKhan Petr Kalasa discovers a plot to seize the leadership of Clan Sea Fox and faces off against his worst enemy. The Marik-Stewart Commonwealth invades the Republic with the goal of securing the world of Stewart.

THE SCORPION JAR

Jason M. Hardy, 2004
BT Dates: 10/01/3134 to 01/02/3135

When he discovers a secret plot to subvert the Republic from the inside, Victor Steiner-Davion is murdered before he can blow the whistle. Paladins Jonah Levin and Heather GioAvanti investigate his murder amidst growing unrest and the election of the next Exarch.

TARGET OF OPPORTUNITY



Blaine Lee Pardoe, 2005
BT Dates: 01/26/3135 to 08/23/3135

The HPG network has been down for over two years and ComStar is no closer to a solution. Tucker Harwell is a genius in hyperspace mechanics and is sent to repair the HPG on Wyatt, protected by the Knight Alexi Holt. The Spirit Cats and the Marik-Stewart Commonwealth both try to seize Wyatt and Harwell.

SWORD OF SEDITION

Loren L. Coleman, 2005
BT Dates: 12/17/3134 to 06/02/3135

Victor Steiner-Davion's funeral brings the leadership of the Inner Sphere to Terra. Newly elected Exarch Jonah Levin and his Paladins must deal with the Senatorial rebellion and the continuing invasion of the Republic by other realms while Julian Davion forges an alliance among a new generation of leaders.

DAUGHTER OF THE DRAGON

Ilsa J. Bick, 2005
BT Dates: 02/14/3134 to 02/15/3136

The Draconis Combine invades the Republic and the Dragon's Fury are in their way. Katana Tormark must navigate treacherous alliances with the Yakuza and Clan Nova Cat to save her people and prove her worth to the Dragon.

HERETIC'S FAITH

Randall N. Bills, 2005
BT Dates: 11/05/3135 to 02/09/3137

Clan Nova Cat joins the Combine's invasion of the Republic, bringing them into conflict with the Spirit Cats and their leader, Kev Rosse. Nova Cat Mystic Kisho is drawn into the conflict and struggles with his own doubts about his destiny.

FORTRESS REPUBLIC

Loren L. Coleman, 2005
BT Dates: 06/09/3135 to 10/12/3135

The Senate rebellion continues to grow as Exarch Jonah Levin searches for a way to save the Republic. Julian Davion leads a multi-national force in defense of the Republic as his cousin Caleb takes control of the Federated Suns.

BLOOD AVATAR

Ilsa J. Bick, 2005
BT Dates: 12/09/3135 to 04/21/3136

A murder mystery on Denebola exposes small town secrets and a conspiracy dating back to the Jihad. A mysterious organization known as the Triumvirate makes an appearance with a hidden agenda.

TRIAL BY CHAOS

J. Steven York, 2006
BT Dates: 11/21/3136 to 12/27/3136

When the Republic descends into chaos, the Rasalhague Dominion sends troops to keep the peace on Vega. In addition to outside factions influencing events, the Ghost Bears must confront a revolutionary movement within their own ranks.

PRINCIPLES OF DESOLATION

Randall N. Bills and Jason M. Hardy, 2006
BT Dates: 05/09/3135 to 03/01/3137

Danai Centrella-Liao leads a Capellan offensive into the Republic before being called upon by Chancellor Daoshen to undertake a diplomatic mission to the court at Oriente. There she forms a friendship with Nikol Marik and comes to terms with events in her past.

WOLF HUNTERS

Kevin Killiany, 2006
BT Dates: 05/27/3135 to 10/22/3136

Anastasia Kerensky disbands the Steel Wolves and forges the best of her warriors into a new force: the Wolf Hunters. Those who didn't make the cut pursue different destinies, including mercenary life and the Solaris game circuit.

SURRENDER YOUR DREAMS

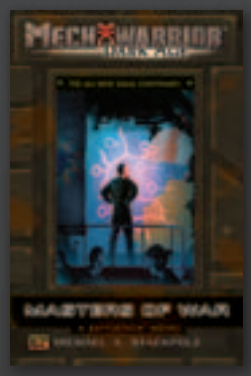
Blaine Lee Pardoe, 2006
BT Dates: 03/27/3135 to 03/31/3138

Told in a unique style, this novel details actions by former Exarch Damien Redburn and a select cadre of Knights, who fight to protect the Republic in the days and months after Fortress Republic is declared. Introduces the Fidelis, a secret society of special-forces troops loyal to Devlin Stone.

DRAGON RISING

Ilsa J. Bick, 2007
BT Dates: 06/13/3136 to 05/16/3137
Katana Tormark is now Warlord of Dieron and commands the Combine's invasion of the Republic. A conspiracy among the ISF and others plots to take out Tormark and the ruling Kuritas.

MASTERS OF WAR



Michael A. Stackpole, 2007
BT Dates: 10/22/3136 to 03/20/3137
Clan Wolf allies with the Lyran Commonwealth to attack the former states of the Free Worlds League. Alaric Wolf leads a diversionary force against the Republic while the Clan's population relocates to the Commonwealth/League border. Anastasia Kerensky directs the defense of the Republic and fights Alaric on physical and psychological levels.

A RENDING OF FALCONS

Victor Milán, 2007
BT Dates: 08/03/3135 to 04/04/3136
Not content with commanding the Jade Falcon presence in the Republic, Malvina Hazen challenges the Falcon Khan and a civil war erupts.

PANDORA'S GAMBIT

Randall N. Bills, 2007
BT Dates: 02/04/3135 to 08/20/3137
Captain-General Jessica Marik of the Oriente Protectorate decides it is her destiny to rebuild the shattered Free Worlds League. Her children seek out allies and opportunities, including the Spirit Cats and Clan Sea Fox. The planet Marik falls to a combined assault.

FIRE AT WILL

Blaine Lee Pardoe, 2007
BT Dates: March 3136 to 03/30/3138
The Lyran invasion of the former Free Worlds League begins with a massive assault against the Duchy of Tamarind. The forces of Clan Wolf compete with the Commonwealth forces to gain territory. Roderick Frost comes to accept his heritage.

THE LAST CHARGE

Jason M. Hardy, 2007
BT Dates: 02/13/3138 to 06/13/3138
The Marik-Stewart Commonwealth is under assault from all sides and Captain-General Anson Marik decides to make his last stand on the planet Stewart. Clan Wolf and the Lyran Commonwealth race to seize the planet and defeat Anson.

TO RIDE THE CHIMERA

Kevin Killiany, 2008
BT Dates: 08/23/3137 to 06/03/3139
Jessica Marik and her allies fight to revive the Free Worlds League against the Lyran/Wolf invasion and opposition from within.

BATTLECORPS ANTHOLOGY, VOL. I: THE CORPS

Edited by Loren L. Coleman, 2008
A collection of short stories from the first year of the BattleCorps website, produced by some of the most popular authors old and new. Included is a brand-new story about a young Aleksandr Kerensky in his first days as a Star League soldier.

WWW.BATTLECORPS.COM

Launched 2004
BattleCorps.com is a subscription-based website for online, canon fiction set in the *BattleTech* universe. From short stories to novellas, serials to entire novels, more than a million words of fiction have been published.

RULEBOOKS (BOX SETS)

BATTLEDROIDS

1984
Basic rulebook for what is today known as *BattleTech*. Includes all basic movement, combat, and construction rules for BattleMechs known today, as well as a historical overview of the Inner Sphere.

BATTLETECH, 2ND EDITION

1985
Expanded basic rules in a boxed set including cardboard counters and maps.

MECHWARRIOR, THE BATTLETECH ROLE-PLAYING GAME

1986
First edition rules for the *MechWarrior* RPG system. Outlines rules for point-based character creation, role-playing and combat. Expands on the *BattleTech* universe history and provides details on several House-specific 'Mech designs.

CITYTECH

1986
BattleTech rules expansion, covering urban combat. A boxed set with maps, counters and new 'Mech designs.

AEROTECH

1986
BattleTech rules expansion covering aerospace fighters and DropShips in combat, as well as the rare Land-Air-'Mechs (LAMs). A boxed set with maps, counters and aerospace fighter designs.

BATTLETECH MANUAL: THE RULES OF WARFARE

1987
A compilation and revision of all *BattleTech* rules published to date.

BATTLEFORCE
1989

First edition rules for large-scale combat operations for *BattleTech*. Designed to make it possible to conduct larger battles in the same amount of time one might play out a standard one-on-one game.

BATTLETROOPS
1989

Rules for conducting infantry-level actions in *BattleTech*, rather than resorting to MechWarrior RPG rules. The combat system is more akin to a *BattleTech* game than the role-playing aspect, based mainly on action points.

THE BATTLETECH COMPENDIUM
1990

A compilation and revision of all *BattleTech* rules published to date, including the introduction of Star League weapons and Clan equipment, OmniMech construction rules, aerospace fighter and vehicular construction and combat rules.

MECHWARRIOR, SECOND EDITION
1991

Second edition rules for the MechWarrior RPG system; revises rules for point-based character creation, role-playing, and combat with greater flexibility than the first edition and incorporates the Clans. Summations of the *BattleTech* universe's history, military basics, key faction run-downs and the like are provided.

CLANTROOPS
1991

An expansion for *BattleTroops*, *ClanTroops* adds battle armor to the standard *BattleTroops* rules and provides additional rules to give the original game system more flexibility.

BATTLETECH, 3RD EDITION
1992 (re-released 1994)

Expanded basic rules, including Level 1 (3025 and earlier-era tech) and Level 2 (Star League, post-3050 and Clan tech) equipment rules. Released in a boxed set including plastic miniatures of several Inner Sphere designs as well as maps.

BATTLESPACE
1993

This boxed set revises and replaces *AeroTech* with new rules, maps, counters and stats for everything from aerospace fighters and conventional aircraft to DropShips, JumpShips, and WarShips in the Clan and Inner Sphere aerospace navies. Scenarios and overviews of naval history are also included for reference and game play.

CITYTECH, 2ND EDITION
1994

Expanded urban rules, including Level 1 (3025 and earlier-era tech) and Level 2 (Star League, post-3050 and Clan tech) equipment rules, plus vehicles. Released in a boxed set including plastic miniatures of several Inner Sphere and Clan designs as well as maps.

BATTLETECH COMPENDIUM: THE RULES OF WARFARE
1994

A revised compilation of all *BattleTech* rules published to date, covering all aspects of *BattleTech* combat, but downplaying aerospace fighter rules to emphasize their role as support elements for the ground battle.

BATTLETECH TACTICAL HANDBOOK
1994

Designed to give comprehensive rules for larger-scale campaigns and the detailed running of military operations using *BattleTech* units. Rules covering everything from battlefield repair and scavenging, logistical operations, maintaining manpower and coordinating various aspects of *BattleTech* combat are featured, as well as several experimental weapons devised by the various factions of the Inner Sphere and Clans.

MECHWARRIOR COMPANION
1995

A rules expansion for *MechWarrior, Second Edition*, this book features expanded rules for skill use, new character skill packages, advantages, expanded rules for personal combat involving heavy combat units such as 'Mechs and vehicles, environmental rules, creature rules and new equipment.

BATTLETECH, 4TH EDITION
1996

Expanded basic rules covering Level 1 (3025 and earlier-era tech) and Level 2 (Star League, post-3050 and Clan tech) equipment. Released in a boxed set including cardboard counters of several Inner Sphere and Clan designs as well as maps.

MAXIMUM TECH
1997 (original), 1999 (revised)

Expanded rules—many classified as Level 3 (optional and illegal for tournament play)—are added to *BattleTech* in this product. Among the features are new equipment, special weather and terrain rules compiled from previous scenario packs, new repair and scavenging rules, expanded vehicle rules, the new Battle Value system and a listing of all published stock units with their BVs calculated.

BATTLEFORCE 2
1998

A boxed set that updates the original edition large-scale combat game, *BattleForce 2* is a complete ground-up revision with various scales of combat from company-on-company tactical rules to planet-wide campaign rules. Maps and counters are included.

BATTLETECH MASTER RULES
1998 (original), 2001 (revised)

A revised compilation of all *BattleTech* rules published to date, with the exception of aerospace fighters, covering all Level 1 and Level 2 rules for *BattleTech* combat, and incorporating new equipment that surfaced in the Field Manuals (up to their print date).

MECHWARRIOR, THIRD EDITION
1999

A completely reworked version of the MechWarrior role-playing game, featuring a gloss-over history and overview of the Inner Sphere and Clans and an organic life path character generation system.

A MECHWARRIOR'S GUIDE TO SOLARIS VII

1999

An expansion to the core rules for the MechWarrior RPG focused on the Game World of Solaris VII, with new features for the game as well as a history and backdrop of Solaris VII. Also featured are expanded rules for using BattleMechs and vehicles in MechWarrior combat and an adventure set on Solaris VII.

AEROTECH 2

2000

Updated rules for aerospace and space naval warfare in the *BattleTech* universe appear in this book, replacing *BattleSpace*. *AeroTech 2* also includes a set of *AeroTech* counters for game play. Focused mainly on aerospace as ground support, the book also features expansion rules for *MechWarrior, Third Edition*; random aerospace tables; and BV formulas for fighters and spacecraft used by the Inner Sphere, Periphery and Clans.

LOSTECH: THE MECHWARRIOR'S EQUIPMENT GUIDE

2000

An expansion to *MechWarrior, Third Edition* focused on all the cool toys player characters can use. This book also features some expansions on the basic MechWarrior rules for character generation and combat.

A MECHWARRIOR'S GUIDE TO THE CLANS

2000

An expansion to the core rules for the MechWarrior RPG focused on the Clans, with new game features as well as a history and backdrop of the Clans overall. Also featured is an adventure set on Strana Mechty, the capital world of all Clans.

CLASSIC BATTLETECH COMPANION

2003

A rules expansion for the *Classic BattleTech* RPG, this book features additional Life Paths, a point-based character creation system, and expanded rules for skills and traits, combat, creature creation and battle armor construction.

CLASSIC BATTLETECH BOX SET

2003

Basic rule set for playing *Classic BattleTech*. Box includes complete rulebook, record sheets, quick-start rules, map sheets and a map of the Inner Sphere in 3067. Players can use the included counters to operate any one of twenty-four 'Mechs on the battlefield.

CLASSIC BATTLETECH MINIATURES RULES

2003

A complete rule set for playing *Classic BattleTech* using miniatures and 3D terrain. Also includes a section detailing the brand-new Dark Age setting.

COMBAT OPERATIONS

2003

A rules expansion that brings strategic operations to *BattleTech*, including expanded *AeroTech 2* rules, infantry platoon creation, faction force tables and the *Inner Sphere in Flames* strategic game. Also included are expanded rules for the creation, running and play of any type of military force.

AEROTECH 2, REVISED

2004

This companion to the *BattleTech Master Rules* contains background and rules for aerospace operations and incorporating such actions into the ground-based game. Includes construction rules and complete stats for all previously published fighters.

CLASSIC BATTLETECH MASTER RULES (REVISED)

2004

An updated edition of the *Classic BattleTech Master Rules* book. Includes complete game rules, a system for generating scenarios and expanded miniatures rules. This book incorporates all Level 2 weapons and equipment from various earlier sourcebooks.

MAXIMUM TECH, REVISED

2005

This updated edition of the expansion rule book for *Classic BattleTech* incorporates Level 3 equipment, weapons and rules. It has been revised to include the units from *Technical Readout: 3060*. (This is a FanPro printing of the FASA book.)

COMBAT EQUIPMENT

2005

An expansion for *Classic BattleTech* and the *Classic BattleTech* RPG that provides new equipment and construction rules for personal weapons and support vehicles. Also includes a Technical Readout section containing fourteen new battle armor designs and eight new ProtoMechs.

TOTAL WARFARE

2006

First in a new line of Core Rulebooks. This is the standard *BattleTech* rule set, incorporating expansions and updates to previous books and functioning as a complete reference for standard tournament-level play. Includes rules for BattleMechs, ProtoMechs, combat vehicles, support vehicles, infantry (battle armored and conventional), aerospace fighters and DropShips.

CLASSIC BATTLETECH RPG

2007

Reprints *MechWarrior,Third Edition*.

CLASSIC BATTLETECH INTRODUCTORY BOX SET

2007

Everything needed to start playing *Classic BattleTech* in one box. Includes quick-start rules, record sheets, complete rulebook, background on the fictional universe, map sheets, a map of the Inner Sphere in 3067 and a painting and tactics guide. Also included are 24 plastic BattleMech miniatures that can be painted or used as-is.

TECHMANUAL

2007

The second Core Rulebook. This book provides construction rules for all unit types found in *Total Warfare*. Included are blank record sheets and information on all tournament-legal weapons and equipment.

TACTICAL OPERATIONS

2008

The third Core Rulebook. Adds optional rules for *Total Warfare* combat, including movement, planetary conditions, buildings and advanced support vehicle construction. Provides a plethora of advanced weapons and equipment for use in construction of new units.

STRATEGIC OPERATIONS

2009

The fourth Core Rulebook. Contains advanced rules for aerospace operations as well as repair, salvage and customization of battlefield units. This rule book also presents *BattleForce*, a system that allows players to use their existing miniatures and mapsheets to play fast games incorporating forces both large and small.

A TIME OF WAR: THE BATTLETECH RPG

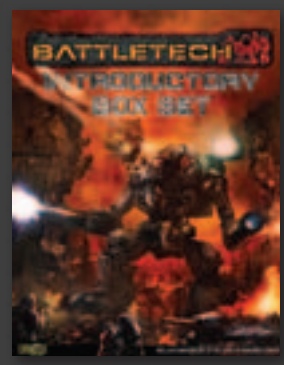
2009

The fifth Core Rulebook. An overhauled and expanded version of the *MechWarrior* role-playing game, *A Time of War* includes rules completely compatible with the *BattleTech* board game, allowing for a seamless transition between a role-playing session and a board game session.

BATTLETECH INTRODUCTORY BOX SET

2009

The 25th anniversary edition of the box set released in 2007, the *BattleTech Introductory Box Set* upgrades the paper maps to deluxe, board game-style maps, while including four high-quality miniatures in addition to the 24 ready-to-play-play plastic miniatures.



SOURCEBOOKS

THE MERCENARY'S HANDBOOK

1987

Outlines rules for generating and running mercenary units in the *BattleTech* universe of 3025. Contains histories and full rosters on selected mercenary units, such as the Waco Rangers, Wilson's Hussars and the Eridani Light Horse.

HOUSE KURITA (THE DRACONIS COMBINE)

1987

Complete overview of the history, culture, important people and places of the Draconis Combine as of 3025, with an emphasis on the ruling House Kurita, as told through the eyes of ComStar. Also included are deployments of the Combine military at that time.

HOUSE STEINER (THE LYRAN COMMONWEALTH)

1987

Complete overview of the history, culture, important people and places of the Lyran Commonwealth as of 3025, with an emphasis on the ruling House Steiner, as told through the eyes of ComStar. Also included are deployments of the Lyran military at that time.

HOUSE LIAO (THE CAPELLAN CONFEDERATION)

1987

Complete overview of the history, culture, important people and places of the Capellan Confederation as of 3025, with an emphasis on the ruling House Liao, as told through the eyes of ComStar. Also included are deployments of the Capellan military at that time.

DROPSHIPS AND JUMPSHIPS

1988

Complete overview of the naval aspect of *BattleTech* history, with campaign rules and new equipment for use in *BattleTech* or *MechWarrior, First Edition* campaigns around the 3025 era. Statistical info provided for all the most common civilian and military spacecraft, from shuttles to JumpShips, used in that era.

HOUSE DAVION (THE FEDERATED SUNS)

1988

Complete overview of the history, culture, important people and places of the Federated Suns as of 3025, with an emphasis on the ruling House Davion, as told through the eyes of ComStar. Also included are deployments of the Federated Suns military at that time.

HOUSE MARIK (THE FREE WORLDS LEAGUE)

1988

Complete overview of the history, culture, important people and places of the Free Worlds League as of 3025, with an emphasis on the ruling House Marik, as told through the eyes of ComStar. Also included are deployments of the Free Worlds League military at that time.

THE PERIPHERY (1ST EDITION)

1988

Complete overview of the histories, cultures, important people and places of the near Periphery realms and bandit kingdoms active in the 3025 era, as reviewed through the eyes of ComStar.

THE STAR LEAGUE

1988

Complete overview of the history, culture, important people and places of the Star League as of 3025, including its fate after Stefan Amaris' Coup and the collapse of the League into anarchy, as told through the eyes of ComStar. Also included is an atlas of its many key worlds.

WOLF'S DRAGOONS

1989

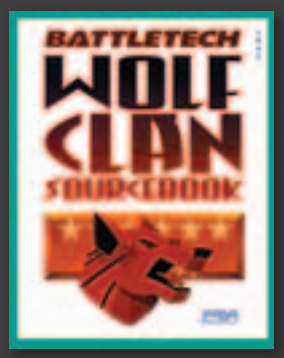
A detailed history of the Wolf's Dragoons mercenary unit from its first appearance in the Inner Sphere in 3005 through the Dragoons' actions on the Combine border in the Fourth Succession War, as told through the eyes of ComStar. Information on unit strength as of 3030, as well as new 'Mechs and vehicles specific to the Dragoons, is included.

BATTLETECH 20 YEAR UPDATE

1989

Accelerating the history of the *BattleTech* universe to 3050 with a widespread update on all factions, great and small, the *20-Year Update* covers every conflict and important figure who carried the universe from the Fourth Succession War to the days before the Clan invasion.

WOLF CLAN SOURCEBOOK



1991

An overview of the Wolf Clan, told through the eyes of ComStar, including a review of the history of all Clans, the Wolves' development in particular, and a planet-by-planet account of the Wolf Clan's invasion of the Inner Sphere from 3048-3052. A listing of the Clan's TO&E and three new OmniMechs are included.

SOLARIS VII (BOX SET)

1991

An overview of the Game World of Solaris VII, including Game Master and Player handbooks, for role-playing or *BattleTech* campaigning on Solaris. Special dueling rules and maps for the main Solaris City arenas are also included, along with information and record sheets on several Solaris-specific 'Mechs.

JADE FALCON SOURCEBOOK

1992

An overview of the Jade Falcon Clan, told through the eyes of ComStar, including a gloss-over of the history of all Clans, the Falcons' development in particular, and a planet-by-planet account of the Falcon Clan's invasion of the Inner Sphere from 3048-3052. A listing of the Clan's TO&E and a few new second-line 'Mechs are included.

COMSTAR

1992

Complete overview of the history and important people who shaped and guided the mystical Order known as ComStar as of 3055, told in their own words with editorial remarks by the Word of Blake breakaway group. Three new ComStar/WoB 'Mechs and a few character archetypes are included.

OBJECTIVE RAIDS

1992

A resource largely for gamemasters, describing in detail several worlds throughout the Inner Sphere and Clan-held territory as of 3054. Deployments of all known factions in the Inner Sphere and Near Periphery, plus the locations of major military industries, are given, along with maps of each faction's borders and member worlds.

SOLARIS: THE REACHES

1993

An expansion for the Solaris VII boxed set, this sourcebook delves into the Game World's seedier side, particularly focusing on the area surrounding Solaris City, where lesser stables and arenas are located. Expanded rules for detailed 'Mech damage, new arena maps, and three new 'Mechs are introduced.

MERCENARY'S HANDBOOK: 3055

1993

Updated rules for generating and running mercenary units in the *BattleTech* universe of 3055. Histories and rosters on selected mercenary units, such as Wolf's Dragoons, the Kell Hounds and the Black Thorns, are presented.

INTELLIGENCE OPERATIONS HANDBOOK

1993

An overview of the intelligence agencies of the five Great Houses, the Clans and ComStar/Word of Blake, told through the eyes of WolfNet, the Wolf's Dragoons intelligence service. This book also presents a few additional rules for character generation, role-playing and personal gear used in the *MechWarrior, Second Edition* RPG.

HOT SPOTS

1993

This two-book set is intended for gamemasters and players of a mercenary *BattleTech/MechWarrior* campaign and includes contracts and behind-the-scenes information on a variety of missions across the Inner Sphere and Periphery, circa 3055. Random lance generation tables are featured.

INVADING CLANS

1994

Told through the eyes of ComStar, this sourcebook covers the remaining invading Clans (Ghost Bear, Steel Viper, Nova Cat, Smoke Jaguar and Diamond Shark) with a gloss-over history and profile of each Clan, and planet-by-planet accounts of each of their invasions of the Inner Sphere from 3048-3052. A listing of each Clan's TO&E and a few new 'Mechs appear as well.

CHAOS MARCH

1995

This book gives the history leading up to and the aftermath of the Marik-Liao invasion and secession of the Lyran Alliance from the Federated Commonwealth in late 3057. Minor powers and independent worlds that rise up in the turbulent region formerly known as the FedCom's Sarna March are introduced and described. A few new conventional vehicles, expanded rules for repairing and scavenging, plus several pieces of *MechWarrior, Second Edition* equipment are included.

EXPLORER CORPS

1996

A history of the ComStar Explorer Corps as well as campaign rules for Explorer Corps-based missions are detailed in this book. Also included are several expansions on *BattleSpace* and *MechWarrior, Second Edition* rules, rules for creating and detailing star systems, and low-tech 'Mech rules for *BattleTech*.

THE PERIPHERY (2ND EDITION)

1996

This update on the status of the Periphery since 3025 overviews the major powers of the Near Periphery from the Magistracy of Canopus to the Rim Collection, as well as a host of minor realms and independent worlds as they stand in 3058, as told through ComStar's eyes. Force deployments of the various realms, hooks for *MechWarrior* campaigns, and stats for new vehicles and a 'Mech are also included.

FIELD MANUAL: DRACONIS COMBINE

1996

A revision and update on the overall state of the Draconis Combine with a particular emphasis on its military and its component regiments up to the start of 3059, including color schemes and deployment of the DCMS. Also presented are special unit rules; random 'Mech tables; *MechWarrior, Second Edition* expansions; and new Combine-produced military equipment from Kanazuchi heavy battle armor to the *Tatsumaki* destroyer.

FIELD MANUAL: FREE WORLDS LEAGUE

1997

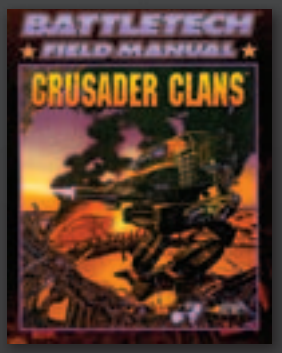
A revision and update on the overall state of the Free Worlds League with a particular emphasis on its military and its component regiments up to the start of 3059, including color schemes and deployment of the FWLM. Also presented are special unit rules; random 'Mech tables; *MechWarrior, Second Edition* expansions; and new League-produced military equipment from Achileus battle armor to the *Thera* carrier.

FIELD MANUAL: MERCENARIES

1997

A revision and update on the overall state of mercenaries across the Inner Sphere as of late 3059, including color schemes and deployment of the most famous units. Also presented are special unit rules; random 'Mech tables; *MechWarrior, Second Edition* expansions; and new rules for creating, maintaining and running a merc unit that replace those in *Mercenary's Handbook: 3055*.

FIELD MANUAL: CRUSADER CLANS



1998

An overview of the history and overall state of the seven Crusader Clans with a particular emphasis on their military forces and component Galaxies up to the end of 3059, including color schemes and deployment of each Clan's touman. Also presented are special unit rules, random 'Mech tables, and new military equipment produced by several of the Crusader Clans.

FIELD MANUAL: WARDEN CLANS

1998

An overview of the history and overall state of the seven Warden Clans (and Clan Wolf-in-Exile) with a particular emphasis on their military forces and component Galaxies up to the beginning of 3061, including color schemes and deployment of each Clan's touman. Also presented are special unit rules, random 'Mech tables, and new military equipment produced by several of the Warden Clans.

FIELD MANUAL: COMSTAR

1999

An overview of the history and state of ComStar, the Word of Blake, the Free Rasalhague Republic, the new Star League Defense Force and Clan Nova Cat, with particular emphasis on their military forces up to the beginning of 3062, including color schemes and deployment of each featured unit. Also presented are special unit rules, random 'Mech tables and new military equipment produced by several of the selected factions.

THE CLANS: WARRIORS OF KERENSKY

1999

A pure sourcebook that overviews the history, culture, sociopolitical condition, and state of affairs of all the current Clans as of 3062, told through the eyes of Phelan Kell of Clan Wolf-in-Exile. No new rules or equipment are featured in this book, though an atlas of major Clan homeworlds is given at the end.

SHATTERED SPHERE

1999

A miniature update on the state of all major and minor players in the Inner Sphere and Near Periphery, including ComStar and Word of Blake, are detailed in this book, covering events from the Twilight of the Clans to the first overtures of the FedCom Civil War.

FIELD MANUAL: CAPELLAN CONFEDERATION

2000

A revision and update on the overall state of the Capellan Confederation with a particular emphasis on its military and its component regiments up to mid-3063, including color schemes and deployment of the CCAF. Also presented are special unit rules; random 'Mech tables; *MechWarrior, Third Edition* expansions; and new Confederation-produced military equipment from Fa Shih battle armor to the *Feng Huang* cruiser.

FIELD MANUAL: FEDERATED SUNS

2000

A revision and update on the overall state of the Federated Suns with a particular emphasis on its military and its component regiments up to late 3062, including color schemes and deployment of the AFFS. Also presented are special unit rules; random 'Mech tables; *MechWarrior, Third Edition* expansions; and new FedSuns-produced military equipment from Cavalier battle armor to the *Avalon* cruiser.

FIELD MANUAL: LYRAN ALLIANCE

2000

A revision and update on the overall state of the Lyran Alliance with a particular emphasis on its military and its component regiments up to late 3062, including color schemes and deployment of the LAAF. Also presented are special unit rules; random 'Mech tables; *MechWarrior, Third Edition* expansions; and new Alliance-produced military equipment from Fenrir heavy armor to the *Mjolnir* battle cruiser.

INNER SPHERE

2000

A pure sourcebook that overviews the history, culture, sociopolitical condition, and state of affairs of all the Successor States and major Periphery states in the Inner Sphere, told through the eyes of ComStar. No new rules or equipment are featured in this book, though an atlas of major worlds is given at the end.

FIELD MANUAL: PERIPHERY

2000

An overview of the history and overall state of the major and minor powers of the Near and Deep Periphery, as well as several pirate bands, with a particular emphasis on their military forces up to the beginning of 3064, including color schemes and deployments of each major unit. Also presented are special unit rules, random 'Mech tables and new military equipment produced by several Periphery powers.

FEDCOM CIVIL WAR

2002

An overview, history and world-by-world account of the civil war across the states of the former Federated Commonwealth are given in this book, which includes *BattleTech* campaign rules, *MechWarrior* hooks, and even expansions to *BattleForce 2* game play.

CLASSIC BATTLETECH FIELD MANUAL: UPDATES

2003

Updates the Field Manual series to bring all factions into the post-FedCom Civil War era. Sets the stage for the Word of Blake Jihad. Includes rundowns and deployments for all major faction units and a narrative history of the past decade of the *BattleTech* universe.

CLASSIC BATTLETECH FIELD MANUAL: MERCENARIES (REVISED)

2004

A revision and update on the overall state of mercenaries across the Inner Sphere as of late 3067, including color schemes and deployment of the most famous units. Also includes updated rules for creating and running a mercenary unit, as well as profiles of four worlds where the merc trade flourishes.

HANDBOOK: HOUSE STEINER

2004

Updates the old House Steiner book to the modern 3067 era. Includes a complete history of the Lyran Commonwealth, as well as corporate and planetary profiles, an overview of politics and the economy, and several historical maps showing the development of the Commonwealth from its founding until the current day.

A GUIDE TO COVERT OPS

2004

Updating the *Intelligence Operations Handbook* to the 3067 era, this book includes profiles of all major intelligence agencies throughout the Inner Sphere. Also gives information on the Manei Domini, the Thuggees, WolfNet and several other smaller organizations.

MERCENARIES SUPPLEMENTAL

2004

An update to *Field Manual: Mercenaries (Revised)* that takes a look at thirty-one more members of that profession. Also included are profiles of three worlds where the merc trade flourishes, as well a point-based system for creating your own mercenary unit.

HISTORICAL: WAR OF 3039

2005

First in a new series covering historical conflicts of the *BattleTech* universe. Contains detailed information about the war between the Federated Suns and the Draconis Combine, including unit deployments, personalities, maps and era-specific rules.

INTERSTELLAR PLAYERS

2005

A new kind of sourcebook for *BattleTech* that provides gamemasters and players with interesting story hooks and fleshed-out conspiracy theories and mysterious organizations to introduce a new level of play.

MERCENARIES SUPPLEMENTAL II

2005

A second update to *Field Manual: Mercenaries (Revised)* that takes a look at forty of the less reputable members of that profession. Also included are profiles of four worlds where the merc trade flourishes, as well as rules for creating and running a mercenary unit in alternate eras of *BattleTech* history.

DAWN OF THE JIHAD

2005

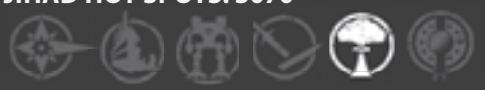
Beginning a new storyline! The Word of Blake launches a full-on assault against the Inner Sphere. Alliances fail, enemies join forces and new heroes arise to combat this threat. Presented in a new "you are there" format that immerses the reader in the ongoing action as it happens.

HANDBOOK: HOUSE MARIK

2005

Updates the old House Marik book to the modern 3067 era. Includes a complete history of the Free Worlds League, as well as corporate and planetary profiles, an overview of politics and the economy, and several historical maps showing the development of the League from its founding until the current day.

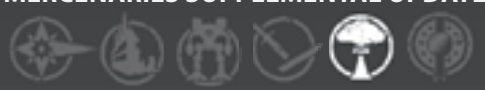
JIHAD HOT SPOTS: 3070



2005

The Jihad continues! The war with the Word of Blake heats up in this sourcebook as events continue to spiral out of control. Includes several new vehicles and DropShips and rules for using nuclear weapons in *BattleTech* game play.

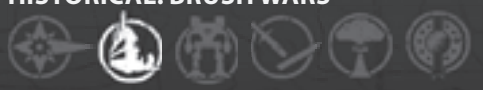
MERCENARIES SUPPLEMENTAL UPDATE



2006

With the chaos of the Jihad raging, this book provides reports on the status of nearly 100 new and previously described mercenary units. Also contains rules for running a merc outfit during the Jihad and several new units, including the *Valiant* BattleMech and *Aurora* DropShip.

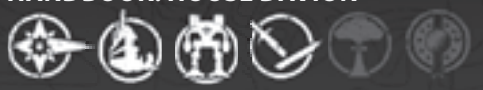
HISTORICAL: BRUSH WARS



2006

Second in the Historical series. This sourcebook covers three minor conflicts of the thirty-first century: the Marik Civil War of 3015, the Ronin War of 3034 and the Andurien/Canopian invasion of the Capellan Confederation in 3036. Contains era-specific rules, personalities, maps and unit deployments to allow players to recreate these wars.

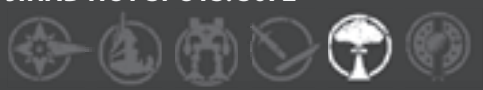
HANDBOOK: HOUSE DAVION



2007

Updates the old House Davion book to the modern 3067 era. Includes a complete history of the Federated Suns, as well as corporate and planetary profiles, an overview of politics and the economy, and several historical maps showing the development of the Suns from its founding until the current day.

JIHAD HOT SPOTS: 3072



2007

The Jihad continues! As the forces arrayed against the Word of Blake begin to come together in mutual aid, the worst is yet to come. The rules section includes the introduction of the Celestial-series OmniMechs and details of the cyborg Manei Domini troopers.

BLAKE ASCENDING: A JIHAD COMPILATION

2008

Omnibus reprint edition of *Dawn of the Jihad* and *Jihad Hot Spots: 3070*.

JIHAD CONSPIRACIES: INTERSTELLAR PLAYERS 2

2008

What secrets lurk behind the Word of Blake and their war against the Inner Sphere? The mysteries behind the Hidden, the Society, Devlin Stone and many more are presented for use by gamemasters and curious players.

JIHAD SECRETS: THE BLAKE DOCUMENTS

2008

Provides players with an overview of the situation in 3075, including maps and campaign descriptions for most major fronts in the war against the Word of Blake. Also: the answers to one of the biggest secrets in *BattleTech* history are revealed!

HANDBOOK: MAJOR PERIPHERY STATES

2009

Handbook: Major Periphery States gives the essential history, politics and culture of the many larges states in the Periphery.

JIHAD HOT SPOTS: 3076

2009

As the Jihad rages on, new alliances and new heroes emerge in the struggle against Word of Blake zealots.

MASTERS & MINIONS: THE STARCORPS DOSSIERS

2009

StarCorp's army of administrators has compiled a huge list of whose-who in the *BattleTech* universe.

SCENARIO PACKS

TALES OF THE BLACK WIDOW COMPANY

1985

Scenario pack detailing missions and campaigns fought by the Wolf's Dragoons' Black Widow Company (mostly against House Davion, in service to House Kurita) around 3022. Included in this scenario pack are stats for three 'Mechs, among them the *Mackie*, and first generation double heat sinks.

THE FOX'S TEETH

1985

Scenario pack detailing missions and campaigns fought by McKinnon's Raiders, a mercenary unit that effectively became a House unit loyal to Hanse "The Fox" Davion. This pack describes missions fought by this unit from around 3020 to 3029.

CRANSTON SNORD'S IRREGULARS

1986

Scenario pack detailing missions and campaigns fought by Cranston Snord's Irregulars from 3007 to 3025, including actions along the Steiner-Marik border and the Junkyard Dog Affair.

THE GRAY DEATH LEGION

1986

Scenario pack detailing missions and campaigns fought by the Gray Death Legion mercenary unit described in the novels *Decision at Thunder Rift*, *Mercenary's Star* and *The Price of Glory*. The Battle of Helm is featured in this pack, which covers key battles fought from 3024 to 3030.

THE GALTOR CAMPAIGN

1987

Scenario pack detailing key missions of the Galtor Campaign, a military operation fought by House Davion against House Kurita in 3025, designed for use with *BattleForce (First Edition)*, rather than *BattleTech*.

SORENSEN'S SABRES

1987

Scenario pack detailing missions and campaigns fought by Sorenson's Sabres, a Draconis Combine unit with roots in the Rasalhague District, from 3021 to 3026. Several 3025-era Kurita 'Mech variants are featured in this book, as well as the Devastator Mk III tank and *Samurai* aerospace fighter.

NAIS FOURTH SUCCESSION WAR MILITARY ATLAS (VOL. I & II)

1988

Complete overview of the Fourth Succession War in historical format, with information provided to permit fighting the Fourth Succession War using *BattleForce (First Edition)* rules.

ROLLING THUNDER

1988

Scenario pack detailing missions and campaigns fought by Rolling Thunder, a merc outfit formed after the Marik Civil War, in service to the Free Worlds League between 3025 and 3028. Also included are two *BattleForce* scenarios and two *MechWarrior, First Edition* scenarios.

THE KELL HOUNDS

1988

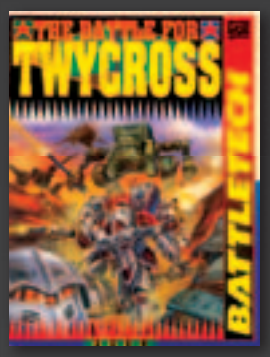
Details the history of the Kell Hounds mercenary unit since its inception, through their actions during the Fourth Succession War. Information on unit strength as of 3030, as well as new 'Mechs and vehicles specific to the Hounds, is included.

THE FOURTH SUCCESSION WAR SCENARIOS, VOL. I

1989

Scenario pack detailing key missions of the Fourth Succession War, covering actions between Houses Steiner and Davion against their enemies in the Capellan Confederation, Draconis Combine and Free Worlds League in 3028.

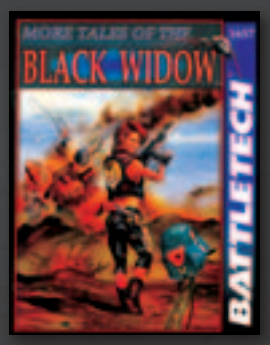
THE BATTLE FOR TWYCROSS



1990

This scenario pack details the battle for Twycross during the Clan invasion, including scenarios for the initial Jade Falcon conquest and the FedCom counterattack as seen in the novel *Lethal Heritage*.

MORE TALES OF THE BLACK WIDOW



1990

Scenario pack detailing significant actions of Wolf's Dragoons' infamous Black Widow Company from 3032 to 3052, covering events from the War of 3039 and Natasha Kerensky's role commanding the Wolf Spiders Cluster for Clan Wolf during the invasion years. Two new 'Mech designs are included.

RHONDA'S IRREGULARS

1991

Scenario pack detailing significant actions of Rhonda's Irregulars from the Fourth Succession War, to the Clan invasion, from 3028 to 3051. Includes *BattleTroops*/*ClanTroops* scenarios as well as BattleTech scenarios, and describes two new 'Mechs and one new armored vehicle.

MCCARRON'S ARMORED CAVALRY

1992

Scenario pack detailing missions and campaigns fought by the McCarron's Armored Cavalry mercenary unit in 3044, including the assault on the Davion world of Bourgogne. Also included is a history of the MAC as well as several new 'Mech and vehicle designs.

DAY OF HEROES

1993

Scenario pack detailing missions and campaigns fought by the Gray Death Legion mercenary unit from 3039 to 3056, including actions in the War of 3039, the Clan Invasion and the Second Skye Rebellion. New rules for terrain and weather are featured.

LUTHIEN

1993

This scenario pack details the battle of Luthien during the Clan invasion, and includes a special map for the scenarios as well as three new Clan 'Mechs.

TUKAYYID

1994

A complete campaign book for the climactic battle of the Clan invasion. Details all six campaigns fought on Tukayyid and includes scenarios for recreating many of the most important battles between the Clans and ComStar.

THE BLACK THORNS

1994

Scenario pack detailing missions and campaigns fought by the Black Thorns mercenary unit from 3052 to 3057, including flashback scenarios set on Tukayyid, a Solaris duel, and the battle on Courchevel in 3057. Also included is a history of the Thorns as well as four new Clan 'Mechs and one from the Star League era.

1ST SOMERSET STRIKERS

1995

Scenario pack detailing adventures of the 1st Somerset Strikers, the ad-hoc unit created by Adam Steiner to investigate the Clans during their invasion. Every battle from the cartoon series is featured, along with *BattleTech* rules for using EI neural implants.

THE FALCON AND THE WOLF

1995

Scenario pack outlining key battles of the Jade Falcon/Wolf Refusal War that followed the deposing of Ulric Kerensky as ilKhan in 3057. Also provides a historical rundown of the conflict and a listing of the Crusader Wolves (here called the Jade Wolves), the Falcons, and Clan Wolf-in-Exile afterward.

THE FALL OF TERRA

1996

Scenario pack detailing key events in the Word of Blake assault and capture of Terra from ComStar in 3058, with scenarios for *BattleTech* and *BattleSpace*. An overview of Terra as of the 31st century is given, along with a few new BattleMechs used by the Blakists.

FIRST STRIKE!

1996

This training scenario pack is designed to introduce new players to the game. Contains a quick overview of the various wars in the Inner Sphere as well as rules for creating and running scenarios, stats and record sheets for a few new OmniMech configurations and vehicles.

THE BATTLE OF COVENTRY

1997

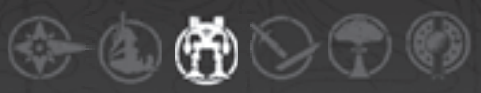
Scenario pack detailing key events in the Jade Falcon invasion of Coventry in 3058. Includes a history of the battle, as well as stats and record sheets for one new Falcon OmniMech.

NORTHWIND HIGHLANDERS

1997

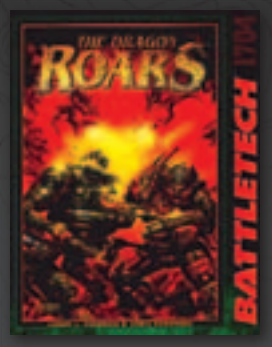
Scenario pack detailing missions and campaigns fought by the Northwind Highlanders mercenary unit and its cousin unit, the Royal Black Watch, from the days of the Star League—including the Amaris Coup—to their latest actions on Wayside V in 3058. Also included are a history of the Highlanders and stats for the *Black Watch* 'Mech and Schiltron OmniTank.

THE DRAGON ROARS



1998

Scenario pack detailing key events of Operation Bulldog, the Inner Sphere drive to destroy the Smoke Jaguar Clan, with a historical overview of the conflict. Scenarios for *BattleTech* and *BattleForce 2* are included.



BATTLEPACK: FOURTH SUCCESSION WAR

1998

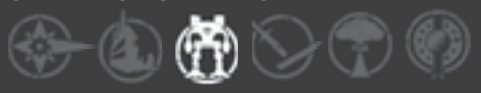
Scenario pack detailing key battles of the Fourth Succession War from 3028 to 3029, with a historical overview and several 'Mech designs plus their record sheets. Sold with counters and the Woodland Map.

TWILIGHT OF THE CLANS

1998

Scenario pack detailing key events of Task Force Serpent, the final Inner Sphere bid to destroy the Smoke Jaguar Clan, and the Great Refusal that ends the Clan invasion, with a historical overview of the conflict and scenarios for *BattleTech*, *BattleSpace* and *BattleForce 2*.

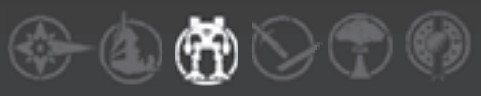
OPERATION STILETTO



1999

This flexible scenario pack, designed for homegrown *BattleTech* units, features rules for generating balanced forces quickly, tailored to the strengths and capabilities of a player group, with special rules for each mini-campaign. The story is set in 3061, centered on two worlds of the Chaos March and a corporate-backed effort to stabilize them.

OPERATION FLASHPOINT



2000

This flexible scenario pack, designed for homegrown *BattleTech* units, features rules for generating balanced forces quickly, tailored to the strengths and capabilities of a player group, with special rules for each mini-campaign. The story is set in 3063, on a Lyran world divided by nobles entrenched on opposite sides of the Steiner-Davion split.

STARTERBOOK: SWORD AND DRAGON

2007

A new series of scenario books designed to bridge the gap between products. Presenting the famed Fox's Teeth and their sworn foes Sorenson's Sabres, this Starterbook eases new players from the *Introductory Box Set* into the more comprehensive *Total Warfare* rules while providing experienced players with two complete units that can be incorporated into their games. Includes full-color art and record sheets for all twenty-four pilots and their BattleMechs, plus scenarios and optional rules for advanced equipment.

STARTERBOOK: WOLF AND BLAKE

2008

Taking the struggle between the infamous Black Widows and Word of Blake's deadly Opacus Venatori as its background, this Starterbook transitions players from the basic *Total Warfare* rules to the more complicated optional rules found in *Tactical Operations*. Includes full-color art and record sheets for all twenty-four pilots and their BattleMechs, plus scenarios and advanced rules for weather, terrain and weapons.

ADVENTURES

UNBOUND

1991

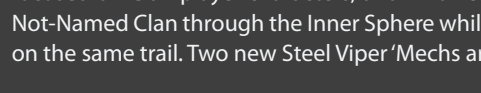
The first adventure designed for the *MechWarrior, Second Edition* RPG pits the characters against a mad Davion scientist on Solaris VII, and unveils special new technology including cockpit-less 'Mechs, neurological links direct to the 'Mech, and special 'Mech weaponry from buzzsaws to PPC shields.

BLOODRIGHT

1992

An adventure designed for the *MechWarrior, Second Edition* RPG, this one is focused on Clan player characters, and involves the hunt for descendants of the Not-Named Clan through the Inner Sphere while contending with rival Clansmen on the same trail. Two new Steel Viper 'Mechs are unveiled.

NULL SET



1992

This *MechWarrior, Second Edition* adventure features the player characters as members of a mercenary unit caught between ComStar and Word of Blake, who must clear their names when charged with a crime against humanity in destroying an HPG that was actually being used as a weapon against them. Includes detailed information on Outreach and the operations of the Mercenary Review and Bonding Commission.

ROYALTY AND ROGUES

1994

This *MechWarrior, Second Edition* adventure takes the player characters to the lawless Periphery world of Port Krin in an effort to locate and rescue the daughter of a local duke, abducted as a pawn in a local power struggle.

LIVING LEGENDS

1995

This *MechWarrior, Second Edition* adventure features a misjumped WarShip from General Kerensky's Exodus fleet that arrives in a Smoke Jaguar-occupied system and becomes the focus of a race to capture or destroy its experimental jump drive.

TECHNICAL READOUTS, RECORD SHEETS AND GAME AIDS

TECHNICAL READOUT: 3025

1986 (original), 1996 (revised)

The first Technical Readout, describing 'Mechs, aerospace fighters and even some of the DropShips and conventional vehicles most commonly used in the *BattleTech* universe circa 3025.

TECHNICAL READOUT: 3026

1987

This Technical Readout exclusively covers vehicles from tanks to submarines and conventional aircraft commonly in use by the Successor States around 3026. Also included is personal equipment intended for use in the *MechWarrior* role-playing game.

BATTLETECH: REINFORCEMENTS BOX SET

1987

Additional 'Mechs, statistics, record sheets, and counters for use in *BattleTech*, covering all known 'Mechs, vehicles, and their variants created to date.

TECHNICAL READOUT: 2750

1989

This Technical Readout covers the most common 'Mechs, vehicles and aerospace fighters of the Star League Defense Force, and also includes a couple of DropShips and WarShips used in the SLDF naval forces.

TECHNICAL READOUT: 3050

1990 (original), 1996 (revised)

This Technical Readout updates most of the 'Mechs used by the Inner Sphere from *Technical Readout 3025*, and adds a few from the Wolf's Dragoons and Kell Hounds sourcebooks and *Technical Readout 2750*. The first of the Clan OmniMechs and information on Elementals and other new weapon systems are also included.

BATTLETECH: REINFORCEMENTS 2

1990 (boxed set), 1991 (record sheets only)

Additional 'Mechs, statistics, record sheets and counters for use in *BattleTech*, covering all known 'Mechs, vehicles, and their variants created through 3050, including the first Clan OmniMechs.

BATTLETECH RECORD SHEETS, VOL I: LIGHT 'MECHS

1990

Record sheets for all stock BattleMech and OmniMech designs and variants published through 3050 in previous *MechWarrior* products. This volume covers light 'Mechs (up to 35 tons) in alphabetical order.

BATTLETECH RECORD SHEETS, VOL II: MEDIUM 'MECHS

1990

Record sheets for all stock BattleMech and OmniMech designs and variants published through 3050 in previous *MechWarrior* products. This volume covers medium 'Mechs (40-55 tons) in alphabetical order.

BATTLETECH RECORD SHEETS, VOL III: HEAVY 'MECHS

1990

Record sheets for all stock BattleMech and OmniMech designs and variants published through 3050 in previous *MechWarrior* products. This volume covers heavy 'Mechs (60-75 tons) in alphabetical order.

BATTLETECH RECORD SHEETS, VOL IV: ASSAULT 'MECHS

1990

Record sheets for all stock BattleMech and OmniMech designs and variants published through 3050 in previous *MechWarrior* products. This volume covers assault 'Mechs (80-100 tons) in alphabetical order.

BATTLETECH RECORD SHEETS, VOL V: VEHICLES

1992

Record sheets for all stock conventional vehicle designs and variants published through 3050 in previous *MechWarrior* products, in alphabetical order.

TECHNICAL READOUT: 3055

1992 (original), 1996 (revised)

This Technical Readout provides new 'Mechs used by the Inner Sphere and new Clan 'Mechs, including those featured in the two Clan Sourcebooks (Wolf and Jade Falcon) published to date. Additionally, Clan OmniFighters make their debut in this book.

BATTLETECH RECORD SHEETS: 3055

1992

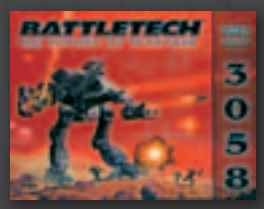
Record sheets for all stock 'Mechs and aerospace fighter designs and variants published in *Technical Readout 3055*, in alphabetical order.

TECHNICAL READOUT: 3057

1994

This Technical Readout covers aerospace fighters, DropShips and WarShips of the Star League, Clan and Inner Sphere navies, for use with *BattleSpace* rules.

TECHNICAL READOUT: 3058



1995

This Technical Readout describes new 'Mechs and updated conventional vehicles—many from previous sourcebooks, compiled here—coming into play among the armies of the Great Houses and the Clans around 3058.

RECORD SHEETS: 3055 AND 3058

1996

Record sheets for all stock 'Mechs, aerospace fighters and vehicle designs and variants published in Technical Readouts 3055 and 3058, revised and recompiled.

RECORD SHEETS 3025 AND 3026

1996

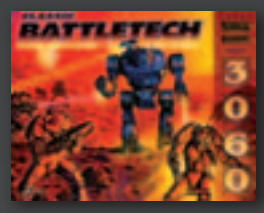
Record sheets for all stock 'Mechs, aerospace fighters and vehicle designs and variants published in Technical Readouts 3025 and 3026, revised and recompiled.

RECORD SHEETS 3050

1996

Record sheets for all stock 'Mechs, aerospace fighters and vehicle designs and variants published in *Technical Readout 3050*, revised and recompiled.

TECHNICAL READOUT: 3060



1998

This Technical Readout describes new 'Mechs and conventional vehicles coming into play among the armies of the Great Houses and the Clans around 3060. Featured as well are never-before-seen Clan conventional vehicles as well as construction and combat rules for the new ProtoMechs.

RECORD SHEETS: 3060

1998

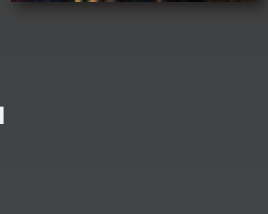
Record sheets for all stock 'Mechs, ProtoMechs, and vehicle designs and variants published in *Technical Readout 3060*.

RECORD SHEETS: UPGRADES

2001

Record sheets for upgraded versions of previously-published 'Mechs, battle armor, vehicles and ProtoMechs.

TECHNICAL READOUT: 3067



2002

This Technical Readout describes new 'Mechs and conventional vehicles coming into play among the armies of the Great Houses and the Clans around 3067, as well as WarShips from previously published sourcebooks, new DropShips and even new *AeroTech 2* fighters.

RECORD SHEETS: 3067

2002

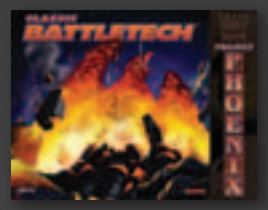
Record sheets for all stock 'Mechs and vehicle designs and variants published in *Technical Readout 3067*, as well as upgraded variants on older designs and ProtoMechs.

AEROTECH 2 RECORD SHEETS

2002

A compilation of more than three hundred complete record sheets for every conventional fighter, aerospace fighter, small craft, DropShip, JumpShip, WarShip and space station used in the *BattleTech* universe.

TECHNICAL READOUT: PROJECT PHOENIX



2003

This Technical Readout reintroduces nearly thirty classic BattleMech designs, upgraded and improved with new technology. All-new art accompanies each design and a gallery of variant designs is included.

MECHWARRIOR: DARK AGE RECORD SHEETS 1

2003

Five decades after the Word of Blake Jihad, war breaks out once more. This collection of record sheets details some of the new units fighting in the 3130s, including the *Legionnaire*, the *Ryoken II*, the *Tundra Wolf*, the *Jupiter* and several new battle armor designs.

BATTLETECH TECHNICAL READOUT: 3026, REVISED

2004

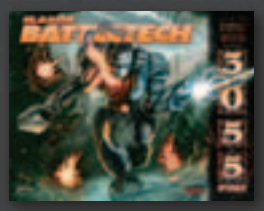
This revised readout includes all the vehicles from the original *Technical Readout: 3026* and introduces nearly twenty brand-new vehicles, aerospace fighters, DropShips, JumpShips and WarShips.

TECHNICAL READOUT: 3057, REVISED

2004

This revised edition includes all the designs from the original *Technical Readout: 3057*, updated for *AeroTech 2* rules, as well as two dozen new designs for WarShips from earlier eras in *BattleTech* history.

TECHNICAL READOUT: 3055 UPGRADE



2005

This upgraded TRO introduces designs using advanced weapons and equipment from *Maximum Tech* and brings the BattleMechs from the old Solaris VII box set into a Technical Readout for the first time. Also includes updated versions of the 'Mechs and OmniFighters from the original *Technical Readout: 3055* and the return of Notable Pilots.

TECHNICAL READOUT: 3058 UPGRADE

2006

Updates the units from the original *Technical Readout: 3058* to the current 3070 timeframe and adds Notable Pilots for each design. In addition, a section for battle armor—Inner Sphere and Clan—is included.

TECHNICAL READOUT: VEHICLE ANNEX

2006

This Technical Readout introduces many of the day-to-day designs that populate life in the *BattleTech* universe. Included are civilian luxury hovercars, satellites, industrial exoskeletons, trains, airships, emergency services vehicles, submarines and much more.

TECHNICAL READOUT: 3050 UPGRADE

2007

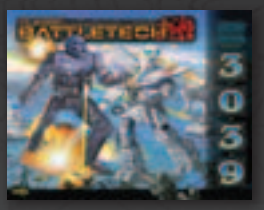
Updates the designs from the original *Technical Readout 3050* to the 3071 era and includes the 'Mechs, vehicles and aerospace fighters from the out-of-print *Technical Readout 2750*. Each design receives new art, an expanded history and Notable Pilots.

RECORD SHEETS: 3050U (INNER SPHERE, CLAN & STAR LEAGUE)

2007

Record sheets for more than 500 BattleMechs, vehicles and aerospace fighters (plus variants) as published in *Technical Readout: 3050 Upgrade*. Available in Inner Sphere and Clan/Star League collections.

TECHNICAL READOUT: 3039



2008

Designed as a companion book to the *Introductory Box Set*, *Technical Readout: 3039* incorporates the 'Mechs, vehicles and aerospace fighters previously published in *Technical Readout: 3025* and *Technical Readout: 3026*. Each design receives a complete history, a listing of variants and a selection of Notable Pilots.

TECHNICAL READOUT: 3075

2008

Presents new designs fielded by all sides in the Word of Blake Jihad, including the fearsome Celestials, Demons and Spectrals. Also included are various "RetroTech" designs making their return to the battlefield after centuries of disuse.

RECORD SHEETS: 3039

2008

A compilation of more than fifty BattleMech and thirty vehicle record sheets for use with the *Introductory Box Set* and *Technical Readout: 3039*. Also included: combat vehicle rules, two scenarios and rules for creating additional scenarios.

MAP SETS

MAP SET #1

1985

BattleTech terrain maps. Included: BattleTech Map, CityTech Map, Lake Area Map and River Valley Map.

MAP SET #2

1988 (cardboard), 1991 (paper)

BattleTech terrain maps. Included: BattleTech Map, CityTech Map, Mountain Lake, City Ruins, Desert Hills, Scattered Woods, Lake Area and River Valley.

MAP SET #3

1991

BattleTech terrain maps. Included: Desert Mountain (2 maps), Desert Sinkhole (2 maps), City Hills/Residential (2 maps), and Rolling Hills (2 maps).

MAP SET #4

1991

BattleTech terrain maps. Included: Heavy Forest (2 maps), City Street Grid/Park (2 maps), Large Lakes (2 maps), River Delta/Drainage Basin (2 maps), and Deep Canyon (2 maps).

MAP SET #5

1997

BattleTech terrain maps. Included: BattleForce 2 Map, Large Mountain (2 maps), Moonscape (2 maps), Open Terrain (2 maps), Woodland and Wide River.

MAP SET #6

2000

BattleTech terrain maps. Included: Wide River, BattleForce 2 Map, Box Canyon, City (Downtown), City (Skyscraper), City (Residential) and City (Suburbs).

MAP SET #7
2002
BattleTech terrain maps. Included: DropPort (2 maps), Archipelago (2 maps), Military Base (2 maps), Coast (2 maps) and Seaport.

MAP SET COMPILATION 1
2003
Compilation of maps from Map Set #2, Map Set #3 and Map Set#4.

MAPPACK: SOLARIS VII
2005
Compilation of maps from the Solaris VII box set and *Solaris: The Reaches*, plus information on the game world, various MechWarrior stables and new weapons and equipment for use in Solaris competitions.

MAP SET COMPILATION 2
2005
Compilation of maps from Map Set #5, Map Set #6, *BattleForce 2* and *BattleSpace*.

HEX PACK: LAKES AND RIVERS

2009
Flexible terrain expansion system designed for use with other pre-printed mapsheets.

HEX PACK: CITIES AND ROADS
2009
Flexible terrain expansion system designed for use with other pre-printed mapsheets.

EBOOKS ONLY

RECORD SHEETS: 3055 UPGRADE
2006
Record sheets for all stock 'Mechs and OmniFighters (and their variants) published in *Technical Readout: 3055 Upgrade*.

RECORD SHEETS: UNIQUE 'MECHS
2006
The result of a fan contest on the BattleCorps website, this e-book describes fifteen uniquely modified BattleMechs and their pilots. It includes record sheets for each 'Mech and artwork commissioned specifically for one of the winning designs.

RECORD SHEETS: PHOENIX UPGRADES
2006 (old style), 2009 (new style)
More than 200 record sheets for the stock 'Mechs and their variants published in *Technical Readout: Project Phoenix*. The new-style version is also available in faction-specific collections.

CLASSIC BATTLETECH QUICK-START RECORD SHEETS
2006
Two additional BattleMech record sheets and counters for use with the Quick-Start Rules.

CLASSIC BATTLETECH INTRODUCTORY RECORD SHEETS
2006
Twenty-four record sheets detailing the plastic BattleMech miniatures found in the *Introductory Box Set*.

RECORD SHEETS: SWORD AND DRAGON

2006
Set of eight BattleMech record sheets corresponding to the 'Mechs used by the Fox's Teeth and Sorenson's Sabres.

RECORD SHEETS: 3058 UPGRADE
2006
Record sheets for nearly 400 BattleMechs, battle armor and combat vehicles (plus variants) published in *Technical Readout: 3058 Upgrade*.

RECORD SHEETS: 3072
2007
Six record sheets detailing the new Celestial OmniMechs introduced by the Word of Blake during their Jihad.

RECORD SHEETS: 3039
2008
More than 300 record sheets for the BattleMechs, vehicles and aerospace fighters (plus variants) published in *Technical Readout: 3039*.

CHAOS CAMPAIGN
2008
A free e-book that provides rules and suggestions for using the Campaign Track and Warchest Point systems. Can be used with published tracks such as those found in the Turning Points ebook series and the Jihad plot sourcebooks.

TURNING POINTS: LUTHIEN

2008
First in a new series of e-books! This book allows players to recreate the battles on Luthien during the Word of Blake Jihad in a series of linked scenarios. This book also gives short breakdowns of all the units involved in the fighting as well as a planetary map and information.

TURNING POINTS: NEW AVALON

2009
The Turning Points series continues! This book allows players to recreate the battles on New Avalon during the long years of the Blakist occupation and the epic struggles to free the world from their tyranny. Also included are short breakdowns of all the units involved in the fighting as well as a planetary map and information.

TURNING POINTS: THARKAD

2009

This book allows players to recreate the battles on Tharkad during the long years of the Blakist occupation. Also included are short breakdowns of all the units involved in the fighting as well as a planetary map and information.

OTHER PRODUCTS

BATTLETECH BLUEPRINTS

1986

Blueprints of the more famous 'Mechs (particularly, several Unseen) used in the 3025 era, issued in rolled format.

THE SUCCESSION WARS (BOARD GAME)

1987

A board game based on the 3025-era *BattleTech* universe that allows players to control entire Houses in campaigns against one another.

CAMO SPECS

1988

A pictorial overview of the standard paint schemes of several famous *BattleTech* units.

PLASTECH

1988

The first plastic miniatures released for *BattleTech*, *Plastech* includes two each of eight different BattleMechs.

FACTION PATCHES

1988

Three-inch cloth patches for Houses Kurita, Davion, Liao, Marik and Steiner.

FACTION PATCHES

1990

Three-inch cloth patches for the Federated Commonwealth, as well as Clans Wolf, Ghost Bear, Jade Falcon and Smoke Jaguar.

BATTLETECH BLUEPRINTS

1991

Blueprints of the more famous 'Mechs used in the 3025 era, reissued in folded format.

OMNIMECH BLUEPRINTS

1991

Blueprints of the more infamous heavy Clan OmniMechs.

BATTLETECH PLASTIC MINIATURES

1993

The miniatures found in the *BattleTech, Third Edition Box Set* sold separately, this box set contains fourteen plastic BattleMechs.

BATTLETECH RECOGNITION CARDS

1993

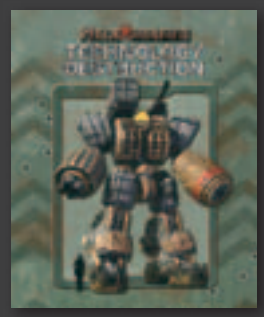
Full-color cards showing the image and stats of all *BattleTech* 'Mechs.

MEDIUM OMNIMECH TECHPRINTS

1994

Blueprints of the basic medium Clan OmniMechs: *Nova*, *Stormcrow*, *Viper* and *Ice Ferret*.

MECHWARRIOR: TECHNOLOGY OF DESTRUCTION



2004

A large-format hardcover book presenting the details of the Dark Age setting in full color. Players can learn about the history of the conflicts and view a map of the Republic of the Sphere. Contains several fold-out sections, including a size chart comparing more than fifty BattleMechs, vehicles and infantry units.

MECHWARRIOR COLLECTIBLE MINIATURES GAME SETS

DARK AGE

2002

The Dark Age begins with the collapse of the hyperpulse generator network and the rise of factions within the Republic of the Sphere. This initial set contains 158 game pieces, including 54 unique pilots, and introduces the seven base factions: Bannson's Raiders, Dragon's Fury, Highlanders, Republic, Swordsworn, Spirit Cats and Steel Wolves.

FIRE FOR EFFECT

2003

The action heats up as the struggle for power in the Republic continues. This set contains 136 game pieces, including 52 unique pilots.

DEATH FROM ABOVE

2003

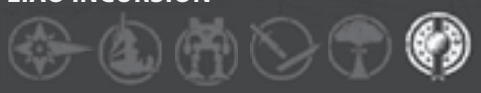
With allegiance to the Lyran Commonwealth, the Stormhammers thunder onto the scene in this expansion set. Contains 144 game pieces, including 32 unique pilots. Introduces the Stormhammers faction.

AURORA DROPSHIP

2003

This large-scale DropShip can be incorporated into *MechWarrior: Dark Age* as a game piece, a terrain feature or both. Features five combat dials and four 'Mech bays that can be used to enhance repair abilities.

LIAO INCURSION



2003

The Capellan Confederation enters the fray with an invasion of the Republic to reclaim their former worlds. Set contains 156 game pieces, including 44 unique pilots. Introduces the House Liao faction.

COUNTERASSAULT

2004

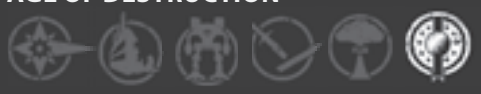
Beset on all sides, the Republic strikes back against the invaders! This set contains 151 game pieces, including 39 unique pilots.

FALCON'S PREY

2004

Descending like a sudden storm, Clan Jade Falcon invades the Republic! Set contains 146 game pieces, including 34 unique pilots. Introduces the Jade Falcon faction.

AGE OF DESTRUCTION



2005

As the storyline moves from the Dark Age to a new Age of Destruction, this set revamps the *MechWarrior* game with new card-based mechanics for building forces, altering the battlefield and customizing units. Set includes 245 game pieces, including Faction Pride, Mercenary Contract, Gear, Planetary Condition and Alliance cards, plus 20 unique Gunslinger pilot cards. Introduces Houses Davion and Steiner as factions.

FIREPOWER

2005

The samurai forces of the Draconis Combine want a piece of the Republic and will stop at nothing to get their share. Set contains 165 game pieces, including 18 unique Gunslinger pilot cards. Introduces House Kurita and Clan Nova Cat as factions.

ANNIHILATION

2005

The Nova Cats jump in with full force as the Combine invasion of the Republic continues. Set contains 173 game pieces, including 22 unique Gunslinger pilots. Introduces the Rasalhague Dominion as a faction.

DOMINATION

2006

The Ghost Bears of the Rasalhague Dominion claim to have come to help the Republic, but can they be trusted? Set contains 246 game pieces, including 33 unique Gunslinger pilots. Introduces Clan Wolf as a faction with a special "Historical" pilot card and BattleMech of Phelan Ward.

CLAN JADE FALCON BATTLEFORCE

2006

Special set of six Jade Falcon BattleMechs and pilots, available to Officer's Club members.

REPUBLIC OF THE SPHERE BATTLEFORCE

2006

Special set of six Republic BattleMechs, two each of the *Nyx*, *Malice* and *Mangonel*.

VANGUARD

2006

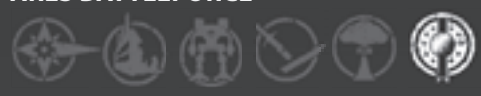
With so many factions fighting over the corpse of the Republic, a free-for-all of epic proportions breaks out. Set contains 179 game pieces, including 24 unique Gunslinger pilots. Introduces the Wolf Hunters and (through a special "Historical" pilot card and BattleMech) ComStar as factions.

WAR COLLEGE

2006

Two BattleMechs and their pilots, available to those who participated in the special War College promotional games at local stores. This event was designed to help new players learn the *MechWarrior* game.

ARES BATTLEFORCE



2006

From out of nowhere comes the first of a new breed of BattleMech: the mysterious Colossal-class *Ares*! This set contains three *Ares* miniatures and the pilots needed to run them, as well as rules for including them in your game.

WOLF STRIKE

2006

Clan Wolf hits the Republic in force, bringing with them new BattleMech designs and fearsome troops. Set contains 226 game pieces, including 40 unique Gunslinger pilots. Also includes a special "Historical" pilot card and BattleMech of Katherine Steiner-Davion.

GALE FORCE 9 BATTLEFORCE

2006

This package of 3D terrain templates for use with the *MechWarrior* CMG also comes with four BattleMechs and their pilots.

POSEIDON ACTION PACK

2006

A fourth Colossal-class *Ares* is sighted and it's even more deadly. Set includes one miniature, the pilots needed to field it and supporting infantry.

PHANTOM WAR BATTLEFORCE

2006

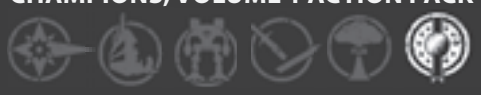
A complete stand-alone game that pits three Clan Hell's Horses 'Mechs against three 'Mechs from House Steiner. Includes two unique pilots, two-sided game mat, dice and rules. Pilots and miniatures are compatible with *MechWarrior: Age of Destruction*.

HOUSE DAVION ACTION PACK

2007

This action pack contains six BattleMechs and six pilots from the powerful House Davion, including the *Atlas* and *Enforcer III*.

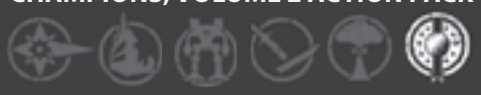
CHAMPIONS, VOLUME 1 ACTION PACK



2007

This set honors the top four players in the 2006 MechWarrior Fellowship Championship. Each of the winners chose a 'Mech and had a pilot card based on them. Set also includes gear cards and a map. Introduces the *Mortis* BattleMech.

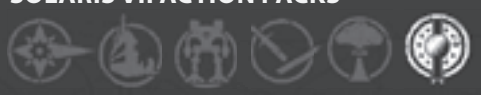
CHAMPIONS, VOLUME 2 ACTION PACK



2007

This set honors the top four players in the 2006 MechWarrior World Championship. Each of the winners chose a 'Mech and had a pilot card based on them. Set also includes gear cards and two maps. Introduces the *Daishi* BattleMech.

SOLARIS VII ACTION PACKS



2007

The four Solaris VII action packs (Light, Medium, Heavy and Assault) introduce a new rule set for more nuanced battles between contestants on the famous Game World. Each set contains four to eight 'Mechs and their unique pilots, plus gear cards, a map and rules for Solaris VII combat.

UNDEAD ACTION PACK

2007

When four of the worst criminals in known space escaped from prison, they banded together as the Four Horsemen and hired themselves out as deadly mercenaries. This set includes four 'Mechs and unique pilots, plus an exclusive map.

WOLF'S DRAGOONS WOLF SPIDERS ACTION PACK

2007

The infamous Wolf Spiders come to the *MechWarrior* game in this set, which contains four BattleMechs and pilots, four scenario cards and an exclusive map. Also included is a special "Historical" pilot card for the legendary Jaime Wolf, founder of Wolf's Dragoons.

WOLF'S DRAGOONS GAMMA REGIMENT ACTION PACK

2007

This action pack brings one of the most storied *BattleTech* units full force into the *MechWarrior* game. Included are two BattleMechs and pilots, infantry, vehicles, squadron cards and contracts, plus an exclusive map.

SOLARIS VII CAMPAIGN PACK

2008

An expansion of the Solaris VII rule set, containing new rules for running stables and tournaments on the Game World. Also contains rally cards to affect the outcome of a match and a campaign tracking worksheet for keeping records of your matches.

METAL MINIATURES

1985-2009

Originally produced by Ral Partha and then Iron Wind Metals, a full line of metal miniatures for the *BattleTech* universe has been in constant release for more than 20 years. More than one thousand individual sculpts have been released, with more than five million units sold across two decades.

LICENSED PRODUCTS

The list of licensed products for *BattleTech* is far beyond the purview of this book. From magazines to comic books, toy lines to plastic model kits, mugs to pins, T-shirts to hats, dossier folders to interactive combat books, dice to mouse pads, checks to large-scale resin sculpts, virtual reality pods to a massive multi-player online game, software game aids to a host of best-selling computer games (see p. 254), *BattleTech* has spread the feel of metal titans storming across alien worlds to a massive list of paraphernalia.

TRANSLATIONS

BattleTech game books and novels have been translated and published in more than a dozen languages worldwide. A host of licensed products—along the lines of those discussed above—have also appeared in numerous countries around the world.

FANDOM

The *BattleTech* community has always been dedicated and connected. First through fan organizations (such as MechForce North America and similar chapters around the world) and then through more than five thousand *BattleTech* websites, the community stays active and interactive. A myriad of fan-generated publications, from fanzines to original fan-generated sourcebooks, have seen print and e-publication, widening the depth of material available for use.