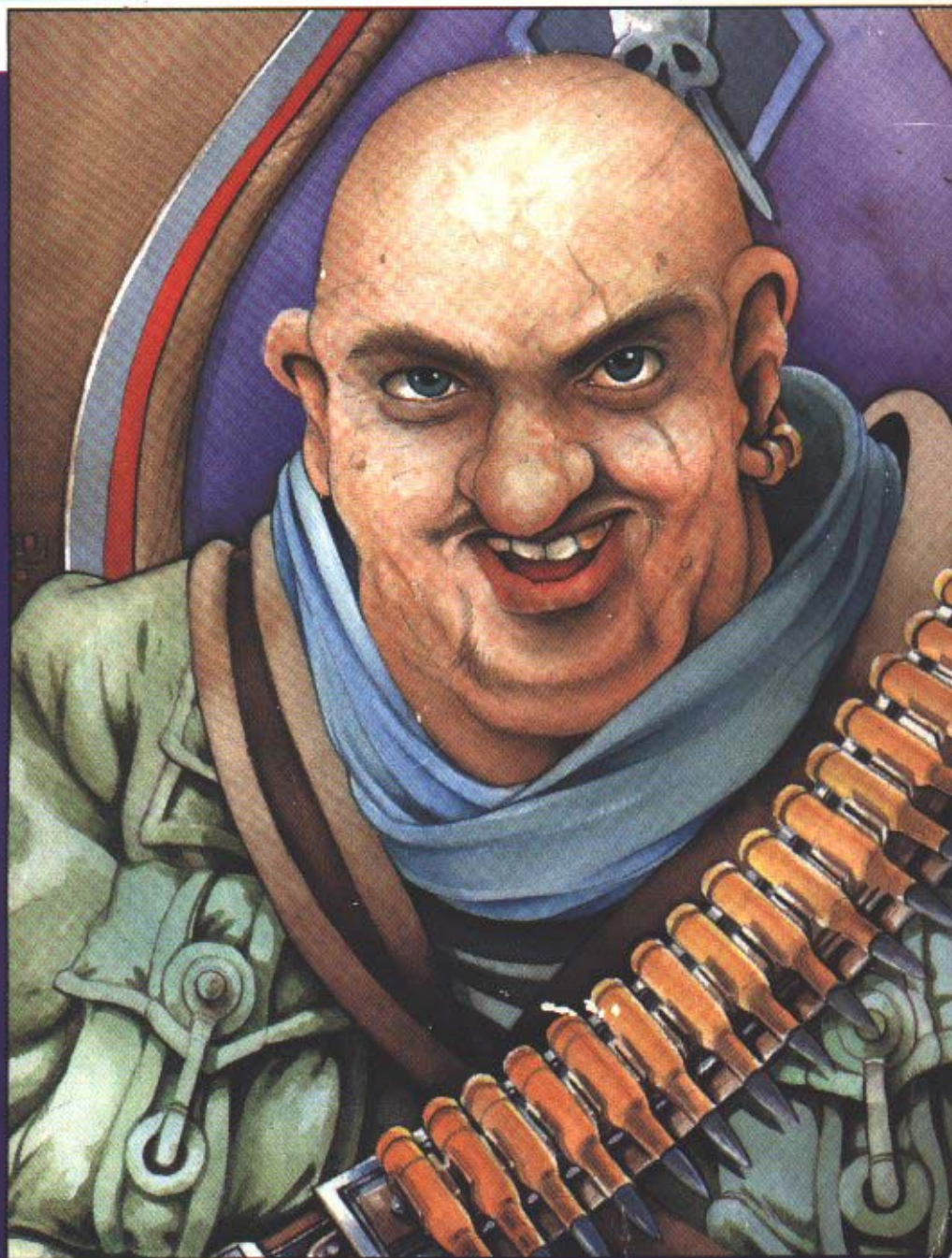


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# SHRAPNEL™

FRAGMENTS FROM THE INNER SPHERE



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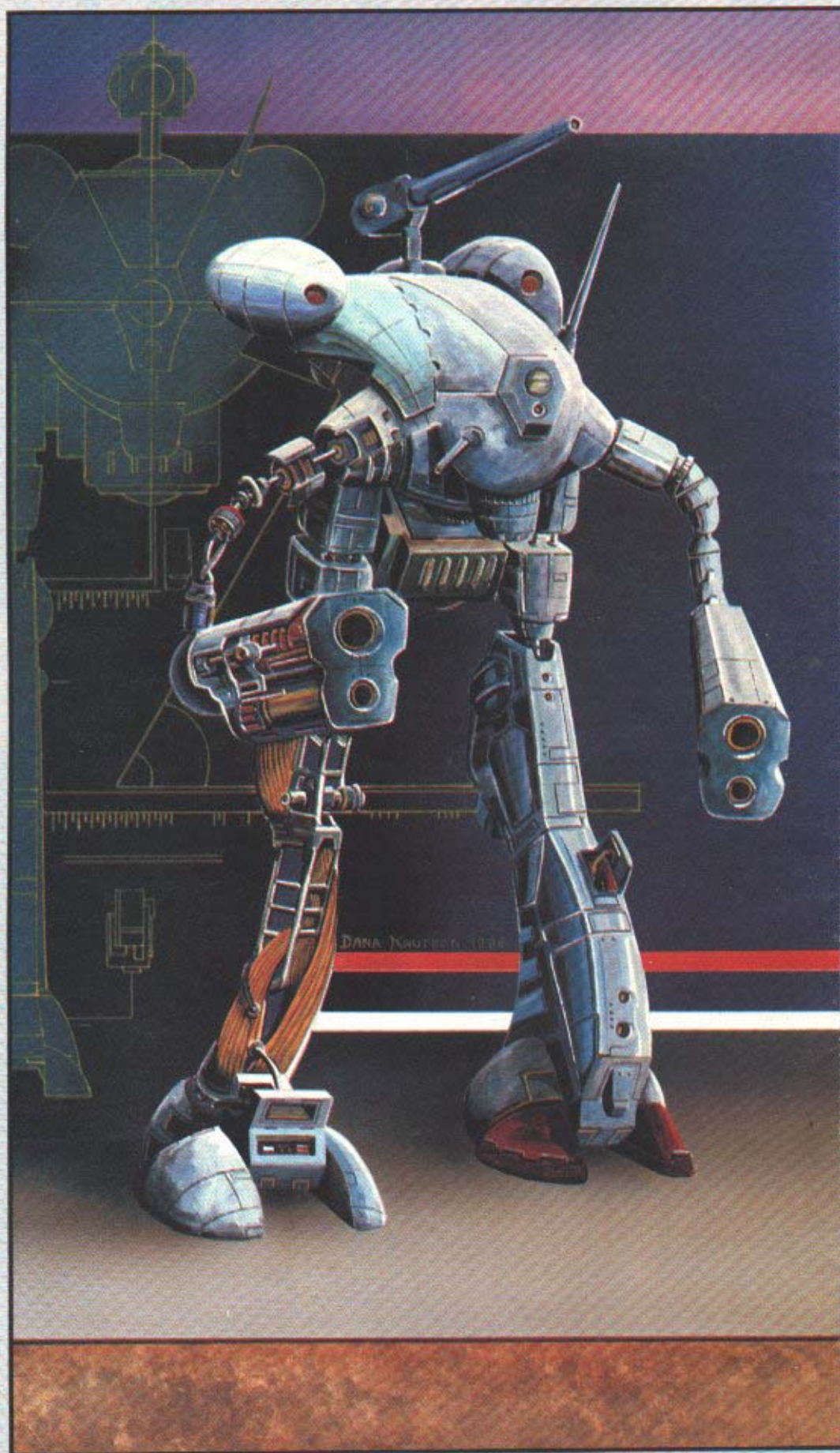


# SHRAPNEL™

FRAGMENTS FROM THE INTERSPHERE













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# INTRODUCTION

—Jordan K. Weisman

**T**he **BattleTech** game, supplements, scenarios, and other related fictional products are all offshoots of an idea that came to me in 1984, when my own imagination was captured by the strong images that the Japanese had created for their animated television series featuring huge, walking battle machines. Though the graphics for these man-like and insect-like monoliths were fantastic, the Japanese storylines still left my Western mind unsatisfied. And so I set off to create my own fictional universe where men used fearsome, 10- or 12-meter tall monsters of destruction called BattleMechs to carry their endless struggles for domination across the stars.

What I wanted was a universe that had a taste of the alien, but that did not contain aliens. As in other science fiction, we produced this effect of strangeness combined with familiarity by changing only one of the basic premises we take for granted in the "real world." In



contemporary society, new technology is automatically superior to what came before. That means a computer that is only five years old soon becomes completely obsolete. It was that premise that we turned on its head for **BattleTech**.

In the 31st century where our game is set, anything built 200 years ago is dramatically superior to anything that can be produced today. Indeed, many machines and equipment can never be replaced, for the technology to construct or even repair them has been lost as a result of hundreds of years of interstellar war. This single change creates huge societal repercussions in the **BattleTech** universe, from a natural tendency toward a scavenger society to more subtle effects such as the huge importance of hereditary rights.

In my view of history, a given political situation usually grows out of several hundred years of decisions and actions by numerous individuals rather than as a result of a single person's influence or power. Thus, I rely on historical events to inspire the backdrops of my fictional universes. For **BattleTech**, I felt that the struggle among the five Great Houses of the Inner Sphere and the ideal of restoring the glory of the Star League era were analogous to the fighting among the Roman city-states after the fall of Rome. This analogy helped us flesh out our history because I wanted all the sides in the fight to be shades of gray, as opposed to a conflict between good and evil.

House Kurita is a good example of what I had in mind. Though the enemies of the Draconis Combine may consider them to be bloodthirsty, war-hungry maniacs, the Kuritans have their own history, background, and motivations as well as their own perception of who they are. The same goes for House Davion, whose rulers may show up as knights in shining armor or conniving double-crossers, depending on who you talk to. We try to see that each book is written from the fictional point of view of someone in the 31st century. That means players must always pay attention to who is providing the information and then add the appropriate grain of salt.

Once I had a good outline of my history, society, and technology, I showed it to Pat Larkin, and the two of us spent considerable time discussing the ideas and how they could be fleshed out. When Pat and I felt

we'd worked out the bugs, he went ahead to produce the excellent history that is included in the basic game. It was that early, original material that inspired you to want to know more and we at FASA to further develop the background of **BattleTech**.

While Pat was busy writing the fiction, I began to design the game system. As a gamer, I have always felt that the best systems were those where you could vividly imagine the action in your head while playing, as though the game were a movie, with the player as hero. To keep from destroying the magic of imagination, I did not want a game with rules so complicated they interfered with the movie playing in our heads.

**BattleTech** started as a simple system, and that helped to draw more and more people into the game. Of course, as players became more experienced, they began to want more and more details. Though we have expanded the rules far beyond anything I ever imagined at the start, players can still stick with simplicity by playing with the basic rules, and choosing for themselves whatever additional rules they want to include in the game.

While producing all the new books and products for the popular **BattleTech** line, we wanted strong visual images that would help players feel that the game universe lives, breathes, and feels real. As a result, our **BattleTech** artists and designers have established new high marks for graphic quality in the adventure game industry. **BattleTech** was also the first line in the industry to include interior color art and it is the first to feature extensive uniform and vehicle painting schemes.

In addition to rules and striking graphics, the richness of the the **BattleTech** fictional background made it a natural for straight, non-gaming fiction. With fans of the game clamoring for more, I called Bill Keith to discuss the idea of writing novels related to the game and he jumped at the chance to work in a longer fictional form. The result was the exciting trilogy of the Gray Death Legion.

This year, with the major figures of the **BattleTech** universe moving their realms again toward another major interstellar war, I felt that the motivations of the major characters in this drama needed to be discussed in a depth that game material cannot hope to

do. Thus was Mike Stackpole's *Warrior Trilogy* conceived. To begin this enormous project, Mike first had to become a world authority on **BattleTech** (excluding us at FASA, of course). Only then could he begin to craft the major plots we had designed, together with hundreds of characters and minor plots that he created, into a tale that would take the Successor States to a new stage of struggle, intrigue, and war.

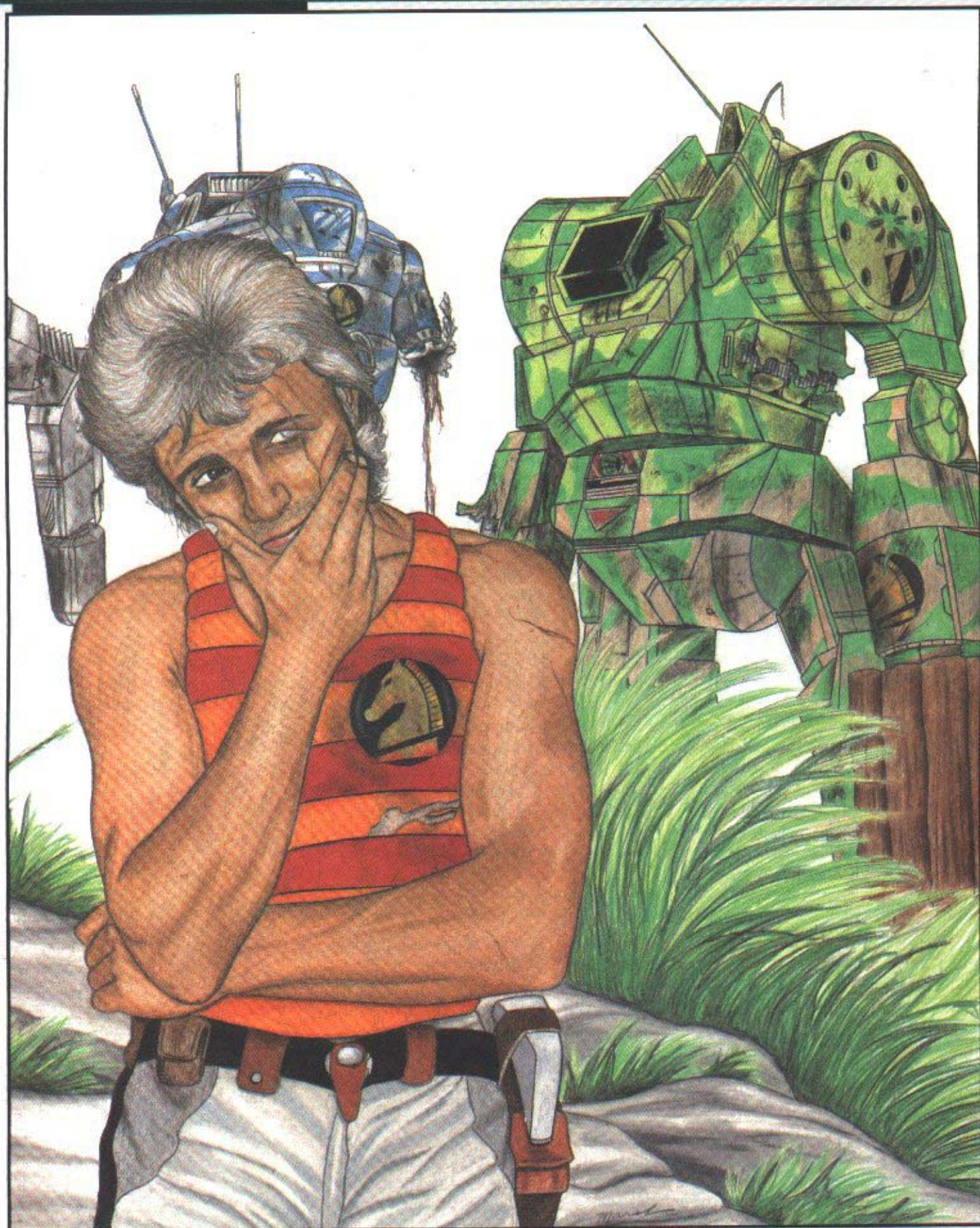
Because we felt that **BattleTech** had spawned a wealth of beautiful and striking graphics, we decided to create **Shrapnel**, which is a collection of **BattleTech** short stories as well as a showcase for dramatic artwork such as the Jim Holloway painting shown here. For me, this painting is **BattleTech**. It portrays the action, the grittiness, and the scale that has made **BattleTech** so popular—and all from the player's perspective. This image gives player the kind of "you are there" identification that makes the game so real and therefore so much fun. As for the stories, all were commissioned specifically for this book, and are meant to show aspects of life in the **BattleTech** universe that have not been covered before.

This book is dedicated to the creative team, both in-house and free-lance, that has worked with me to create a universe that lives and breathes and feels real.

Enjoy.

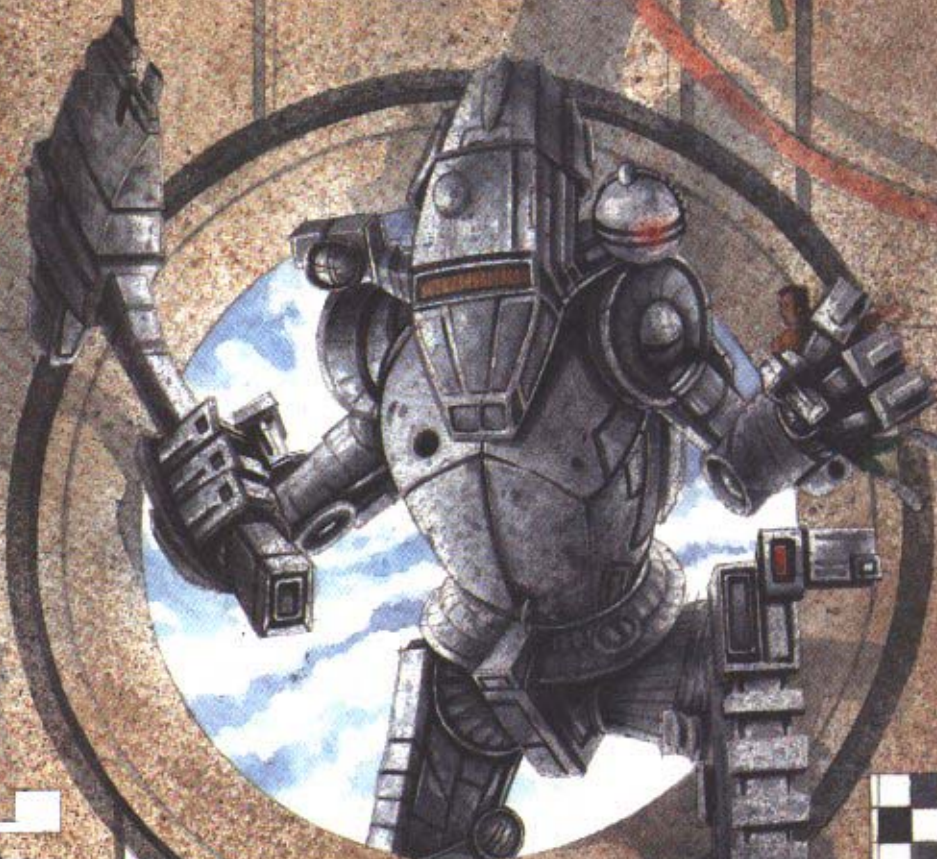
J. K. W.  
Chicago, June 1988







ZONE-FIVE



HIDDEN TREASURES





# OLD MECHWARRIORS NEVER

—Ken St. Andre

**H**ard times on Solaris VII, the gaming world, meant that not much was happening in the planetary arenas. With the galaxy at war, most of the best 'Mechs and all of the best warrior-pilots were offworld, slugging it out for keeps on a hundred different planets. A lot of the 'Mech-businesses had shut down. The city taverns were mostly empty. And the frequency of 'Mech combat in the various arenas of the gaming world was greatly reduced.

But there was still some demand for 'Mech combat and arena time, and as long as there was some demand, any man who could operate the giant war robots, no matter how poorly, need not starve in Xolara City. Also, there were still a few noble houses onplanet, namely the Tandrek, Zelazni, Blackstar, and Oonthrax, that had programs to test or young scions to prove in mechanized battle.

Trev-R came out of Arena headquarters with a 50-credit advance toward his next fight. Considering that his last fight had ended with his 'Mech reduced to a pile of smoking rubble—thank the galactic Spirit for last-second ejection pods—he had not done too bad. Still, it did not seem like enough money to tide him over for a month or more until the next fight unless he could augment it somehow.

He pulled his old plastic cowl up to protect his head from the stinging acid rain that was just starting to fall. Overhead, thick gray clouds blotted out the sky and obscured the tops of the city buildings. Underfoot, the road was half-gravel, half-quagmire. Trev-R lurched into a rapid and peculiar walk as he headed for Morte's Tavern. His left leg pivoted in a half-circle from the hip and planted firmly in the mud ahead. Then he pushed off with his right foot and took a normal half-step. Then the left foot dragged around in another half-circle. And so on. For such a jerky and awkward gait, he made good speed. The left leg, along with certain other parts of the left half of his body, was an old mechanical prosthesis. The servo-motor in the knee had burned out a few months earlier, and he had not been able to afford a replacement.

*Eight years as a Tech and I can't fix my own leg,* he thought disgustedly. *Should have stayed a Tech. I'd have made more money. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to get back into 'Mech fighting as a warrior.* Trev-R's thoughts were as gloomy as the weather. "Just one big score," he always told himself, "and I could leave Solaris. Ten years on this world is eleven years too long!"

As he turned into Rotten Alley, a shortcut between Arena HQ and his tavern, Trev-R's right hand rested on the time-worn handle of his old .45 slug-thrower. It was an ancient gunpowder weapon dating back to 28th-century Terra—a replica of a 20th-century police weapon. It was the only valuable thing he had left, and it had been in his family for centuries. Over the years, Trev-R had taken care of it, even going so far as to handload his own ammunition, back in better times, and it had taken care of him. He had only two bullets left, and he did not want to use them. Rotten Alley was in the toughest part of town, though, and so he knew he needed to be ready for anything.



The local thugs, however, were busy with someone else. Trev-R heard the muffled thud of a body being thrown back against a wall, and a thin voice protesting weakly. He knew he should turn back and walk away before anyone noticed him, but old memories rose unbidden and he lurched on toward the scene of the crime.

Three figures loomed out of the rain as Trev-R approached. One was short, thin, and well-dressed in a blue pseudo-leather jacket and black slacks. Two larger men, covered with the standard gray plastic coats of the lower class had the smaller man backed into a corner. A short knife glittered at the victim's throat while the second robber rummaged through his pockets.

"I've got his cash," said the second man. "Slit his throat and let's go!"

"Don't kill me! I'm a nobleman," squeaked the youth.

"Trev-R pointed the gun in their direction. 'I'd leave quietly if I were you,' he advised them in his most menacing tone.

The alleybashers looked annoyed but not intimidated. Trev-R knew they did not even recognize his weapon. The one with the knife spun his victim around in front of him to act as a shield. The other one started to grope inside his raincoat.

"Blast outa this, grampers!" sneered the knifeman. "Fly yer own spacelanes, and ye might live to see the sun come out." The second thug pulled out a slugthrower.

Trev-R shot them—one bullet apiece. Very fast, very neat. The double explosions of his pistol thundered loudly in the alley. Trev-R's bullet hit the knife-wielder right between the eyes, and blew him backward into the wall. The victim jerked free and threw himself down at the sound of the shots. He took only a slight cut across one cheek from the falling knife.

The second man had started to react. He squeezed off one shot, but the bullet flew wide. Trev-R's shot struck him in the nose, and blew the back of his head off.

Trev-R saw the boy lying in the alley mud like a corpse. "Get up, kid," he said. "We've got to get out of here."

Trev-R did not waste any time. This part of Xolara was as lawless as any frontier town in the galaxy, but one should not go around shooting people down. He checked the closer body first. The dead man had a Mikari-22 in his hand. It was a cheap four-shot

far inferior to Trev-R's antique. He took it anyway, and scooped up the kid's ID and money pouch. That took only about ten seconds. The second corpse had nothing worth taking but the knife. Trev-R left it.

The kid whimpered as he climbed to his feet and tried to stanch the blood flowing from the cut on his cheek. Trev-R ripped a piece of cloth off the shirt of one of the thugs and handed it to him. "Here, kid. Use this." The youth took the cloth and dabbed at his cheek, then did a double take as he got a good look at Trev-R's grizzled face. "I know you," he blurted. "You're Trev-R the MechWarrior. I've seen all your fights, but I never saw anything like what you just did for me. Thank you! Thank you for saving my life!"

Trev-R grabbed the babbling youth by one shoulder and half-carried, half-pushed him down and out of the alley. Trev-R glanced at the ID he had recovered. This kid was Vayil Oonthrax, the only son of Baron Irvxx Oonthrax. He had about 200 C-bills on him. Trev-R thought about keeping the money, but he did not. Handing the whole wad back to the boy, he said, "Wipe yer mouth. We're goin' in here."

Here was Morte's Tavern, one of perhaps twenty such places where a man down on his luck could get a cheap meal and a room in the city of Xolara. Trev-R had called it home for over a year now. He had worked out a deal with Slainte, the tavern-keeper, to do chores around the place in exchange for his nightly meal and verminous bed. He guided Vayil over to a table near the fire and threw his plastic rain-protector onto a rack made for it. Their soggy clothing started to steam in the warmth of the fire as a puddle formed beneath them.

"Don't forget to mop that up, Trev-R," yelled the barkeeper.

There was no one else in the place this evening. Slainte, a white-haired old troll of a man with abnormally developed arms, came over to see if they wanted anything. Trev-R ordered a bottle of Cthonian whiskey for himself and another of R-thing Cola for the kid. Along with drinks, he ordered two plates of grits and pseudoburgers as a meal. "You're buying, kid. O.K.?"

"It's the least I can do." Hero worship gleamed in the young man's blue eyes. "I'm, uh, Vayil Oonthrax, and I'm going to be a MechWarrior someday, too, Mr. Trev-R."

"Just Trev-R." The old man gave a

mocking Arena warrior salute with his artificial left hand. The smooth, cool plastic of the fake hand just did not fit with the grizzled features of the man.

Vayil Oonthrax, nobleman of Solaris VII, could hardly believe his eyes. The character across the table from him could have emerged from any docu-drama or vid-cast about space pirates or MechWarriors. He saw a man of average height, but that was the last average thing about him. His face and skin had that peculiar sun-burned glaze acquired only by exposure to many different suns and some of the hard ultra-violet of space. A mane of bleached white hair grew low on his forehead and was cut in such a way that it padded the top and back of his skull but could never fall into his eyes. His deeply lined face showed an old burn scar running from chin to hairline on the left side. Where his left eye should have been, a white patch, apparently fixed in place with some super adhesive, covered the socket. He squinted out of a pale blue, almost colorless, right eye. When the other man spoke, Vayil noticed that one of his bottom incisors was missing, and the remaining teeth were stained yellowish-brown with age. He wore a ragged blue tunic and trousers, but a good pair of old brown boots.

"Where's yer bodyguard, kid?"

"He's ill with Kentares flu. I didn't think I'd need him just to get over to the 'Mech-stable and back."

"Well, that was yer first mistake. What were you doin' at the 'Mech-stable?"

"'Mech practice," Vayil explained. "I'm in training."

"Ya don't look it, kid," growled Trev-R. "Ya make too many mistakes."

"But I've got to be one!" Desperation entered his voice. "It's what my family does. My father is spending a fortune to make a MechWarrior out of me. If I let him down, he'll kill me!"

"If ya make mistakes in a 'Mech, you'll kill yerself."

The food arrived, and Trev-R dug in. Vayil only played with his.

"Yes, I do make too many mistakes," Vayil admitted, hanging his head, but it popped up again as he had a thought. "Maybe you could help me...be my tutor. I could make it worth your while!"

"Is that a bribe, kid?"

Vayil looked embarrassed.





"Say, yes," laughed Trev-R, "and I'm your man." A new source of income had just appeared to him.

"Yes! Yes! Consider yourself bribed." Vayil bobbed up and down like a happy puppy. "How about 50 C-bills a week?"

As they ate the cheap but nourishing food that Slainte had brought, they found themselves talking about many things. "Why did you save me?" asked Vayil.

"I can't stand muggers," explained Trev-R. "Thirty-odd years ago my brother Bill-R and me were ambushed in an alley on Acter by four thugs who'd have killed us for loose change. They beat us with clubs after taking our few C-bills, beat us into unconsciousness. I woke up in a hospital. My brother never did wake up. The bastards killed him."

"Gosh, Trev-R," blurted the kid. "I'm sorry. But thanks for helping me!"

"Forget it, kid. Yer payin' for dinner. It all works out."

"So when can I have my first lesson?"

"Let's start tonight. D'ya know about the private MechWarrior radio frequencies?"

"No. What do you mean?"

"In combat, we MechWarriors sometimes like to talk to each other. Ya can't do it on a public band, or ya might give your position away, so every warrior has his own special channel. Mine is the third down from 100 Megahertz."

"That would be 99.7 Megahertz," calculated Vayil.

"Ya got that right. Remember it! We might need to talk some day."

"Tell me about some of your adventures," Vayil demanded.

"All right. Just keep the Cthonian whiskey flowin' and I'll talk yer ears off," said Trev-R with a laugh. "I mind me of the time I was with the Second St. Ives Lancers back in ought two. We were pinned down by superior forces on Pinard..."

**S**olaris City is the capital of Solaris VII, and the place that everyone thinks of first when Arena 'Mech combat is mentioned, but there are half a dozen other arena cities on the planet. Though places like Xolara were definitely the minor leagues, they could put on a pretty good fight once in a while. When the rumors started that Xolara would stage a major

'Mech battle between an *Atlas* and a *Warhammer*, the MechWarriors and gamblers of all Solaris took notice.

As everyone knows, the *AS7-D Atlas* is the biggest BattleMech in the galaxy. It is usually reserved for generals like the Draconis Combine's Vasily Cherenkoff. For a place like Xolara to even own one was unprecedented. It went without saying that this was an old, old machine, one that had been destroyed and rebuilt time and again. Still, it might have remained a frontline unit somewhere if Baron Irvxx Oonthrax had not spent a major fortune to buy it for his son Vayil.

Family Oonthrax was one of the newer MechWarrior houses, less than a hundred years old. The family patriarch was McJames Oonthrax, who had bet the family estate against clear title to a *WSP-1A* 'Mech in a high-stakes game of Galaxy Poker. His four novas had been sufficient to beat the red giants and white dwarves of the foe. When he took his 'Mech into battle with Reilly's Armored Cavalry, winning a decoration for bravery, House Oonthrax became part of the minor 'Mech nobility that dominated so many worlds. Since that time, a dozen family members had fought their 'Mech units all over space, some dying, and some doing well. Now Irvxx Oonthrax dreamed of glory for his only son, Vayil, and had beggared his estate to acquire the *Atlas*.

He hoped to get some of that money back in the games on Solaris while waiting to see what 'Mech troop would offer the best commission to his son. He also hoped to start off big with what should look like a notable victory for a rookie warrior. That was why he was in the office of Kandar Kant, Arena Master of Xolara, shelling out a substantial bribe.

Baron Oonthrax counted each thousand C-bill as he placed them in the comptroller's pudgy hand. "...Nine...ten thousand. Now, you're sure you can fix it so that my son can win next month."

"No problem," the Arena Master said with a sly smile. "I'll pit him against my worst fighter, an old sot named Trev-R. He was a pretty good MechWarrior ten years ago, but he's over the hill now. He's lost so many fights, been shot up so many times, that he's more of a cyborg than a man. I think more than half of his body is prosthetics, and half of that doesn't work right. If he was a racehorse, they'd have put him out of his



misery years ago."

"Good, good," gloated the Baron, taking out two Centauran dope-cigars and offering one to the Arena Master. "Still, you say he has a lot of experience, and Vayil has only standard training. Could this old guy get lucky and hurt my boy?"

"No way! Not a chance! Sure, we're gonna put him in a *Warhammer*, which is a pretty tough heavy 'Mech, to make it look good. But it's an old and decrepit *Warhammer*. Half the offensive systems don't work. The main engine is old and half-blown, and delivers barely half power. The armor is paper-thin on the front torso. All your boy has to do is hit him a couple of times to win. Furthermore, I'll be at the arena controls. If it looks like your boy is having any trouble, I'll lower all the barriers to give him a clear field of fire. He can't lose!"

The two men lit up their dope-cigars and shook hands, still laughing. The fix was most definitely in.

**T**rev-R had been waiting for over an hour to see the Arena Master. Kandar Kant had sent for him and then kept him cooling his heels. It did not look good, and Trev-R was wondering if despite the advance he had scored a few weeks ago, he was out of a job. When he was finally allowed into the Arena Master's office, he was ready for bad news.

The smile he got from Kandar Kant was not reassuring. It was the kind of piranha smile that made Trev-R feel that lunch was served and he was it. Trev-R lowered himself into an uncomfortable steel chair and waited for the axe to fall.

"You haven't been doing too well in your last few fights, have you, Trev-R?"

"Been doin' the best I could, sir. I been kinda outmatched, and the equipment isn't very good."

"Don't blame it on the equipment! Maybe it's just too much Cthonian whiskey. I hear you're over at Morte's Tavern every night sucking it up like water. Too many dead brain cells? You know the neurohelmet has got to have a brain to work with if the 'Mech is going to fight well."

"I'm not drinkin' that much," grumbled Trev-R. "Can't afford to on your pay."

"Lost your last five fights in a row," continued Kant. "When you punched out last month, you cost me 50 big C-bills."

"That scrap-heap I was ridin' was done fer anyway," Trev-R argued. "No point in me gettin' killed. Are ya tryin' to say yer lettin' me go?"

"I ought to. I really should," said the Arena Master, but I'm going to give you one more chance—a really good chance to rehabilitate yourself. You made a lot of money for the Arena during your first couple of years here. How would you like to pilot a *Warhammer* in your next fight?"

"A *Warhammer*!" Trev-R could not believe it. Many MechWarriors never got to pilot a heavy 'Mech. He had fought against *Warhammers* 15 years back, and he remembered them as awesome.

"I didn't know Xolara had a *Warhammer*," said Trev-R.

"Just got it last week, sent down from Solaris City. It needs some work before it will be ready to fight, but you used to be a Tech. You and JoeBob work on it, and see if you can't have it ready to fight in two weeks."

"What do I have to fight?"

The Arena Master gave him a shrewd glance. "Does it matter? Well, you have to fight another heavy 'Mech, of course, to make the battle interesting. How'd you like to fight an *Atlas*? I've got it set up for a planet-wide telecast. The Arena should be able to make some pretty good money on this one if we play it right."

"Sheeee-itt!" whined the old fighter. "If I wanted to commit suicide, I could just shoot myself and get it over with. A beat-up *Warhammer* is no match for an *Atlas*, and you know it."

"If you're chicken, I can get Delaney to do it. I just thought I'd give you one more chance," said Kandar. "Besides..."

"Besides what?"

"Besides, you haven't heard the whole deal yet. If you win, you'll get the 20 megaC-bill prize—enough to buy that passage back to Acter that you're always talking about."

Fantasies of escape from Solaris flashed through Trev-R's mind. "But I can't win against an *Atlas*. Nobody could." Reality reared its ugly head.

"Yeah, everyone will think that, so the betting should be pretty heavy against you. I'll lay some third-party bets to make us a lot of money whether you win, lose, or draw. All you'd have to do is hold out for ten minutes or more. And I'll be controlling the movable obstacles in the Arena. I can rig it so that you

get all the protection, and the *Atlas* doesn't get any. Surely, you could fight him to a draw, at least, with me helping you."

"Reckon I could do that," Trev-R agreed. "O.K., I'm your man."

Kandar pulled out a contract for Trev-R to sign, and a blue security pass that would get him into the 'Mech hangar at the edge of town. "Take this down and see JoeBob. You've got some work to do. The fight is in two weeks."

Trev-R signed. What else could he do? He shook Kandar's oily hand, and allowed the Arena Master to thump him on the back. "You won't regret this, Trev-R," the Arena Master said heartily, knowing that he would not live to regret it.

*Damn straight!* thought Trev-R. *I intend to win this fight, one way or another.*

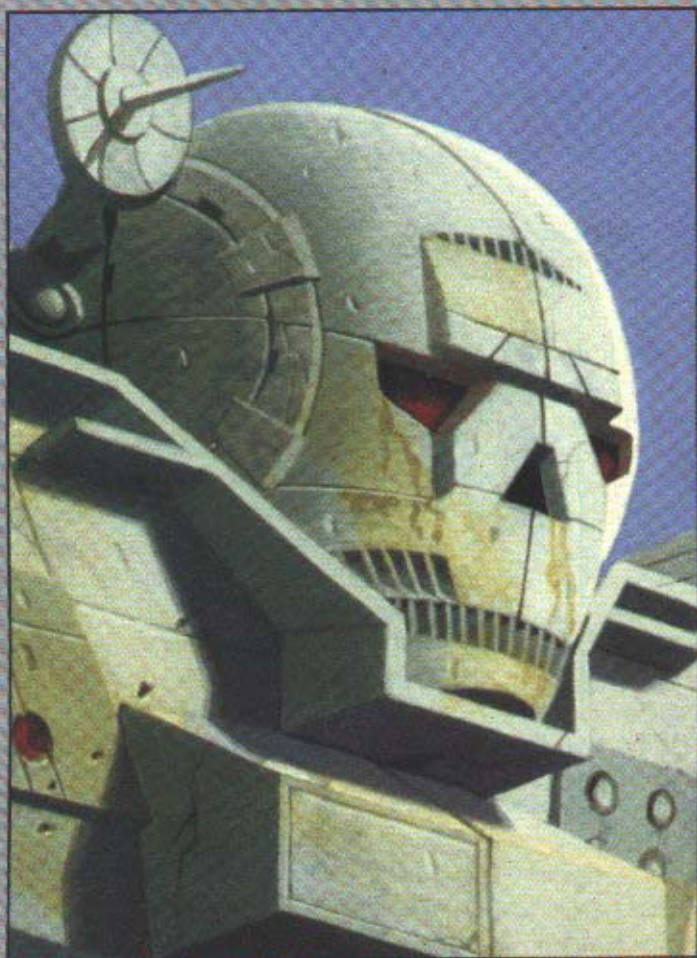
As soon as the old warrior left the office, the Arena Master put through a call to the Oonthrax estate. When the Baron appeared on the screen, Kant gave him the thumbs-up sign and reported that Trev-R had fallen for it.

After talking to Oonthrax, Kant called the arena motor pool and got JoeBob, the head Tech, on the line. He told the grease monkey to cooperate with Trev-R in fixing up the old *Warhammer* they had just acquired, but not to use any first-class material. If the machine guns jammed after a couple of bursts, that would be O.K. If the lasers burned out prematurely, not to worry about it. JoeBob said he got the picture.

**T**rev-R came late to Morte's Tavern that night, wearily dragging his mechanical leg. He found Vayil Oonthrax buying rounds for everyone in the place. MechWarriors, arena workers, merchants, laborers, thugs, prostitutes—the whole gameut of poor Xolara citizenry—crowded round to shake his hand and rub his head for luck, and to each one he gave the drink of their choice. Trev-R shoved his way through the mob, accepted a glass of Cthonian rotgut from his young friend, who had seen him coming, and then dragged the kid off to his private table. Four mean-looking bruisers got up and left when Trev-R gave them the evil eye (and Slainte flourished his neural whip from behind the bar). They grabbed their drinks and mumbled something about making a place for the young hero.



# *THE MAIN EVENT!*



## ATLAS VS. WARHAMMER

# THE ARENA: SOLARIS 7

WHERE THE GREAT ONES WRITHE!



"What's this all about, kid?" Trev-R asked as they settled down.

"Great news, Trev-R," burred the kid. "I'm scheduled for my first arena fight as a MechWarrior in two weeks."

"But yer only 16," argued Trev-R. "You couldn't get a license to fight at that age."

"Maybe you couldn't," bragged the kid, "but I'm a noble of House Oonthrax. A little money in the right place"—he made the sign of the bribe, rubbing thumb and index finger together—"and the record-computers think I'm 18 and have three fights to my credit already. Pretty neat, huh?"

"Damn dumb, I'd say," growled Trev-R.

"What's the matter, Trev-R? Can't get any more fights of your own? I thought you'd be proud of me."

"Yer not ready, kid. Ya need at least two more years of training afore I'd let ya in a 'Mech for real."

"Ah, Trev-R, I'm good enough. You're just jealous."

"Shows what you know, kid. I've got another fight coming up in two weeks also. Ya won't see much of me between now and then. My 'Mech needs repairs."

"Well, then," said Vayil. "That's great! Maybe we'll see each other at the arena! I know you're going to be impressed, Trev-R. Won't you wish me luck like everyone else here has? Not that I'll need it, of course."

A crooked smile appeared on the old warrior's face. "Yer a real fire-eater, Vayil, me boy, and I do wish you the best of luck."

Bonnie, the barmaid, pushed through the crowd and plunked down two bottles—one of Cthonian and the other of R-thing Cola. "Compliments of the house," she smiled. "And, kid, if you're not too busy, I'd like to extend my personal congratulations a little later." She gave him a broad wink and a leer as Vayil's fair skin turned beet-red. Then she sashayed away with an exaggerated wiggle.

A few minutes later, Vayil left to talk to other wellwishers. Trev-R settled down to do some serious drinking.

Half a dozen Mech hangars, big, square, ugly gray buildings of Solaris mud-bricks and corrugated aluminum, stood at the edge of town beyond the arena. Trev-R had gotten permission from old Fred McBru, the custodian, to sleep on the premises in the rec room at the rear of the heavy 'Mech hangar. McBru had agreed to it when Trev-R told him that he was flat broke and could not afford to stay in town at Morte's Tavern anymore. Besides, it was far too walk every morning and every night, and Trev-R needed to spend most of his days in the hangar working on his 'Mech.

The WHM-6R had its own hangar, which was also filled with scaffolding and gantries. Patches of gray steel showed through the flaking bronze paint on the armor. An ugly black laser scorch marred the front torso engine mounting. Broken myomer muscle cable showed where the left-arm PPC had been blown off. Dings, dents, scorches, and bullet holes covered most of the body, and the head unit, where the pilot rode, looked like it had been smashed in with a club. Just getting the head fixed was going to be a major job. Trev-R put JoeBob to work on replacing the head armor and internal controls, while he and a team of welders tried to reattach the broken PPC. The job took three days of hard work.

It seemed like every time he turned around, JoeBob was feeding him some kind of bad news. The bit that really bothered Trev-R was about the ejector mechanism. It did not work, and it would take more than a month to get a new one to replace it. Worse, when Trev-R checked, Kandar Kant refused to authorize the expense. The Arena Master swore at Trev-R and told him that he was not going to have some chicken-hearted warrior punching out if he got scared in the big fight. Trev-R began to feel that the deck might be even more stacked against him than he had anticipated.

Trev-R used all of his technical expertise to restore the *Warhammer*.

Cooperation and enthusiasm for the job from JoeBob and the other Techs seemed perfunctory at best, but they managed to affix new ceramic armor and smooth out the dents. Three days before the fight, the *Warhammer* was supposedly ready. Trev-R planned to make his own inspection after hours. He had pretended to

quit early that day, then sat down to drink a whole bottle of Cthonian. "What a sot!" said JoeBob as he ambled by the table and saw Trev-R leaning back in his chair and snoring.

"Poor guy," said another Tech named Klyde. "He probably knows he doesn't have a chance against that *Atlas*. With the way you've sabotaged his 'Mech, he'll be lucky to last three minutes."

"Oh, the Boss will keep him alive and make it look like a good fight for a little while at least. But he's as good as dead."

"That may be why he's getting drunk. He's looked pretty sharp the last few days. He may know he doesn't have a chance."

The two men turned out the lights and left Trev-R snoring. When he was sure they were really gone, Trev stopped his act and sat up. It was a real Cthonian whiskey bottle, but the contents had been 90 percent R-thing Cola, with just enough booze in it to give his breath the right smell.

Trev-R scrambled up the scaffolding with a flashlight and conducted a quick inspection. That's when he learned that the crystals in his medium lasers had hairline cracks and would probably blow the first time he tried to use them. That's when he learned that half of his machine gun ammunition was blanks instead of the high-explosive armor-piercing shells it should have been. That's when he found the damaged firing pin that would jam his left gun and that he was able to replace on the spot. That's when he found the premature timing mechanism in three of his short-range missiles. That's when he knew he had been set up to die. And that's when Trev-R decided not to go along with this foul scheme, even if it meant he'd have to cheat.

Trev-R did not get much sleep that night, or the next, and only about four hours on the night before the battle. When the big morning came, however, he was ready, and he had a plan. Perhaps not a great plan, but any plan was better than nothing.

Then, too, there was that smuggler, Toron Jones, who had agreed to get Trev-R offplanet in a hurry if he lived through the fight. And the payroll clerk who had been bribed to give him his "winnings" quickly if, indeed, he should win.



Vayil spent most of the days of his two weeks before the fight strapped into his battle couch inside the great spherical head of his mighty new 'Mech. His father was spending a fortune to see that his armament was as good as it could be. Extra armor had been welded onto every vulnerable spot, especially the pilot's quarters. Ammunition was all new, too, and he had a neurohelmet and heat-insulation vest fresh from the factory. Vayil was proud to know that he had the best money could buy. Total expenses: five million C-bills for the 'Mech and another two hundred thousand in refurbishing.

His 'Mech was a grim-looking monster of gray titanium steel, more humanoid than most of the BattleMechs around. The word massive described every part of it, from the powerful chest to the sturdy arms and legs. His weapons included a Class 20 autocannon, four medium lasers, and two short-range missile systems capable of firing six missiles each. Normally, the *Atlas* would carry a long-range missile system as well, but it had been replaced as unnecessary for arena combat. The whole arena was only 300 meters on a side.

Vayil practiced diligently. As his mind attuned to the computers within the 'Mech, his movements got less clumsy, more skillful. By the day before the fight, he could bring his 'Mech into an all-out running charge within 100 meters. He could get up from a prone position in just under a minute. He could track a 240-degree arc with his autocannon, and hit a Solaris gullbird with his lasers at 90 meters. He felt ready.

When he woke up on the big day, he found that a card had been delivered during the night. He almost did not open it, until he noticed a number—99.7—in parenthesis behind his name.

He knew that his opponent was supposed to be some old sot that the Arena had hired. He did not know that it was Trev-R until the announcer mentioned it in the opening ceremonies.

Every arena on Solaris is unique. They take the form of jungles, caverns, gigantic buildings, or even more exotic settings. The arena at Xolara was a huge, steel-walled square. The concrete floor concealed several dozen titanium walls, posts, and blocks. These obstruc-

tions could be raised and lowered by radio-control. Sometimes the controls were made available to the MechWarriors in their battle machines, and sometimes not. Each warrior would control some of the barriers, but not all. They could be overridden by the Arena Master in his control booth, though, of course, he would never do that...unless he had something to gain.

The weather on Solaris is almost always dismal—high winds, acid rain, air pollution—but the day of the big fight dawned bright and clear. Two preliminary matches warmed up the crowd for the main event. Four *SDR-5V Spiders* engaged in a free-for-all melee until only one was left standing. Then two *VLK-QA Valkyries* took on one *ENF-4R Enforcer*, a match the *Enforcer* won, but only barely. The radio-controlled arena barriers had played a big part in keeping the *Enforcer* alive.

No crowd filled the arena stands. Instead, they filled bars and vid-theaters all over the planet. Scores of hovering telecameras broadcast the action, first to the arena control room where the view was edited and enhanced on a ten-minute delay by vid-engineers. Sound effects—applause, music, explosions, whistles, screams, laughter—were dubbed in by the studio. The fight “producers” monitored and edited the radio chatter of the MechWarriors to provide maximum drama. It was big entertainment and almost as good as a fight from Solaris City.

Trev-R and his *Warhammer* came into the arena first from the west. His 'Mech had been repainted the day before with diamond-glint bronze paint and an image of his grizzled one-eyed face had been stenciled on the left shoulder. The 'Mech towered a full ten meters above the concrete arena floor, and looked impressive. Only Trev-R knew that more than half of his armament was worthless.

He could say one thing for the arena announcer, though. In his introduction, he built up Trev-R to sound like some epic hero. After mentioning Trev-R's experience at the battle of Pinard, the commentator went on to credit him with six other fights and a couple of medals that he had never won. An idealized picture of Trev-R as he had looked about ten years earlier was broadcast around the world, and he heard a computer simulation of himself give a little speech



about the nobility of 'Mech combat in the arenas. The audience loved it. Trev-R listened with amazement and a bit of disgust. "The thicker you spread it, Kandar, the harder you'll find it to eat," he muttered.

Then the *Atlas* entered from the east, a hulking gray machine three meters taller and thirty tons heavier than Trev-R's 'Mech. Trev-R had known for a couple of days now that Vayil would be inside it, though he had been hoping he would not. The announcer gave the boy an equally great buildup. The picture broadcast to the world showed a smiling young man, who was supposedly 18, but looked younger. He had yellow-gold hair cut short in fashionable MechWarrior style. Slim and classically handsome, he posed for the cameras in a crisp military salute. The announcer mentioned Vayil's three fictional battles in other arenas, and said that this was young pilot to watch. By the time the man finished his phony story about the young noble from the House of Oonthrax, it sounded like this would be a real David and Goliath battle. Never mind that David's 'Mech was the real Goliath on the battlefield.

Trev-R and Vayil faced off across the arena. Trev-R heard the kid break radio silence first, his voice tinny and full of static. "Trev-R," Vayil said urgently. "I didn't know it was going to be you."

"Listen, kid," replied Trev-R on the radio, starting to walk in four-meter strides across the arena. "You do yer best, and don't worry about me. Of course, if ya had a lick of sense, ya could give up now before ya get hurt."

The studio engineer keyed in a great wave of canned laughter at that point, drowning out the radio voices. All over Solaris people laughed along. To have the old guy bluff the kid was a real hoot.

The *Atlas* also lurched into motion. For



a moment, it looked like a scene from an old holo-drama of two grim gunfighters stalking each other. The *Warhammer* fired first, its right PPC spitting lightning. Energy crackled off the bulky hip structure of the gray leviathan and ceramic armor bubbled and flew off in great steaming chunks. The arena thundered to the sound of man-made lightning until heat buildup in his weapon forced Trev-R to cut it off. A black scorch marred the gray metal finish of the *Atlas*, but no serious damage had been done.

"Welcome to the wonderful world of 'Mech combat, kid!" sneered Trev-R.

"Hey!" yelled Vayil into his radio. "You're shooting at me." It began to sink in that this was a real fight.

Trev-R saw a laser flash from the *Atlas*, and the computer informed him of a hit to his knee. Before the searing energy could burn through the *Warhammer*'s armor, Trev-R activated a great titanium-steel wall

that rose suddenly out of the concrete directly before the *Atlas*. The laser hit the mirrored surface and splashed for an instant like water before Vayil could deactivate it.

The announcer made some comment about the superior experience of the old warrior saving him in that situation, and went on to say that the best thing Vayil could do in his mighty *Atlas* would be try to close the range so that his autocannon could come into play.

Temporarily screened from view by the wall he had erected, Trev-R kicked his 'Mech into a run at a 45-degree angle to Vayil's right. The *Atlas*'s autocannon comprised its massive left arm, but the armament on its right side was considerably lighter. He hoped to surprise the kid with a salvo of missiles from his weak side.

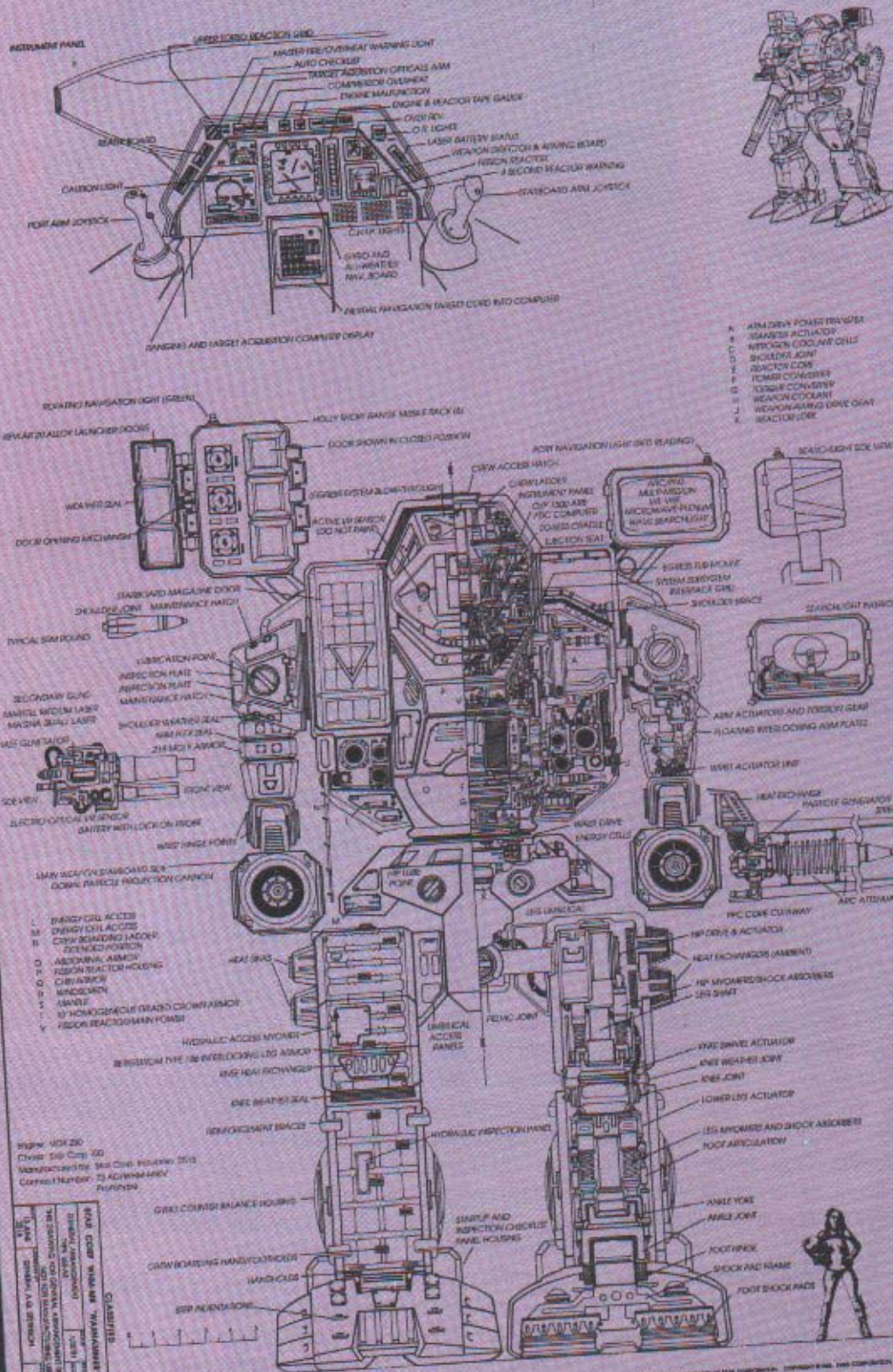
A dozen steel poles sprang up all around Trev-R's 'Mech. "Argh, kid, yer gettin' the hang of it," said Trev-R as the *Warhammer*'s massive leg struck a post

and ripped it from the concrete. The blow clanged through the arena and threw the 'Mech off balance. With its stride disrupted, the 'Mech started to fall, but Trev-R knew what to do. He bent both knees and extended the 'Mech's right and left PPC cannons at a 45-degree angle to catch himself as the huge machine tottered forward. He came to rest in a kneeling position and began to rise again as the *Atlas* emerged from the left side of the obscuring wall.

The *Atlas*'s four lasers began to pulse with demonic energy, but Vayil fired high. One of his lasers struck the heavy spotlight mounted on the *Warhammer*'s left shoulder and melted the thick glass. Trev-R fired his medium lasers, scorching away at the *Atlas*'s heavy leg armor. Superheated ceramics boiled away in steam, but the heavy steel underneath was not yet damaged. Then, just when it looked like the lasers would punch through and possibly tear a



## BATTLETECH: WARHAMMER





hole in the *Atlas's* left leg, they exploded. They had overheated, and the lasing crystals, flawed as they were, had shattered. Trev-R's lasers blinked off.

In the fishhead cockpit of the *Warhammer*, Trev-R sweated like a fountain as the heat rose and he tried to figure out his next strategy. He straightened the torso, angled it at 45 degrees to reduce the size of the target, and got to his feet. At the same time, he lowered the obstacle that he had put up, and activated another that was closer to him and would cut off Vayil's lasers. A few seconds later, the tremendous ringing of autocannon shells slamming into the barrier told Trev-R that Vayil had changed his strategy. That wall would not last long. Trev-R got moving and carefully picked his way around and over the obstacles that Vayil had thrown up.

One thing had shown up in the battle so far—Trev-R was the more accurate shot, and that was because he trusted his computers more. Inside the 'Mech cockpits where the fighters were strapped into place, the battle computers put various displays up on the screen to help the pilots choose their tactics. The pilot who could make best use of this data was always most accurate. Though Vayil had been practicing with the *Atlas* for two weeks, and Trev-R had hardly practiced at all, a lifetime of piloting so many different 'Mech types allowed Trev-R to sink deeper into machine-mode, and it showed in his shooting.

Now both 'Mechs held their fire while closing on one another. The *Atlas* took five-meter steps and moved straight for the *Warhammer*. Trev-R, on the other hand, pushed his machine into a run covering six meters to the stride. He angled first to the right, then to the left in a zigzag pattern.

Trev-R saw the *Atlas* launch a volley of missiles. "Incoming," reported Trev-R's computer. "Projection: three hits out of six."

Trev-R knew he could probably take three hits, but he did not want to. He activated all arena barriers, including one that was close to his position, and froze. Four missiles exploded on contact with various barriers. Two threaded the needle and detonated against the head of the *Warhammer*.

The sensors went out in a wash of flame, temporarily overloaded. A great cloud of heat and noise enveloped Trev-R, and he prayed the head armor could take it.

Otherwise, he was a dead man. When the explosion subsided, the head unit of Trev-R's 'Mech had been seared badly, but the inner armor had held and Trev-R still lived. Trev-R had closed his eye before the flash. With the additional protection of combat goggles, he was not blinded. There was a slight ringing in his ears, but the huge neurohelmet had protected him from the sound.

"Visual scanners knocked out," reported the computer. "Switching to radar."

The announcer was ecstatic. Six explosions had rocked the arena and two were direct hits. He was sure that Kid Oonthrax, as he was now calling Vayil, had the advantage, and it was only a matter of time.

"Trev-R! Trev-R...Are you O.K.?" The kid's tinny voice cut through the ringing in his ears.

"It'll take more than that, kid," Trev-R snarled.

With all his barriers now up, Trev-R had no idea exactly where the *Atlas* was. He edged around the corner of one wall and then another, moving toward the *Atlas's* last known position.

His radar spotted the *Atlas* at the same time that Vayil made visual contact with him. "Damn! Behind me!" Trev-R cursed and accelerated his 'Mech. Incandescent beams began to melt armor off four different spots on the back torso. One burst through and hit an ammunition cache for one of the machine guns. The fact that more than half the ammo was blanks reduced the force of the explosion, but it still sent the *Warhammer* lurching forward. Fortunately, Trev-R could turn a barrier corner. In two steps, Trev-R had taken his machine around it.

"Not bad, kid," Trev-R muttered.

In the control booth, Kandar Kant and Baron Irvxx Oonthrax monitored the systems of both 'Mechs. "Trev-R's almost out of it," said the Arena Master. "His medium lasers are gone, and so is one gun. He has lost visual display, and the internal heat must be making him groggy. Time now for the coup de grace," and he hit the switch that overrode all arena barriers and lowered them back into the concrete.

When the barriers went down, there were only 100 meters between the two 'Mechs, with the *Atlas* closing rapidly. Vayil opened up with everything except his last flight of missiles. He squeezed off shot after shot from his autocannon in bursts of five.

Though he had Trev-R dead in his sights, the heavy explosives consistently hit to Trev-R's left. Trev-R moved his 'Mech in a circle to his right, and Vayil kept missing.

Trev-R circled right and shot back with everything he had. The three remaining machine guns chattered away, most of the slugs going wide as he sprayed in an arc 60 degrees in front of his 'Mech. The few that hit bounced like peas off the side of an elephant. The guns jammed and quit firing in seconds, as he had expected. His two small lasers were alternately blazing with incandescent heat, but without visuals, he could not focus them tightly enough to do any real harm. Small pieces of armor vaporized on the approaching leviathan, but the wounds were not very deep and he could not keep them in the same spot. His left-hand PPC was blasting out its electrical fury, but the *Atlas* moved inside its range, and Trev-R could not hit. As for his right-hand PPC, he kept it out of the fight, shielding it with the body of the 'Mech, which he angled back and forth.

"Trev-R! Trev-R!" yelled the kid into his radio mike. "I'm going to try to take you alive, old pal. Don't worry!"

"What a generous offer!" crowed the announcer to his worldwide audience.

"That's right nice of ya, kid," gasped Trev-R. He certainly sounded like a dying man. "But I expect to win this fight. Switch to my private frequency—there's something you ought to know."

"That's the true warrior spirit!" howled the sports announcer to audiences around the world. Those who had bet on the *Atlas* were already beginning to demand that the losers pay up. Those who had bet on the *Warhammer* were griping about never again letting long odds seduce them into betting on an underdog.

All of the *Atlas's* firepower coalesced on the elbow joint of Trev-R's one working PPC. For a few seconds, that arm was wreathed in fire as lasers and cannon shells careened off it in thundering fury. Then the ceramic armor evaporated in the hellish heat and the metal arm fragmented into chunks of molten and broken steel. For an instant, the myomer muscles and the titanium bonework of the arm were visible, then they ruptured in a cascade of high-voltage sparks. The joint shattered and Trev-R's weapon went flying backward.

Around Solaris, there went up a great





cheer from the *Atlas* fans.

Trev-R knew the time had come to activate his last desperate plan. He switched to his private frequency, hoping that Vayil was listening.

Vayil quit firing and raised the *Atlas*'s massive left arm for a punch that should knock the *Warhammer* off its feet.

Trev-R figured the arena personnel would not be able to pinpoint his new ultra-high radio frequency within the few seconds he needed. "Listen up, kid. Your life depends on it," he said. "A few days ago, I found out that this fight was rigged in your favor, and that I wasn't meant to survive. I don't have a working ejection pod. So, two nights ago, I sneaked into the hangar where your *Atlas* was being kept and planted a radio-controlled bomb made from some of my missile explosives there in the command center. Very soon now, I'm going to activate it and blow the head off your 'Mech. If you're still inside, you'll be dead. Get out, and get out quick."

"You couldn't have!" gasped Vayil. "Arena security would have kept you away from my 'Mech!'"

"Arena security is lousy, kid, just like their equipment. To prove what I'm sayin', I also recalibrated the sights on yer autocannon so ya wouldn't be able to hit me with it. Believe me, kid, yer life depends on it. Punch out real quick now."

"You're bluffing!" Vayil screamed. "You love to bluff—you told me yourself. You think I'll back out and you can win. It won't work, Trev-R. This is my fight! I earned it! Damn you, Trev-R! You can't frighten me away like a boy!"

Trev-R could hear the fear and desperation in Vayil's voice. At that moment, the two 'Mechs stood almost toe to toe with the *Atlas* poised for a punch that would knock the smaller 'Mech on its back. Trev-R had his right-hand PPC angled upward so that its shots would come right up into the chin of the *Atlas*. He hoped that would disguise what was going to happen.

"Last chance, Vayil! Punch out, kid! Punch OUT!"

"No! Damn you! No! I don't..."

"I figgered ya were too dumb to know what's good fer ya," said Trev-R. "That's why I re-wired yer ejection mechanism, too. Ya will thank me fer this later, kid." Trev-R pulled the trigger for the PPC with one hand







and pushed the button to eject Vayil with the other. The *Atlas* froze in midpunch as its whole enormous body was covered with the dancing fury of Trev-R's particle beam at point-blank range. The top of the 'Mech's head blew off and an ejection capsule shot 30 meters into the air, deploying a parachute at the height of its arc. Then Trev-R pushed the second button, and the bomb he had fabricated out of all the explosives that should have gone into his missiles detonated with devastating effect. The rest of the *Atlas*'s head exploded in a great ball of red flame as heavy metallic plates went flying in all directions.

Viewers all over the planet were stunned as the mighty *Atlas*, now headless, fell over backward.

"How on Solaris did Trev-R do that?" blurted the announcer. "I don't believe it. Kid Oonthrax had him at his mercy, and he punched out. I don't believe it! The *Atlas* is down and out! The *Warhammer* wins! The *Warhammer* wins!"

In the arena control booth, Baron Oonthrax and Kandar Kant sat gasping at each other like beached fish. "You said he couldn't lose!" croaked the Baron. "I bet everything on this fight. I'm ruined."

"Your cowardly son punched out," retorted the Arena Master. "How could I figure on that? It's all his fault! I bet as much as you did. I'm ruined, too."

They sat there staring at each other with as much hate as disbelief.

Trev-R's *Warhammer* stood above its fallen foe for a moment, then slowly turned and began to trudge toward the exit. Trev-R knew what would happen next. He would dodge the publicity people, collect his reward, and be offplanet before sundown. His life wouldn't be worth an iron slug on Solaris once they figured out what he had done.

"I'm sorry, kid," he mumbled to himself, "but you don't get to be an old MechWarrior by losin' the big ones."

"Yeah, I'm sorry, but if ya meet me at Jones's DropShip like I asked in the note I sent, I'll make it up to ya. My old outfit will take ya on if I recommend ya, and with them, ya can learn to be a real MechWarrior."









# BLACK CATS CROSS YOUR PATH

—Tara Gallagher & James Lanigan

*Falstaff sweats to death  
And lards the lean earth as he walks along*  
—Henry IV

**C**onsidering there's always a war on somewhere, things have been pretty quiet these days. It's nice to have a little rest time. Time to train some new recruits and to work out a few new ideas, but only the battlefield can really keep you sharp. "Big Bill Flynn," I say to myself, "A man like you has got to keep fighting, or he's going to turn into just another barroom mariner, always looking for a wedding guest to regale with a story." And there's nothing wrong with that, except that you've got to keep coming up with new stories.

Every year should bring new tales, and last year was no exception. For instance, we got a job to protect Lawrence, this four-bit semi-industrial town in the middle of nowhere. Some House jerk had a bee in his neurohelmet about one of those Star League parts depots being in or near the town. The town was expecting a raid.

I'm not saying the Black Cats are intolerably special, although maybe we are, but there just aren't many mercenary infantry units. The life expectancy is short. People hire you, then expect you to be dead when payday comes. Mostly, though, rich guys would rather hire a few nice-looking 'Mechs than a bunch of normal-size people. It makes them feel important. So we Black Cats mostly get jobs defending little cities. The nice thing is, these are people whose governments won't protect them with so-called Real Troops, and they're happy to see us.

Any infantry unit that lasts more than a year has to find creative ways to operate, to keep from going buggy. So Boots, my boss Sergeant Elizabeth Hill, is always trying newer and odder ways to peel 'Mechs. Some folks say this means she is already buggy, but it's just a way of keeping us together. They don't call her "Boot Hill" for nothing, you know. She's been boss for nearly two years, longer than most infantry units last.

One of the nice things about being an infantry unit—maybe the only nice thing—is that the tinker boys—the 'Mech drivers—don't take you seriously. So, if you're a good infantry unit, you prove them wrong in fun and interesting ways. They're *so* humiliated. 'Tis sport, indeed, to see the engineer hoisted on his own petard.

And in Lawrence we made those 'Mechs look petarded.

The raid did, indeed, show up. And the locals went crazy. Almost from the second those DropShips had been launched, the word was around town: "Widows! The Black Widows!"

I'll admit that made my stomach disappear for a few seconds, until Boots snapped me back to the real world, whichever one it was.

"If those are the Black Widow Company, I'm Siriwan Kurita," she announced. We were going to send a few Cats over for a look-see, but our employers were not happy with our calm manner in the face of what they thought would be particularly slow, agonizing death and destruction of their world.







This is how Boots, Lou Lingg, my little self, and a few new guys and local cops ended up creeping through the woods on a nasty cold night, playing spies to look like we were earning our C-bills. A little acting is part of the job. Hell, a lot of acting, if you count looking nonchalant while running around the feet of sixty tons of tippy metal. Freezing our triggers off is part of the job, too, but not for no reason. I was just about to say so, when we reached the camp.

"Ill met by moonlight, proud Titans," I said instead.

"Wannabees," said Boots. "We just dragged through nature's own cryonics lab for a bunch of Widow Wannabees."

She explained to the locals that this group of no-talents had apparently painted spiders on their 'Mechs, either to confuse people and strike fear in their hearts, or because they thought it would be really neat to be like the Widows.

The Widow Company would have wept, or more likely shot them all, had they seen those clowns. There was only one company and some infantry that looked like drek. I hate dealing with guys like that. No challenge, no glory. They set up on the edge of town (we had walked nine clicks out of the way, thanks to the local city boys' sense of direction), obviously expecting to march in while the populace turned tail and fled. I like surprise parties.

The next day, we reviewed probable routes they would take into the city, and set up to meet them. The infantry is at an advantage in a city, especially if we know our way around and the enemy don't. Small size works to a distinct advantage when you can squeeze into a spot and trap a big hulk.

The big galoots did not appear in town that entire day. Boots said it was possible they were waiting for dark, but it was more likely they had put themselves in such an obvious location because they were hoping the townspeople would simply evacuate. Of course, it was possible they were simply real stupid and didn't have a clue.

The next day, they finally got off their big cans, into their bigger cans, and headed into town. We met them at the edge of town, and took some potshots at them like any hometown militia in a sweat. Once we had their attention, Boots ordered a retreat and dispersed the squad into town.

Boots and I—well, Boots actually—had

decided to lure some 'Mechs into this large industrial bakery. It was a maze of heavy machinery, vats, and conveyer belts, a good place to trap a 'Mech while it tried to crunch its way out. Let them eat cake, we said.

We had two fire teams in the bakery, when Boots gets this very friendly look on her face. "Bill," she says, "How would you like to be the hero this afternoon?"

Well, I'd been the hero for Boots before, and it wasn't all it was cracked up to be. But she's the top kick in this outfit, so there's no odds in arguing. She sees the look on my face and says, "Have I ever shown you less than a great time?"

I decided not to answer that, and found myself leading my fire team out the back door of the bakery. The 'Mechs had pushed past the bakery and were strolling into town. We worked our way from doorway to doorway until we were about 50 meters from two clumsy-looking buckets of bolts.

"Hi, girls," I said, as we squeezed a few rockets at their tin behinds. We knew it wouldn't hurt them much. We just wanted their attention. We got it. They turned around, and in the words of the poet, all hell broke loose.

'Mechs don't see infantrymen too well, thank god, but I would have given my kingdom, if I had one, for a horse. We were dodging and ducking and beating our feet back to the bakery. All I could think of was that Boots's surprise had better be good.

We hit the door about four kilometers slower than the speed of light, with these two 50-ton soup cans following just as fast as they could. As soon as we broke through, Boots waved us off to the right. The 'Mechs broke clean through the wall about two heartbeats after we got out of their way. I found some cover, then poked my head up.

The two 'Mechs were skating across the floor, trying to grab the walls with their cannons. They did some spins, a nice pirouette, crashed over and under a conveyor belt—one landing on top of the other—and slid on their bellies into a vat of lard. A geyser of lard poured over the 'Mechs.

Boots crawled up next to me.

"Nice touch," I told her. "Can we leave now?"

"Got a match, sailor?" she said, as she lifted her flame thrower. The lard burned beautifully. It smelled like all the messhalls in the galaxy at one shot. "Now," she said. "I



# Got a Match , Sailor?

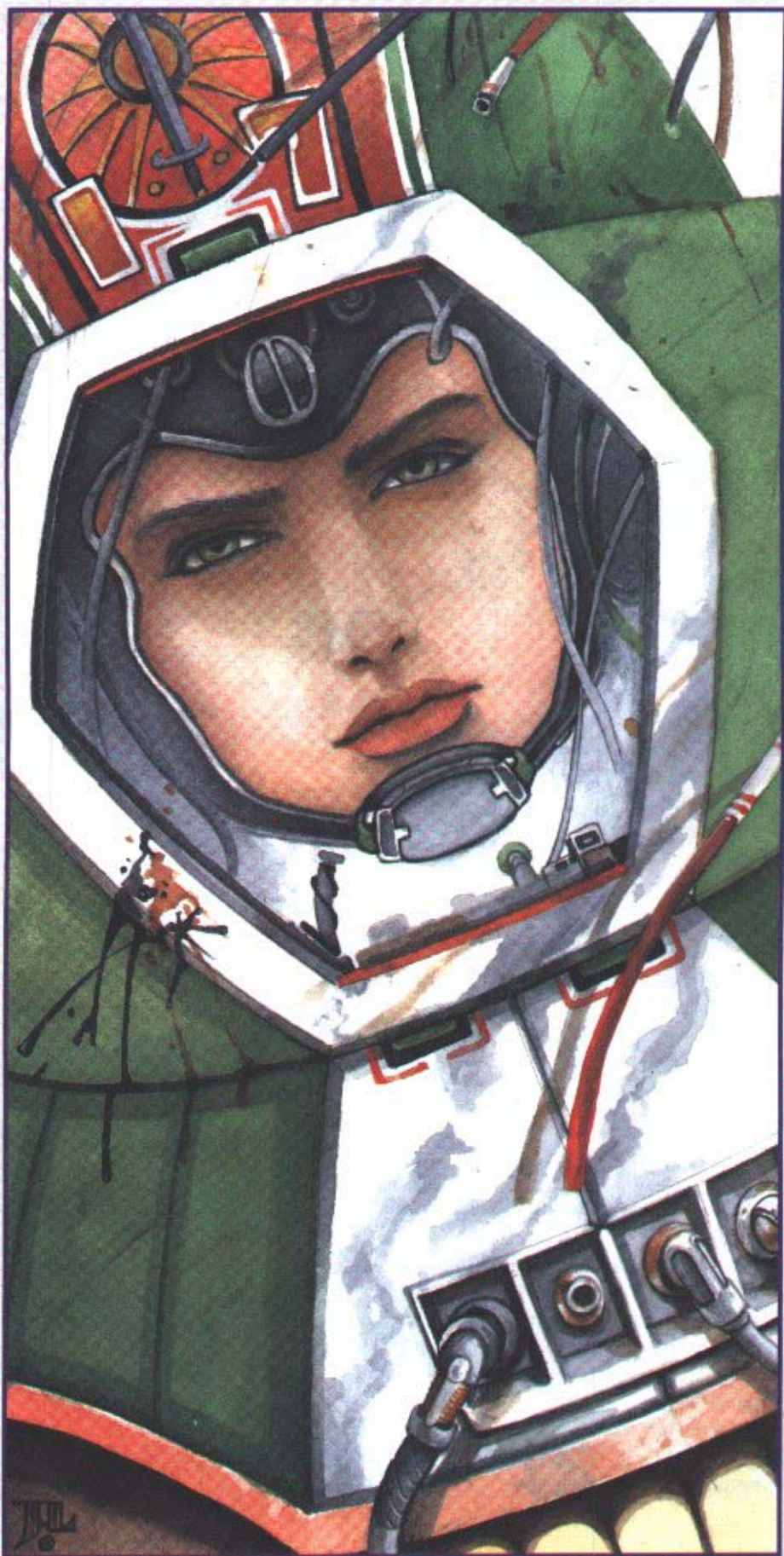


think we better leave."

We took cover in another building just as the ammo in the 'Mechs cooked off. "O! for a muse of fire," I said as the 'Mechs crashed through the top of the building, "that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention."

"Watch out. You might get what you're after," said Boots. "There has got to be a way, burning down the house."













# THINK LIKE A LIAO

—Susan Putney

*Liao*

*Tikonov Commonality*

*Capellan Confederation*

*10 January 3026*

**T**he people of Liao ushered in the Year of the Tiger with a parade. Gleaming BattleMechs, prancing stallions of ancient Eridani blood, and bronze and crimson paper dragons as long as a city block marched past the winter palace. Crowds of citizens waved green banners bearing the Liao fist-and-sword emblem. The parade had started in midafternoon, and now the palace lights glowed in the twilight, but the banners still waved. No one wanted to slack off as long as the Chancellor was watching.

Tormana Liao, sweating in the green and silver uniform of the First Ariana Fusiliers, stood on a balcony with his family and waved to the crowds. His lean body was tense with the habit of risk, and he was darker than the others, tanned by years of service under alien suns. Waving steadily with his right hand, he ran a finger of his left inside his collar and undid the button.

His sister Candace, the planet's ruler, had placed him at her left, shielded from the rest of their family. To her right stood Maximilian Liao, their father and Chancellor of the Capellan Confederation. His red and white robe covered ceremonial armor, and a helmet shadowed his reptilian eyes. Tormana pictured the armor as a cobra's scales. At the Chancellor's right stood his wife Elizabeth, wearing the green and tan of a Home Guard Colonel for purposes of morale. She'd even dyed her hair brown to go with the outfit. Beyond her stood the Chancellor's second daughter, Romano, also in uniform and not bothering to smile.

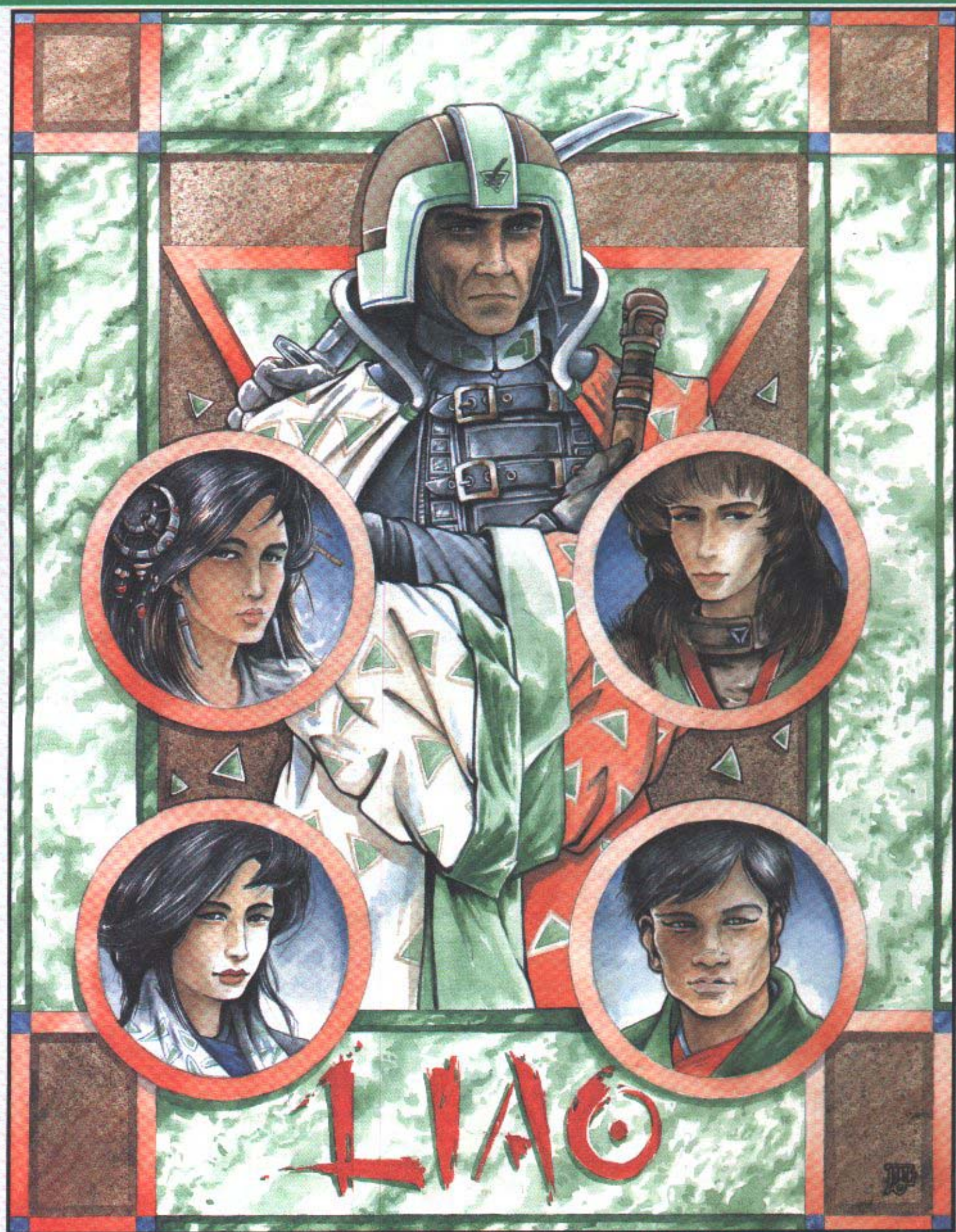
Leaning toward Candace, Tormana murmured, "Where are my replacement Fusiliers? I thought they were going to march, too. After two months' leave, they ought to look as sharp as any of these palace-yard dandies."

His sister's diamond-encrusted headdress wobbled dangerously. "Palace-yard dandies? That's part of the LuSann Warrior House down there!" She spoke without altering her frozen smile, and her hand waved in a steady rhythm. "Anyway—your transfers from Hsien have already been loaded aboard the *Thunderfist*. At least their 'Mechs have. You'll meet some of the Warriors at my party tonight. If you'd come last week, as I asked, you could've gotten to know them before shipping them out to that hell-planet of yours."

Tormana lowered his right arm with a groan, massaged the biceps through the cloth of his uniform, and then resumed waving with his left arm. The noise of the parade kept everyone but Candace from hearing his words. "I might have, if you hadn't told me Father was coming. Did you expect me to believe he really wanted a reconciliation? He hates me as much as ever. He's proven that in just one day."

"He said he wanted the family back together on New Year's Eve," Candace said. "I didn't expect him to hand you a list of your faults!"









"Well, it made nice confetti." Tormana massaged his cheeks with his free hand. "How can you keep smiling like that, hour after hour? Will the parade be over soon?"

"I can't see any farther down the street than you can."

Swinging one leg over the balcony railing, Tormana leaned far forward to peer down the street. There were cheers and good-natured laughter from the crowd below. "A couple of bands, another dragon, and a lot of guys on horses," he reported. "And then the streetsweepers." Ignoring the Chancellor's stare, which had the force of an icy draft, he swung himself back in and grinned at his sister. "After this, we can go soak our arms."

"No. Then we put on our costumes for the party," she corrected him. Her generous mouth relaxed briefly into a natural, wry smile. "And I wish you'd try harder to behave like royalty, Tormana."

He shrugged and started to wave at the crowds again. "I'm not cut out for this work. That's the one thing Father and I agree on."

True to his sister's prediction, an hour later Tormana found himself at the end of a reception line in the vast and glittering ballroom of Palace Liao, exchanging bows with a stream of nobles, diplomats, captains of industry, and MechWarriors. Though the majordomo announced each guest in turn, by the time they reached the end of the line, Tormana had no idea who they were. Their clothes were no clue, for it was a costume party. He bowed and smiled to demons and cyberpunks, knights in armor and a man dressed in nothing but a bath towel. Tormana himself had come as a Japanese corporate warrior of the 21st century, a costume hastily assembled from his kimono-style bathrobe, a blood-red obi made from a curtain, and a borrowed *katana*.

A large white rabbit holding a pocket watch stopped in front of him and bowed. The face, fringed with white fur and topped by floppy ears, was that of a portly and dignified Caucasian with watery blue eyes.

Tormana bowed and repeated, for the hundredth time, "Welcome to our humble homeworld. You honor us with your presence." He was tired of saying it, but Candace had warned him not to improvise.

"The honor is mine, Lord Tormana." The rabbit thought for a moment, as though sifting through his memory for raw data to

make small talk. "I understand you've acquitted yourself well along the Davion border. Duke Michael's men used to hope they'd face the Ariana Fusiliers in battle, but no more."

"Hah! That's true." A wide grin split Tormana's tanned face. "What we lack in equipment, we make up for in skill. Last month, we jumped over to Bushlau to beat up a regiment half again our size—part of Sharp's Cavaliers. The second regiment, I think, nicknamed the Stompers. They like to stake out civilians and step on them with BattleMechs. It was a real pleasure to kick their butts out of Capellan space. Not as good as killing them and salvaging their 'Mechs, of course, but they ran too fast."

Looking indignant, the white rabbit bowed slightly and walked away. There was a lull in new arrivals just then, and Tormana glanced at his sister Romano, who was next to him in line. "Did I say something wrong?"

Romano lifted a thin eyebrow at him. She wore a silk reproduction of an ancient Terran costume that she called "jeans and tea shirt," special garments for drinking tea. In her hair was an ornament made of tiger fangs, which, Tormana knew, was actually a recording device. He wondered who would later be privy to this conversation.

Her smile twisted into something colder as she said, "You've blown it again, brother dear. That rabbit was Edgar Bentley. He's a mining tycoon on Valexa, but he's here as a mouthpiece for Michael Hasek-Davion. Bentley's son just happens to command Sharp's second regiment, and now you've called the kid a war criminal and a coward. Not realizing what a null-wit you are, Bentley thought you insulted him on purpose."

"But what I said is true!"

Laughing, Romano turned away to greet another flurry of incoming guests.

A few minutes later, freed at last, Tormana headed across the huge room toward the bar. He knew that was where he was likely to find his troops, probably in costumes as hastily thrown together as his own. The orchestra was playing background music now, but soon there would be dancing, a form of combat at which he did not excel. He wanted to collect his MechWarriors and escape before Candace made him waltz.

Halfway there, amid a press of revelers, a hand caught his arm and a woman's voice



said, "Tormana, talk with me."

He stopped and looked down to see a diminutive white-haired woman in a black monk's robe smiling up at him with unreadable eyes. She was, among other things, the Director of the Maskirovka, the Capellan secret police. She was also his godmother, but they'd not been close for years.

He bowed. "Lady Ling."

The old woman bowed lower than he and held it longer, as though gently reproving his careless manners. Then she caught his hands in hers. "How brown you've grown since you went away, Tormana! And something about your face is harder. Yet I still look at you and see your poor mother's eyes, clear as a child's. Or is that an illusion?" Her obsidian eyes studied his face with an intensity that belied her light manner. "Let's go where we can talk."

"Actually," Tormana said, trying to get his hands back without seeming rude. "I'm not planning to stay much longer. I've got an early liftoff tomorrow."

"You can't go yet! All the young ladies would blame Candace! Don't you know you're the most eligible bachelor here?"

He laughed. "A disinherited younger son? An exiled Mandrinn? All I really am these days is a warrior from a very unglamorous regiment." With a touch of defiance, he added, "Besides, I'm no bachelor. Hanya No Cha will always be my wife."

"Strange how she disappeared. In all the years since then, have you learned nothing?" She released his hands. "Your father wants a son who knows his place. Not one who criticizes his policies and marries a dissident. Nor a son who insults his guests. You really must apologize to Mr. Bentley, you know. Your father plans to take you back into his good graces and make you the Duke of Bandora. If you don't apologize, Bentley will think the Chancellor put you up to the insult."

"But the man's son is a jackal!" Tormana muttered before doing a double-take. "Father's giving me another title? Why?"

"To reward his loyal and cooperative son." The old woman stared intently into his eyes. "And he will have a cooperative son from now on."

The young MechWarrior made a sound halfway between laughter and a cry of pain. "You know I love my father. But I'll be damned if I'll divorce my wife or kiss up to







his slimy friends! Not for all the titles in the House of Scions!"

Lady Ling drew in her breath with a sharp hiss. "Tormana! What can you gain by this contest of wills with your father? Whatever your game is—"

"I'm not playing a game!" Tormana shouted. Around them, conversations broke off as people turned to stare. He stared back, waiting till they dropped their eyes and returned to their own affairs, then added in a lower voice, "All my life, everyone has assumed that because I'm a Liao, I must be up to something. Well, I'm sick of it! That's why I joined the army. On Kali, there's no room or need for any sort of double-dealing. I'm becoming a good officer and I'm damn good in a 'Mech, and that's all my men care about. Frankly, it's almost all I care about, too."

"For once, godson, use your head!" Lady Ling's voice dropped to a whisper. "This day is your last chance to regain your father's good will. Your very last chance."

"The price is too high. I don't want it." With a deep, formal bow to his godmother, Tormana Liao turned on his heel and cut through the crowd, heading for the door.

*Kali (Algol System)  
Tikonov Commonality  
Capellan Confederation  
21 January 3026*

**T**he four stars collectively known as Algol rode low in the purple sky of Kali. Belial and Bael were blue-white pinheads, close together like the eyes of a snake. Ahriman was a red dot sinking through the haze, and yellowish Asmoday trailed behind it, scarcely brighter than a planet. Under these cheerless lights, the cliffs around Warex Base glittered like the night, a million chips of volcanic glass flashing in black stone.

A BattleMech strode away from the domes of the base toward one of the canyons that pierced the valley's rim. It was a *Vindicator*, nine meters tall, with a particle projection cannon in place of its right forearm. Bright metal glinted through its dull black paint in random scrapes and scars. On the upper part of its right arm were three painted symbols: the black falcon of the regiment, the fist and sword of House Liao,

and a red-gold heart surrounded by flames.

Tormana crossed the valley as quickly as he could without actually throwing his 'Mech into a run. It was the quiet shift at Warex Base, when more than half the battalion slept. He'd told Sheila Po, his Tech, that he was going for a walk around the valley to check the booby traps at the canyon mouths, and to get the feel of his 'Mech again after three weeks away from it. This was a partial truth. He would check the booby traps when he returned. If Sheila or anyone else noticed him leaving the valley, they'd insist on sending an escort with him, or want to know why not. And he couldn't lie to his troops. So he walked faster.

Six hours after the *Thunderfist* had set down with Tormana and his new MechWarriors, a note had come sliding under his office door. Below a set of coordinates was the message, "Come alone when Ahriman sets." It was signed with a sketch of a heart surrounded by flames. The symbol of Brazen Heart.

Brazen Heart was not on any of the star maps. It was a prison colony in the Sarna Commonality, a fierce desert world reserved for political dissidents. Tormana's wife had been born there. When the Chancellor annulled their marriage and Tormana feared for her life, she had returned home, smuggled by a secret group whose symbol, like that of the planet, was a burning heart. He had not seen Hanya in five years. Sometimes he received word, through a friend in the Sarn Reserves, that she was well.

It disturbed him that the underground had an agent at Warex Base. Dissidents were all right. Spies were not. He would have to find out who it was.

As he stepped over the tripwire at the canyon entrance, his gaze fell on two pictures clipped to the side of his instrument panel. One was a snapshot of Hanya. Seated on a sofa with a computer terminal in her hand, she was looking up at the camera with a surprised grin. The other was a holoportrait of the Chancellor in his court robes, glaring sternly into space. "Sorry, Father," Tormana said, unclipping the portrait and turning it face down. "What you don't know won't hurt me."

The coordinates in the note were some 60 kilometers west of Warex Base. In the *Vindicator*, in this terrain, that was a four-hour walk. At least he didn't have to worry



about overheating. Kali was a cold planet. What little moisture the volcanoes threw out condensed and froze every night, filling the darkness with the snap and boom of cracking rocks. Kali would not have been warm enough to support even that brief humidity, if not for the greenhouse effect. Its atmosphere was mostly carbon dioxide and nitrogen, and about 10 percent argon because of the radioactive ores. A rich mining colony had been evacuated because of the frequent raids.

The map on the *Vindicator's* tactical screen was a maze of blue lines indicating passable canyons, highlighted by splashes of red that were volcanic vents. It could not show everything, of course, but he knew the area well enough to find shortcuts. Tormana estimated he would make his appointment with half an hour to spare.

Picking his way over the rocks between looming black walls, he wondered whether Hanya was using the dissident network to get in touch with him. Or, did the network itself want him for some reason? Then it occurred to him that the message might not be from the dissidents at all. After all, he wore the same symbol on the arm of his 'Mech. Anyone who knew of Hanya's origins might guess that the burning heart was Tormana's personal symbol for his wife. It could be used to lure him into a trap. He still had to go, but not, he decided, by the most obvious route.

Stabbing the control for his jump jets, he sailed up and over a low spot in the canyon wall and down again, landing on flexed legs amid the rubble of a canyon that wandered southwest. It was a longer walk. He would be late, but he'd approach the rendezvous from the south instead of the east.

His radio crackled with the voice of Warex Base trying to raise him. He switched it off. They wouldn't worry too much, not yet. In all these canyons, and with Kali's background radiation, direct radio communications were often impossible. And the satellite relay in this quadrant had broken down two days ago.

Ahriman set, with Asmoday close behind it. Belial and Bael approached the smoky horizon. The wind picked up, whistling around the *Vindicator's* head and lashing the radio antennae back and forth like saplings. The cockpit was well-sealed, but the cold seemed to come straight through the view-

port. He was glad he'd worn long underwear beneath his environmental suit.

The meeting place, when he finally came within a kilometer of it, seemed to be radioactive. He paused in the shadow of a wind-sculpted obelisk, thinking this over. With several canyon walls still separating him from the message senders, he could not tell whether they had any atomic-powered equipment. His Geiger counter wasn't built to tell the difference between a faulty 'Mech engine, for example, and a vein of radioactive potassium. From the strength of the reading, though, it was probably an old mine. That also meant it was not likely to be a dissident base. The radiation would jam most kinds of sensors, making the area a good hiding place, but not a healthy one—unless a person was shielded, as Tormana was in his 'Mech.

It was possible to land 'Mechs on Kali undetected. With the satellite out of commission, the radar coverage for this quadrant was the manual set at Warex. If someone switched off the proximity alarm and then created a distraction at the right moment... He hated to think that there could be a traitor among his own men. Yet it could only have been someone from the base who had slipped that note under his door.

Nearly convinced by now that it was a trap, Tormana switched on his radio to ask for a flyover of the rendezvous point. Then he changed his mind. Better to move back another kilometer or so, climb to high ground, and send out a tight beam.

Palming the joystick, he swiveled the *Vindicator*—

Only it didn't move.

"Damn," he growled, thumping the underside of the control panel with his fist. Then he tried it again.

The *Vindicator* stood like a black statue, wind moaning across its armor.

He knew the motor was running, for he could feel the vibration. He disengaged the controls, moved them all through their full range, reengaged them, and tried to lift the 'Mech's right foot. It remained planted.

"Bloody narcoleptic antique," he said in a level tone.

A shadow fell across the viewport. He looked up just as the face of another *Vindicator* clicked into contact with his own. Seen through the dust on both ports, the other pilot was only a Humanoid silhouette.

"There's nothing wrong with your machine," came a hollow voice, conducted through the plexisteel. "I've switched off your manual systems."

"Who the hell are you?"

"I have to kill you, but not until we talk."

"Oh?" Getting no response from the *Vindicator's* weapons, Tormana reached casually behind his seat for his hand laser. "You speak pretty good Liao, for a Davion man. What've you done to my 'Mech?"

"It's not what I did, so much as what Sheila Po did. All I had to do was get close to you and flip a switch. But ever since you left the base, I've had a hell of a time trying to get close. That is, until you so kindly stopped here for a nap in the shade."

"You followed me from Warex?" All the *Vindicator* pilots at the base were Tormana's personal friends. Except for the one newcomer from Hsien. "MacLean?"

"MacLean is here, but he's dead. He and his BattleMech are going to have an unfortunate accident."

Tormana knew that if he fired his laser through the pot, it would take ten or twelve seconds to melt through two layers of plexisteel. Time enough for the other man to do something about it. So he waited for a better chance. "If you're not MacLean, then how can you operate his 'Mech? Or is it his? I can't see it very well."

"It's his. But it was reprogrammed on Hsien to respond to my code as well as MacLean's. The same with your machine, while you were gone. I could get in it right now and walk it away."

"Who are you?"

The other man was silent for a moment. "When you have someone at your mercy, Tormana, and you're going to kill him—do you toy with him first?"

"Of course not!"

"Then I won't, either. I'll tell you straight out. Who I used to be doesn't matter. Your father wants a son like himself, a useful son, a son who thinks like a Liao. So with the help of a lot of doctors, he made me into that son. From this day forward, my name is—Tormana Liao."

"You're insane!" Throwing off his safety straps, Tormana hurled himself at the viewport, slamming his fist against it. "MacLean, you need help! Release my 'Mech, and I won't hurt you."

"Sorry, my friend, it's Maximilian who's



crazy. Me, I'm just ambitious. With your identity, I can bring back the glory days of the Confederation. Meanwhile, I've got plans for Bandora. Or didn't you know your father intends to give—his son—a Dukedom there?"

Tormana dropped back into his seat. He felt as though he'd been punched in the stomach. When he spoke again, his voice was a whisper. "But he's my father. I'm his son. This can't be happening."

There was no reply from the other 'Mech.

"Till this day," Tormana said, "I never knew him. He is a monster. A reptile that eats its own young." Pulling off his neurohelmet, the MechWarrior ran his hands through his tousled hair and touched his face as though assuring himself that he was awake. Then he stopped and frowned. "I suppose there aren't really any 'Mechs in the old mine up ahead there."

"What are you talking about?"

"Then you don't know." Tormana thought for a moment. "About a kilometer north of here, in an abandoned mine, I think there are some enemy MechWarriors. They're probably planning to sneak up on the base."

The other man laughed. Even distorted by the plexisteel, it was a familiar laugh. Tormana's own laugh. "You're stalling for time. I find myself reluctant to get on with this, but I promised not to play cat-and-mouse games. Good journey, Tormana." The other 'Mech's face pulled away from Tormana's viewport. In its place, a huge steel hand clanged down, shutting out the twilight. The canopy locks groaned as the hand began to lift up the hatch. Cold, sulfurous air hissed through the seal. Gagging, Tormana jammed his helmet onto his head, pulled down the faceplate, and twisted the oxygen valve.

From the static of the radio, a crackly voice emerged. "I don't think he fell for it, Bent. When are we gonna sack the base? Oops! Jeez, sorry, I—" The voice broke off, leaving only static.

The transmission had come from close by, and it was in English. They both heard it. The attacking 'Mech froze. Tormana sank back with a gasp, then sealed his helmet and scrambled for his survival gear.

He felt the cockpit shudder as the gray *Vindicator* released its grip. It turned and walked up the canyon. Now he could see its

gray camouflage pattern, reminiscent of a dappled horse. It was MacLean's 'Mech.

Then he turned his attention to staying alive. The radio transmitter, as he'd feared, was dead. The hatch, bent out of shape by the gray 'Mech's hand, was jammed shut.

The imposter had boasted that he could get into this machine and walk away with it. If so, any damage to Tormana's controls must be reversible. Seizing his tool kit from a side compartment, he unscrewed the plates under the panel, looking for anything obviously wrong. As night fell, he took a flashlight from the box, and taped it to make a pencil-thin beam. No point in advertising what he was doing in here.

Tormana was intensely curious about the man his father had selected as the ideal son. All his life, he had utterly failed to please his father. Marrying Hanya was just one of a long string of choices that had somehow disappointed or offended Maximilian. Finally realizing that he could never please the old man, Tormana had quit trying. Yet the question of what Maximilian wanted from him still nagged at the fringes of his mind. And here was the answer in flesh and blood. Mixed with his outrage and the need to kill, Tormana felt a desire to talk a little longer with this man. Not that he was likely to get the chance. Shaking his head at his own folly, he went on probing gingerly through the tangled wires inside the control panel.

He'd found nothing to fix when the duplicate's *Vindicator* came striding back down the canyon, headlights sweeping the tumbled black stones. Its interior was dark, like his. It walked up to his paralyzed machine, touched face to face, and the man inside said, "There are 21 'Mechs up there. Enough to take the battalion if they catch it sleeping. They wear the insignia of the Crusis Lancers."

"No. Davion wouldn't use the Lancers for an assassination. I think these are Sharp's Stompers. They're disguised for some reason."

"Of course they are. I'm just telling you what I saw. Most of their 'Mechs are light-weights, faster than yours or mine. They've given up waiting for you and they're headed for Warex Base. I climbed to high ground and tried to tight-beam a warning, but I can't raise the base. It could be the radiation out here, or their receiver could be sabotaged. You know the planet better than I do. Got any



suggestions?"

"Set me free," Tormana replied instantly. "I can get us in front of them, and we'll set up a trap. How do I get this 'Mech moving again?"

"Open up your instrument deck, and clip all the bundles with green tape."

Wedging his thin-beamed light into a crevice beneath the panel, Tormana seized his wirecutters and went to work. "Don't forget," he said. "After we take care of these invaders, it's between you and me again."

"Of course. But if you win, the Maskirovka will kill you anyway."

"Unless I pose as you."

"An interesting notion, but you wouldn't last long. Sheila Po will be waiting at the door, with a cold beer if I give her the correct code, and a hot beam if you don't. And there are other agents, and other codes."

"I thought so. Maybe you'll tell me the codes, though." Cutting the last of the green-taped braids, he set the clippers down and eased quietly into his seat. "I'm having trouble getting this last panel off." He engaged the leg actuators. "That's more like it." His hand hovered over the right leg keyboard. "Just a few more wires." He tapped a key.

The black *Vindicator* jerked its knee up and slammed its foot down. It was a maneuver designed to scrape the armor plating off the shin of the other machine's rather delicate leg. The other MechWarrior was ready for it, however. Raising the left knee of his 'Mech and swiveling the hips, the imposter neatly deflected the attack, at the same time giving Tormana's 'Mech a hard push. Both machines staggered back.

Popping open a compartment in the top of its head, the gray drew out a coiled cable and offered one end of it to the black. It was a fiberoptic link, standard Fusiliers equipment for conditions of radio silence. With some hesitation, the black *Vindicator* reached out and took the end of the cable, and plugged it into its own head.

"Nice try, Tormana." The imposter's laughing voice rang out from a speaker in the back of the cockpit. It sounded unnervingly like a man standing just behind him—or like a voice from the back of his own mind. "You're a pretty good fighter, but you don't think like a Liao. I do. Anyway, let's agree on a truce until we've taken care of those invaders. We need our full strength for

that."

"All right," said Tormana, knowing this man's truce was worth the paper it was written on. "Follow me, then. I know a short cut. We'll get ahead of them."

Switching on his low beams, he keyed in a fast walk and led the way south, away from the enemy. The lights on his 'Mech's lower torso swept the ground ahead of him. The lighted area showed up only as sparkles of glass on the black ground. Peering keenly through the port, he suddenly punched his override and took an extra long stride. "Watch your step. There's a crevice that's hard to see." Glancing at his rearview monitor, he smiled as the other 'Mech smoothly handled the obstacle. Good man. Then, remembering, he wished the other man weren't quite so good.

"We're going to take the high ground," he said. "It's very unsafe, even in a jumper 'Mech. But if the base is destroyed, you and I are done for anyway. First, though, we have to get far enough away that the enemy won't see our lights when we go above."

They traveled south in distance-eating strides. The cliffs on either side began to "chatter," making an almost constant crackling noise, punctuated by an occasional crack or boom and the rattle of a small avalanche. This was what the Fusiliers referred to as "Kali's lullaby."

Jumping over a low spot in a canyon wall, they followed a wider passage. The ground became smoother and seemed to be sloping upward. Smoke drifted across the beams of their lights.

"Are we headed up a volcano?" came the voice of the man behind Tormana.

"A little one. I think this is the cone that broke through the Dragon Wall about a week ago."

"Broke through what?"

"The Dragon Wall. These canyons are a maze. Most of the walls only go a short distance before they stop at a crevice or another canyon, but a few of them twist and turn for kilometers, unbroken. We memorize the shapes so that we can recognize sections of them on our tac screens. Helps us find our way around. The Dragon Wall runs all the way back to Warex Base. I'll know where we need to get on and off, to save time. There aren't many straightaways on the heading they've taken."

A few minutes later, they stopped near

the crest of the young volcano, some 90 meters higher than the canyon floor around them. About 14 meters down from where the two 'Mechs stood, the top of the nearest canyon wall twinkled faintly against the dead black of new lava.

There was still no response from Warex Base on the tight beam. This area was not radioactive, and so Tormana knew the problem was at the other end. Whoever had slipped the note under his door had also sabotaged the base radio. There would be 'Mechs on patrol, but in the canyons, they'd be out of contact.

Tormana switched on his searchlight and swept it across the landscape. Twisted ridges flashed into view, glittering snakes that curled and broke and intertwined across the blackness. He looked for the familiar pattern of the Dragon Wall.

Finally, he thought he recognized it. "This way," he said, heading down the slope toward one of the east-leading ridges. The other 'Mech followed. It occurred to Tormana that he could lead the imposter into a trap, maneuver him into stepping on a weak overhang or a lava bubble or some other trick of Kali. The man in the gray 'Mech knew the codes to satisfy the Maskirovka, however. Even if he did not need all the help he could get against the invaders, Tormana couldn't kill this man until he got those codes.

The Dragon Wall was 30 meters wide at this point, strewn with the rubble of its own decay. Tormana led the way straight down the middle.

"You know, I'm very wealthy," he said. "Besides a third of my mother's estate, I've a bundle in the Capellan stock market."

"I know. I've studied your life."

"Do you know where the money is?"

"Most of it's in a ComStar trust. Enough to buy a planet or two. Why do you ask?"

"It's also enough to, say, finance a nice little army. Think you might need a private army someday? If you and my father ever part company, for example?"

After a short silence, the other man said, "It's possible."

"I'll bet the Maskirovka hasn't managed to infiltrate ComStar yet. Or have they? Do you know my trust account number?"

"I see what you want. A trade. Your fortune for my Maskirovka passwords."

"Well, after all, only one of us will have





any use for both things. Neither of us has anything to lose by telling."

"That's true. But not yet. After we've done whatever we can do against Davion's men, then we trade information."

"What if one of us is killed?"

"Forget it, Tormana. You're not getting any passwords until you and I square off for our final battle."

In the darkness of his *Vindicator's* cockpit, Tormana made a rude gesture at his rearview monitor.

Walking the Dragon Wall took all the skill they had. Often, the way was not even remotely flat. The two 'Mechs walked and climbed and sometimes jumped along the crest of a winding ridge, usually with a sheer 75-meter drop on either side, wind howling around their heads, trusting their 45 tons to crumbling ledges and eroded stepping-stones across the heights. Sometimes they followed the wall around a bend, going the extra distance rather than trying to find a way down. At other times, knowing a turn of the wall would take them far out of their way, Tormana led the other 'Mech to a less sheer drop-off and they would slide, dropping the last 30 meters on their jump jets, landing on flexed knees and left arms. Then they followed their compasses east over all obstacles till they rejoined the Dragon Wall. It was hard on both 'Mechs and men.

"I can't figure out why they're disguised as *Crucis Lancers*," Tormana said as they toiled up a cliff.

"It's obvious," said the other man. "You shamed Edgar Bentley's son. The kid wants revenge, but Bentley senior doesn't want your father to know who really killed you. Not with everything so cozy between your father and Michael Hasek-Davion."

"But my father hates House Davion!"

"What a novice you are! Your father is a bitter enemy of Hanse Davion, the Prince, but he has a secret treaty with Duke Michael. That's why the assassins are wearing the insignia of one of the Prince's pet regiments—so Hanse will get the blame for killing you."

"A treaty with Duke Michael? After the things he's done to our kinsmen in the Capellan March? Never!"

Laughter echoed down the phone line. "A Liao wouldn't say that, my friend. I wouldn't say it."

The great moon Ratra poked her horns

above the horizon as they stopped on a ridge eight kilometers west of Warex Base. Not quite two hours had passed since they'd set out. Both 'Mechs had lost some armor on the rocky slides, and their leg actuators screeched with every step. The gray 'Mech had a broken finger, and the black seemed to have a boulder stuck in its foot; it wouldn't set down flat.

"That canyon down there should be the way they come, unless they're totally lost," Tormana said. "We can kill them here."

"How?"

Tormana shifted the beam of his spotlight. "See that flat spot on the floor, next to the far wall? A booby trap. There's a huge cave underneath it, and the ceiling is rotten. We patched it with a thin layer of ferrocrete and painted it black. All we have to do is herd them over there, then shoot the wall above them. It's riddled with explosives. The wall falls, the ground collapses, and the invaders are buried."

"That's great, except how are we going to herd them all onto that one spot? If we start shooting at them, they'll just spread out and shoot back."

"Not if we use Kali's Torch."

"Kali's Torch?"

"The argon in the atmosphere. It's concentrated down in the canyons. Fire a PPC into it, and it lights up."

"It explodes?"

"No. It lights up, like a neon sign. Looks like a secret weapon. I don't think the Davion forces know about it." The black 'Mech pointed. "See how the wall bends here? If we get about three hundred meters apart, we can probably catch them in a crossfire. We'll catch them in a triangle, with you firing from one side, and me firing from one side, and the booby trap on the third side."

"All right. Give me my phone cord, and let's get set up."

"One more thing. As soon as we blow that cliff, our truce is off. So tell me your *Maskirovka* passwords now."

Ten minutes later, the two 'Mechs were 150 meters apart on the jagged ridge, hidden behind its crest except for their heads and right arms. A flash of light around a bend in the canyon announced the approach of the enemy. Tormana began to pull himself up onto the narrow crest.

Twenty-one BattleMechs, headlights bobbing in the darkness, came walking up



the canyon. The impact of their steps rattled through rock and metal, and Tormana felt it as a faint vibration in the controls under his hand. He glanced across the canyon at the silhouette of the far wall against the sky. A deep notch marked the booby trap. When they came even with that, he would shoot.

They were almost even with the imposter's position now.

Trying to keep the *Vindicator's* head low, he pulled one metal knee onto the crest of the ridge. They were not expecting an ambush. With any luck, they would not be scanning for heat, at least not upward.

The black *Vindicator's* knee screeched.

One of the enemy 'Mechs stopped. A voice broke into the radio static. "Hey, Bent! There's something—"

The imposter fired. Blue lightning licked out from the muzzle of his PPC, lashing the canyon floor behind the invaders. In the next instant, a blue forest fire burst up from the stones and danced in flickering, interweaving sheets 15 meters high, sweeping across the canyon toward the flock of birdlike machines. Most of them ran, filling the ether with curses and screams of terror. One paused long enough to fire a laser at the blue fire; it had no effect. He ran, too.

They were even with the notch. Aiming his laser at the cliff under the gray *Vindicator*, Tormana fired.

There was a flare of white light. The black 'Mech clung desperately to the ridge as the wall under his enemy burst outward into the air above the canyon. He glimpsed the gray 'Mech tumbling through the air, wildly firing its jets, trying even now to save itself amid the massive chunks of falling cliff. At the same moment, the entire canyon floor gave way, and the radio filled the cockpit with screams.

A few of the enemy were still screaming when he flipped the switch to shut off the sound. More explosions followed, as several power plants were crushed. Debris rained against the cockpit, and the wall bucked like a wild horse. Eyes tightly shut, he sank his nails into the arms of his seat as his 'Mech hung onto the shuddering ridge.

After a while, the dust settled.

Amid a shower of loosened rocks, Tormana climbed down from the cliff, and down farther, into the pit. His lights, sweeping the piles of rubble, picked out gleams of metal here and there. A lot of equipment could be

salvaged from these 'Mechs, but not tonight.

The gray 'Mech was near the top of a slope, pinned under a house-size rock. Tormana approached it carefully, in case it could still shoot. Then he saw that the head was half-smashed, the viewport shattered.

Planting a giant metal foot on top of the other 'Mech's cannon, he lowered his machine to one knee, opened his hatch with the *Vindicator's* mighty steel hand, and climbed out. His laser pistol was ready. Stepping onto the chest of the imposter's machine, he walked over to the head.

The man in the gray BattleMech was not quite dead. Tormana reached into the cockpit and pulled him out. There was another body squeezed in there, but MacLean had been dead for quite awhile.

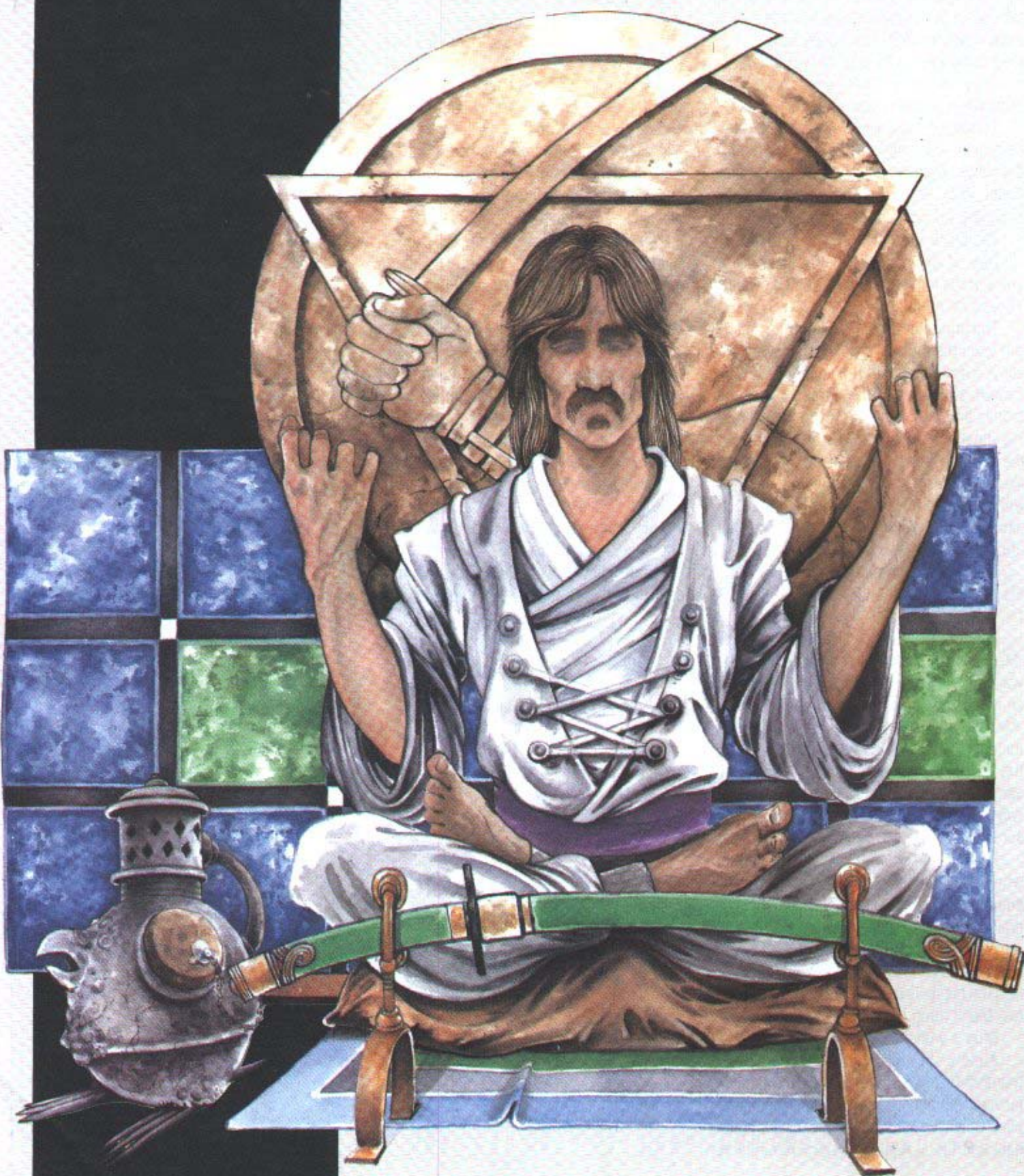
Because of the environmental suit, there was no spilled blood, but the man's right arm and the right side of his chest were crushed. Pulling the helmet off the shivering form, Tormana gazed into his own face, twisted with agony. The brown eyes seemed to focus on him for a moment.

With difficulty, as though he were moving his arm against ten gravities, Tormana lifted his gun, and fired.

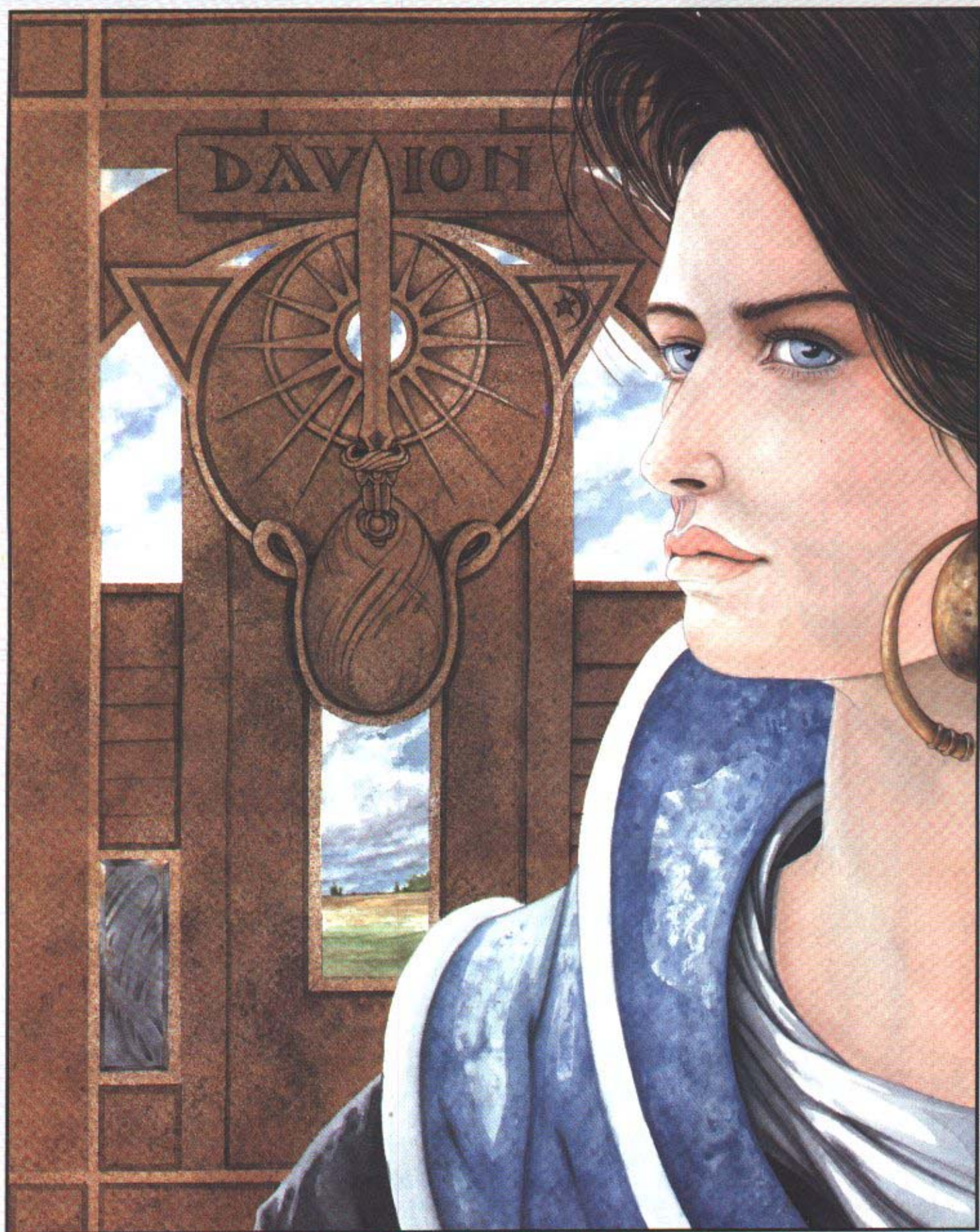
"You believed in our truce," he said to the dead man. "And damn me, I thought like a Liao."













# 復仇的舞

# DANCE OF VENGEANCE

—William H. Keith, Jr.

**“A**nd I say that you, Lord Garreth, are a coward, a liar, and a murderer. It was you who betrayed my father...had him murdered to keep the secret.”

The buzz of conversation and the clink of bottles and glasses dropped away to silence as the nobles scattered about the ornate hall turned to watch the two men standing at the door.

Salvadore Tyrell knew with grim certainty that his words meant death. Garreth's polite smile had faded, replaced by the flushed skin and bared teeth of rage. Even his knuckles showed white against the pommel of the ceremonial *wakizashi* at his belt.

“And you, insect...what business have you here, in this convocation of your betters?”

Salvadore let out his breath slowly. He must retain control. He must!

“I seek your death, Lord Garreth. I claim vendetta for the murder of my father.”

The silence that had descended over the room at Salvadore's first words to Garreth had been one of curiosity and expectancy. The silence that gripped the hall now was one of shock. By publicly challenging Lord Garreth, he, Salvadore Tyrell, had stepped well beyond the accepted boundaries for proper behavior within the noble classes of House Kurita.

“Captain Tyrell!” a voice barked from across the hall. “What are you doing here?”

Salvadore turned to face the speaker and bowed, his back stiff, his knuckles riding down his trouser legs almost to his knees. *Kuge* Ukita Hideie, Earl of Kajikazawa, was a wrinkled gnome of a man, with frosty-white hair that contrasted his dark, leathery skin. Hideie returned the bow, a nod of the head that acknowledged Salvadore's courtesy, but not his right to be in this place.

Salvadore bowed again, lower this time. Hideie was Planetary Chairman of the world of Kajikazawa. At a word from him, Salvadore's head would roll on the floor. Behind the old man, his personal guards were shifting their weight and their robes slightly so that they could, with equal ease, draw stunner or *katana*, depending on what the situation might require.

“My Lord,” Salvadore said. “I have at last won my right of vendetta.”

**C**hu-I Salvadore Tyrell had won both his promotion and his command upon the death of his father, and he'd found joy in neither. Tyrell's Raiders was an independent, company-strength BattleMech unit that had begun as a local Kajikazawan militia in ancient, understrength 'Mechs and become an auxiliary reserve attached to the Second Benjamin Regulars in front-line service. It had been four years since the Second Benjamin had gone into action against House Steiner invaders at New Wessex, close to the border with the Lyran Commonwealth and tens of lights across the Draconis Combine from Kajikazawa.

The relationship between the Regulars and the auxiliaries did not always go smoothly. Most Kurita line commanders mistrusted mercenaries, and they often viewed local units such as Tyrell's Raiders as mercenaries even when their prime motivation was home defense,



rather than fighting for pay. *Sho-sa* Lord Victor Garreth, of the Second Regular's Third Battalion, had been particularly displeased at the Raiders being attached to his command at New Wessex.

Salvadore still remembered Garreth's final conversation with his father on the afternoon that the Steiner forces were closing in toward the Ouros River crossing. "Your 'Mechs would be better employed in my reserve, Tyrell," Garreth had said. "As a separate unit, they compete with my people for supplies and ammunition. And I, for one, am not willing to risk my unit's integrity on the untried temper of your...your *militia*."

The elder Tyrell had colored at that. "Not militia, Lord! Auxiliaries...and damned good men! They have stood in the line of battle before. Give them the chance and they'll stop anything the Steiners can throw our way!"

"You think so?" Garreth's voice dripped sarcasm as he stabbed at a place on the map with a forefinger. "Our intel shows a Steiner company moving south, toward this crossing at Vesper-on-Ouros. You think *militia* can stand against Steiner regulars?"

"Yes, Lord!"

"Then take your command there. Hold the crossing. I will expect regular reports, of course..."

Thus did the twelve BattleMechs of Tyrell's Raiders find themselves drawn up along the bluffs above the swift-flowing Ouros, 20 kilometers south of the main Kurita forces, awaiting the approach of the Steiner attackers. The Raiders were not a heavy unit. Their largest 'Mech was an ancient, 60-ton *Dragon*, piloted by the elder Tyrell. That 'Mech, *Tyrell's Terror*, had been in the family for four generations already, and it was assumed that it would go to Salvadore when his father decided to retire. Salvadore commanded the company's Fire Lance from the cockpit of a battered *Centurion* of uncertain vintage, one of the combat machines that belonged to the unit as common property. Like most line regiments, and unlike most mercenary units, few of the men of Tyrell's Raiders owned their own Battle-

Mechs.

Their Recon Lance was deployed across the river to watch for the approaching enemy, while the rest of the unit found positions along the bluff and settled in for a wait.

It was not to be a long one.

One of the Recon *Stingers* spotted the enemy first and flashed warning of a company of heavy Commonwealth BattleMechs headed for the crossing. Then the other *Stinger* reported a sighting, at least a full company north of the first. The *Wasp* and the *Panther*, hunting further out, made contact through a hail of static and explosions, reporting still more enemy 'Mechs at their position, but contact was lost before they could supply numbers or position.

Moments later, one of the *Stingers* came bounding back across the river in a curtain of spray. The 'Mech's jump jets had been smashed and its left arm mangled by Steiner fire, but it joined the main Kurita line just as the first Steiner 'Mechs began to gather along the far shore of the river.

By now, Tyrell's Raiders realized that they faced far more than a single company—the strength of their own unit. The enemy consisted of at least a regiment, outnumbering them by three to one. Worse, a number of the Steiner 'Mechs now wading into the river were heavies, *Warhammers*, *Archers*, and *Marauders* advancing with a hunter's sure, relentless pace.

The Raiders opened fire with everything they had, hitting the advancing Steiner 'Mechs hard. Salvadore could still see the damaged *Stinger* hurling itself against the hulking mass of a Steiner *Archer*. The next moment, the *Archer's* metal fists were coming down like piledrivers on the *Stinger's* upper torso, splintering armor like plywood as flame boiled from the light 'Mech's shattered cockpit. The *Warhammer* and the *Marauder* were, meanwhile, concentrating their fire against *Tyrell's Terror*. The lightning horror of their combined PPC bolts blasted at the Raiders's Command 'Mech, searing across the closing range in jagged blue discharges, tearing molten craters in the *Dragon's* armor. Raymond Tyrell had fought back tenaciously, retreating step by step, dodging and weaving to avoid the worst of his opponents' fire, all the while laying down his own deadly







barrage of heavy autocannon fire.

Salvadore had struggled to reach his father, his *Centurion's* autocannon adding the weight of its rapid-fire thunder to that of the *Dragon*. A salvo of long-range missiles arrowed from the *Centurion's* chest pack, striking home along the arm and torso of the lumbering Steiner *Warhammer*.

Just then, the Steiner *Archer* caught him from behind, while the Kurita line all along the top of the ridge began to crumble. The *Archer* had shouldered its way past the other 'Mechs in Salvadore's Fire Lance, leaving them to the *Wolverines* and *Shadow Hawks* and *Griffins* that were climbing up on the Kurita side of the river now. Missiles from the *Archer* caught Salvadore squarely in his *Centurion's* back. The multiple hits gouged deep chunks out of his armor, crippling the 'Mech's rear-mounted laser and driving the 50-ton machine to its knees with a clamorous roar that momentarily deafened Salvadore, despite the protection of his helmet.

Somehow, he brought his 'Mech to its feet, lashing out with laser and autocannon fire. Everywhere he looked, Steiner 'Mechs were swarming across the ridge. Kurita 'Mechs stood alone or in pockets of two or three, huddled against the onslaught of vastly superior firepower.

"All Raiders!" His father's voice was harsh over the taccom line. "All Raiders... fall back! Regroup!"

The movement had started already and did not need Captain Tyrell's order to reinforce it. There was no way the Raiders' force could hold that ridge against so many heavy enemy 'Mechs, and to stay in place meant to die there as the heavier BattleMechs wore them down. A *Shadow Hawk* in Salvadore's Fire Lance was cut down at last by the combined fire from the *Archer* and a pair of Steiner *Griffins*. Fierce, white flame seared through the black webwork of internal structure and bracing exposed by char-rimmed gaps in the hull metal. The *Hawk's* final explosion in orange flame and thunder came before the pilot could eject, and Salvadore had watched in horror as his younger sister Theresa met certain death trapped in that 'Mech.

"All Raiders, retreat! Retreat!" Captain Tyrell ordered. "Break off and fall back!"

Cut off by a wall of BattleMechs, Salvadore could not obey. His 'Mech's left leg had taken a full salvo of SRMs and a PPC burst,

and he was limping heavily now, the servo actuators in his knee barely functional. When a laser beam struck his right side, he spun his *Centurion* to face the new threat.

The cumbersome, 45-ton *Blackjack* would not normally have been a worthy opponent for Salvadore's heavier *Centurion*, but his machine had suffered such massive damage that it could not take much more. His board controls lit up red across the console as autocannon shells slammed into his hull, and repeated laser strikes sloughed off armor that sent his internal temperature soaring. With the warning klaxon shrilling in his ear, he'd disconnected his helmet controls, flipped up the arming safety, and ground his thumb into the eject firing button. By the time he came to ground a hundred meters away, his *Centurion* was lying full length on the charred and blasted earth, unquenchable fires consuming its innards with a heat that forced him back even at that range.

The fight had not ended there for Salvadore. On foot, he'd made his way back through enemy lines toward the Kurita encampment, a 20-klick journey that took the better part of three days. The encampment was deserted when he reached it at last, dirty, hungry, and exhausted. Its only occupants were the corpses of the Tyrell Raiders who had escaped the Battle of the Ouros Crossing. They hung there in a ghastly row from a hastily erected gibbet.

He spent a long time staring at the body of his father, which swayed over his head with the wind.

He had no memories now of the time that followed, save one. He could recall foraging for leftover bits of food at the spot where the regimental mess had been. He had felt no emotion at all. It was only after an attempt to scare down a snarling, six-legged fustelizard that was challenging him for a scrap of meat that Salvadore realized his voice was completely gone.

He could not remember having screamed his throat raw.

By the time he rejoined the Kurita forces, the Second Benjamin Regulars had lifted offplanet. He'd learned the full story later, of how Major Victor Garreth had ordered the arrest of his father and his comrades for cowardice and treason, of how he had ordered the court-martial tribunal to find Tyrell guilty and sentence him to death. Raymond Tyrell and his men had been ordered



to hold the lower crossing of the Ouro. In the face of roughly equal numbers, they had withdrawn, against orders, after suffering only light damage and abandoning three of their 'Mechs to the enemy. Though treason could not be proved—there was, after all, no definite proof that Tyrell or his people had actually corresponded with the enemy—the charge of cowardice in the face of the enemy was obviously true.

Justice had been swift.

Salvadore's options had been starkly limited at that point. He was a trained MechWarrior, a graduate of the prestigious Sun Zhang Academy on New Samarkand, but he had no BattleMech and no unit. The 'Mechs belonging to Tyrell's Raiders, he learned, had all become the property of the Second Benjamin Regulars.

Only one idea now dominated Salvadore Tyrell's thoughts. As a DropShip carried him above the smoke-smudged landscape of New Wessex on the first leg of his return to Kajikazawa, he swore an oath to avenge his father's death by somehow, some way, killing Victor Garreth with his own hand.

**“Y**ou murdered my father...and my comrades...to lay your filthy hands on those BattleMechs,” he said. Garreth and Tyrell circled one another warily now, as the nobles and military officers in the Grand Hall moved themselves and the furniture out of the way to make room. Tyrell's *wakizashi* shimmered, mirror-bright in the sunlight that spilled from the frost-tinged skylight. He hefted the blade, feeling its balance, its reassuring weight in his grip. Garreth moved easily beyond the point of the blade, then blurred, reaching in for a slashing cut toward Tyrell's abdomen. Tyrell leaped back and the slash missed. Tyrell parried, striking sparks from the other's blade.

“How'd you get in here, pup?” Garreth said, his eyes black and angry. “You would need a sponsor.”

“You'd be surprised...”

**T**yrell had met Lord Hassid Ricol almost a year after the disaster on New Wessex. He'd been living virtually hand-to-mouth, working when he could as a bodyguard for higher-ranking nobles. Without a 'Mech of his own, there was little for him to do. Openings for pilots in BattleMech units were few and far

tween anyway, and Salvadore did not relish the alternative of joining a line infantry unit. At least, not yet.

The casualty rates in line units were shockingly high. Though Salvadore did not fear death any more than most others of his class and training, he was not ready to die just yet.

He had an oath to fulfill.

The strange thing was that it was Duke Ricol who had sought him out, contacting Salvadore through a servant who appeared one morning at the front door of his cheap room. The man had led him to a hotel near the city's spaceport, where Salvadore found himself bowing before a massively built, bearded man in a flamboyant red and gold uniform. A native of Rodigo, far out toward the Draconis periphery, Hassid Ricol was known far and wide as the Red Duke.

“You've been academy-trained,” Ricol said after Salvadore, at the Duke's invitation, had taken a seat in his presence. Salvadore wore his two ceremonial swords, the scabbards tucked into the belt of his robe. The long, curved blade was the *katana*; the *wakizashi* was identical to the larger blade, but shorter. The blades had been awarded to him upon graduation from the Sun Zhang school.

“That's right, your Grace. Sun Zhang, class of '18.”

Ricol nodded, stroking his beard. “Then you have experience with BattleMechs.”

“Yes, your Grace.”

“Dispossessed?”

Salvadore had tried to hide his scowl and failed. “Yes, your Grace. My 'Mech...and my unit, were lost on New Wessex.”

“Tell me about it.”

For the next hour, Salvadore relived the Battle of Ouro Crossing and the events leading up to it. Ricol listened intently, gently running his hand down his beard as Salvadore described the deployment of Tyrell's Raiders and the unexpected appearance of a full Steiner regiment where only a company had been expected.

“I heard rumors of that business,” Ricol said at last. “You are the first eyewitness to corroborate the stories, however.”

“If I may ask, Lord...what is your interest in this?”

Ricol smiled, but there was ice in the expression of his eyes. “Let us simply say, *Chu-i*, that the Draconis Combine is locked in a death struggle that will require every

tool, every weapon at our disposal.”

Salvadore nodded. It was a basic fact of life among most of the inhabitants of the Combine that life was a day-to-day struggle to survive against the enemies that encircled them—the Lyran Commonwealth and the Federated Suns, in particular. That knowledge sometimes took on the sharp edge of xenophobia, though in the Red Duke, it seemed to have been redirected into a fierce will to triumph.

“The one thing we cannot survive,” Ricol continued, “is stupidity. And of that, I fear, we have more than our fair share.”

“Stupidity, your Grace?”

“A good military unit is a tool to be cared for. Not to be thrown away on a whim or to win some small, personal advantage such as the acquisition of BattleMechs. Many of my peers within the Combine have an aversion to the use of mercenary units, or experienced militias, and deny themselves access to some of the finest, best-honed tools available. That is stupid as well.”

Salvadore felt a thrill of anticipation, of hope. “Garreth. You want to...”

“What I want is of no concern at the moment,” Ricol said sharply. “I suggest, too, that unthinking action solely for the sake of vengeance is stupid, too.”

“Perhaps, your Grace. But I have an oath to avenge my father.”

“Vengeance.” Ricol sighed as though he'd heard the story before. “You realize that a vendetta by a junior noble or officer against a senior is...ah...risky.”

“I'm not interested in the politics of vengeance, your Grace. Just achieving it.”

“You should be, son. You should be. When you tangle with a man as powerful as Lord Garreth, politics becomes the most valuable ally you have.” He shifted back in his chair, considering. “However, I can use a man with 'Mech training and combat experience. I believe you are that man. If you can channel your desire for revenge for a time, if you will swear your oath to me, I believe we can be of service to each other.”

What Ricol had in mind was the formation of a private BattleMech company, one reserved for his own use. Tyrell was his first recruit, the officer charged with forming and training the embryonic unit. The Red Duke, it seemed, had lost several of the 'Mechs in his private service in an adventure across the border in Steiner space a few years before. Ricol needed firepower to pursue his





own, private ambitions, both within the Combine and beyond it.

For Salvadore, it was enough to have both a steady income and new hope of one day having Victor Garreth within his reach.

It was nearly a year later when the Red Duke summoned him into his presence once more. Ricol had been gone from the Combine for some time, and Salvadore's company, now called Tyrell's Terrors, had been employed among the worlds administered directly by the Red Duke. These included the Duke's homeworld of Rodigo and nearby Verthandi, which was still suffering from the chaos left behind by a stupid administrator and a massive, popular uprising. It had been rumored that Ricol was out of the Combine entirely for much of that time, pursuing Star League treasure in the distant realm of the Free Worlds League.

The outcome of that expedition, or even whether it was more than rumor and idle speculation, was unknown. Upon the Duke's return, Tyrell's Terrors received official orders, signed by Ricol, to meet his entourage at a certain date at the spaceport on Kajikazawa. They would provide a guard of honor to escort the Duke to his next official meeting, with the First Lord himself on Luthien.

The Duke looked older than when Salvadore had seen him last, older and more tired, but his eyes still glinted with unrealized ambitions. "We spoke once of oaths...and vengeance," he said.

"Yes, your Grace."

"You have a choice before you now, Salvadore."

The Duke's use of his first name startled the young MechWarrior. "Your Grace?"

The Red Duke handed Salvadore an engraved card. "There is a reception tonight at the Great Hall in the capital, put on by Planetary Chairman Hideie himself. We are invited, of course."

"Yes, your Grace."

"An acquaintance of yours will be there."

Chill crept up Salvadore's spine. His mouth tightened.

"I leave the choice with you, Salvadore. I will tell you frankly that I have worked for some time to have...that person broken. He is loyal to the Combine, but he is loyal to himself first...and his stupidity could cost us much. Unfortunately, he has powerful friends, and I find there is no way to attack him without risking Harmony."

The word referred to the concept that governed the relationships between the warring nobles of House Kurita. A man was expected to sacrifice all things to maintain his personal honor—all things except the greater Harmony of the First Lord's will.

"You say I have a choice, your Grace?"

"Yes. You have leave to seek vendetta with Lord Garreth."

His pulse quickened. "Your Grace..."

"Don't thank me." Ricol's face was grim. "It could mean your death. I value you, Salvadore, and don't relish losing you or



your talents." He paused, considering. "However, I have an idea of what drives you. Perhaps you feel you will never be whole until you face Garreth and challenge him. So be it. You must seek your own destiny, and your own path."

"Thank you, your Grace."

"I release you from my service."

Shock confused Salvadore. "Your Grace? I thought..."

"In this matter, you must act on your own. As my man, you would be fighting for me. Against Garreth, you must fight with no help from me. I was able to obtain leave from a representative of the First Lord here on Kajikazawa for you to challenge Garreth. But the challenge must be between you and him. To do otherwise would involve far more than two men. It would threaten Harmony."

"Harmony..."

"Don't sound so bitter, youngster. The First Lord's will holds the Combine together. It is such trifles as personal feuds among his lords that threaten to tear it down."

"You will have the opportunity to face Garreth, to call him out before his peers. The permission for vendetta allows you to challenge him despite his higher rank. But I warn you that if you disgrace yourself, you will disgrace me. I will have to kill you myself."

"Understood, your Grace." The words were fire in his throat. "I will not let you down!"

Garreth stepped in, his *wakizashi* flashing in a flat arc that sent the tip whispering centimeters past Salvadore's chest. Salvadore struck, was blocked, struck again. Garreth twisted away, breathing hard.

Salvadore was surprised at his own inner calm. He had expected to feel...what? Triumph? Fear? A savage joy in striking back at his father's murderer? Instead, he felt only a steady sense of purpose.

He was surprised, too, by the hatred in Garreth's face.

"Dog!" the man hissed as they came together, blades locked wrist to wrist, straining. "You're Ricol's tool! Nothing more!"

He shoved, and Salvadore lost his footing on the slick marble floor. He fell but kept his blade high, between himself and his foe.

Rather than following his advantage, Garreth turned aside, approached one of the

young nobles standing in the ring around the combatants, and pulled the man's *wakizashi* from its scabbard. There was an audible gasp around the hall. It was expected that a duel would be fought with a man's own weapons. Grinning in savage anticipation of victory, Garreth advanced on Salvadore, a short sword gleaming in each hand, the points weaving in a complex pattern as he readied himself for the final strike.

Salvadore rolled as the twin blades snicked centimeters above his head. He found his feet then, brought his blade up in time to counter one overhead blow from Garreth's right-hand blade, then twisted aside to avoid Garreth's lunge with his left.

"Salvadore!"

He twisted again and glimpsed the burly form of Duke Ricol at the edge of the crowd, reaching toward him. The blade of the Red Duke's *wakizashi* caught the light as Salvadore closed his hand on its grip, and drew it from the extended scabbard.

Two blades faced two blades now. Steel rang on steel, striking sparks as the fighters came together, struck, and danced apart. Both men were breathing hard but Salvadore was smiling as he sensed fear in his opponent. "Mercenary dog!" Garreth screamed. "Mercenary bastard! You're Ricol's dog... nothing more!"

"I have my release," Salvadore retorted as they parted once more. "For now, I am my own dog!"

"Bah! Legalities! You do *his* work!"

Salvadore parried with his right blade, locking both of Garreth's blades for one instant. His left hand made a slashing cut that brought a spreading red stain to Garreth's long-sleeved tunic. They sprang apart, blades at the ready. Salvadore grinned and raised his right hand, holding his blade with his thumb as he wagged his fingers in an insulting "come here" gesture. "His Grace's work," he said, "is mine now, my Lord."

Garreth lunged again, all caution lost, his blades swinging wildly. Salvadore stepped in, feeling the hot slice of pain as Garreth's left-hand blade sliced down across his shoulder, laying the flesh open to the bone.

Salvadore's right blade was already coming up, however, sacrificing the parry to Garreth's swing in order to win one, brief chance at a thrust of his own.

Garreth's face twisted in an almost comical look of utter surprise as he stood

there, Salvadore's blade extending ten centimeters out from between his shoulder blades, the hilt already covered by a fountain of blood running down the weapon's shaft. There was a clatter as his two blades fell to the marble floor. Then he heaved a sigh, his knees folded, and Victor Garreth died.

Salvadore stood for a small eternity, looking at the crumpled, bloody form at his feet. He scarcely heard the shout from the nobles gathered around him, scarcely felt his own pain, or noticed the warm trickle of blood down his right arm. The emotion he had expected to feel continued to elude him. Victory was...exhausting.

But there was peace now, too, and a sense of completion. His father was avenged. And Salvadore was his own man once more.

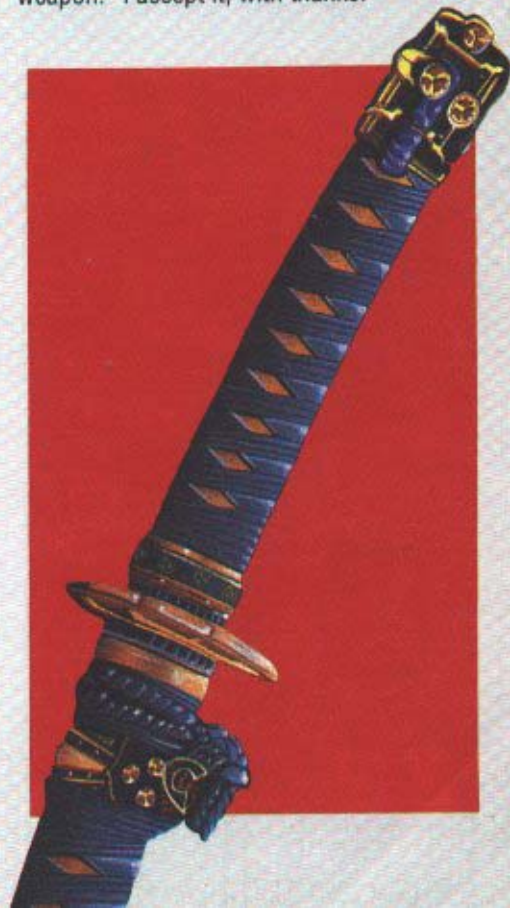
Somehow, he found the presence and strength to turn and bow to Ukita Hideie in approved fashion, then to face the Red Duke. Dropping to one knee, he extended the borrowed *wakizashi*, hilt first.

"Your blade, your Grace. Thank you."

"That is your blade, Captain. Mine is still in Garreth's chest."

"If you'll have it, your Grace...this is your blade as well."

Smiling, the Red Duke took Salvadore's weapon. "I accept it, with thanks."





# ...AND THEN THERE WAS THE TIME...

—Mark O'Green

“ I was in my *Slayer* on patrol in the Galedon district—  
*Not another story...*  
“Yeah, we’d just chased off a few of those ‘Mech drivers—”  
*Should have taken Su-Lin up on her offer...*  
“They call themselves pilots—”  
*She said her ‘Mech pilot had a friend coming...*  
“But all of us real pilots think ‘driver’ is more appropriate—”  
*Just wish I’d understood sooner...*  
“So there I was, cruising machity-mach across the deck—that’s fast and low—”  
*But when she said I’d get the Hunchback and she’d get the Goliath...*  
“When I see this *Stuka* in a pull-up strafing run—”  
*Oh, there go his hands again. Waving around. Looks like Su-Lin doing her Lovers’ Goldfish story...*  
“He finally spotted me, but I had his three-nine line. That’s when you’re behind him—”  
*Wonder how she’s doing tonight...*  
“He flipped inverted, faking that he was going back down so I’d go down and he could reverse on me. Like this—”  
*Oh, this is the part of the story where the goldfish start the Mating Dance...*  
“But I was ready. Old Dugie told me all about *Stukas*. You know Doogan? James Doogan? Wolf’s Dragoons? Has his own black *Stuka*?”  
*Wolfster Goons?*  
“Anyway, I kept pulling up, so when the *Stuka* reversed, I was right there with it—”  
*And you opened your window, waved your hands at him, and talked at him till he fell to the ground from boredom...*  
“So we got into this vertical scissors. That’s where you kind of go back and forth with your canopies facing each other—”  
*Hands again. Let me guess, this must be Goldfish Twining in Sparkling Water...*  
“I got so close to the *Stuka* that I could read the name stenciled on the canopy rail. Captain Karl Stephens—”  
*You’re not studying to be a Geisha in your off hours, are you?*  
“Karl Stephens! Karl’s Krusher! You believe it?—”  
*No, actually. Now ask me if I care...*  
“So by now we’re going real slow—”  
*So why did I think a fighter pilot would make his moves fast?*  
“But I see he’s just about to give up and try to escape—”  
*Escape. That would be nice...*  
“Usually, you can’t see something like that coming, but I’m pretty observant—”  
*Observant? You probably don’t even realize this is my real hair.*





"Comes from all the preparation time—"

*You want to talk preparation! Guess how long it took to get my hair to match my dress?*

"So anyway, I pull behind him, ready to shoot him down—"

*Twenty more seconds and you'll see 'shot down!'*

"And *Uff da!* His wingman sneaks in from the side and hits me with a lucky

burst—"

*Uff da! That's cute. First interesting thing you've said in—what is it—two hours?*

"Dinged my engine and I start smoking pretty bad—"

*Like your cigar...*

"Yeah. I still could've had Stephens, but I decided to save my *Slayer* instead—"

*Uh-oh, he's going to look this way. Better smile...*

"That would've been something, huh?—"

*Not a bad face. Kind of like a big puppy...*

"You could be sitting here with the man who shot down Karl Stephens, ya know?—"

*Maybe he'd stop talking if I did something with his hands...*

"So. Waddya think?—"

*Well, something to do on a Saturday night...*



# DISPATCH

—Elizabeth T. Danforth & Michael A. Stackpole

**T**O: Colonel Josiah Kimbolton, Commander, Second Free Worlds Guards  
FROM: Force Commander Simon X. Beckner, Third Battalion, Second Free Worlds Guards  
SOURCE: McAffe, 13 October 3020

*We're ready, sir. The Lyran mole gets word out to Snord starting tomorrow, focusing on Bright Thomlinson's missing art pieces. She'll include some other things taken from Snord's museum in the misinformation.*

*Is Snord really expected to come after this rubbish Kincaid pulled together? Some of this junk has caught my eye, but a toy dog? I don't care who it used to belong to.*

TO: Force Commander Simon X. Beckner, Third Battalion, Second Free Worlds Guards  
FROM: Colonel Josiah Kimbolton, Commander, Second Free Worlds Guards  
SOURCE: Bella I, 31 October 3028

*Snord's entire company jumped 36 hours after he verified that the Kincaid collection included Frazetta's Galleon and Whelan's Shapechanger. Be waiting for him.*

*I stood up for you in the dispatch to Janos Marik. This is the opportunity to prove you're worthy of your new rank. Don't disappoint me.*

TO: Colonel Josiah Kimbolton, Commander, Second Free Worlds Guards  
FROM: Force Commander Simon X. Beckner, Third Battalion, Second Free Worlds Guards  
SOURCE: McAffe, 3 November 3020

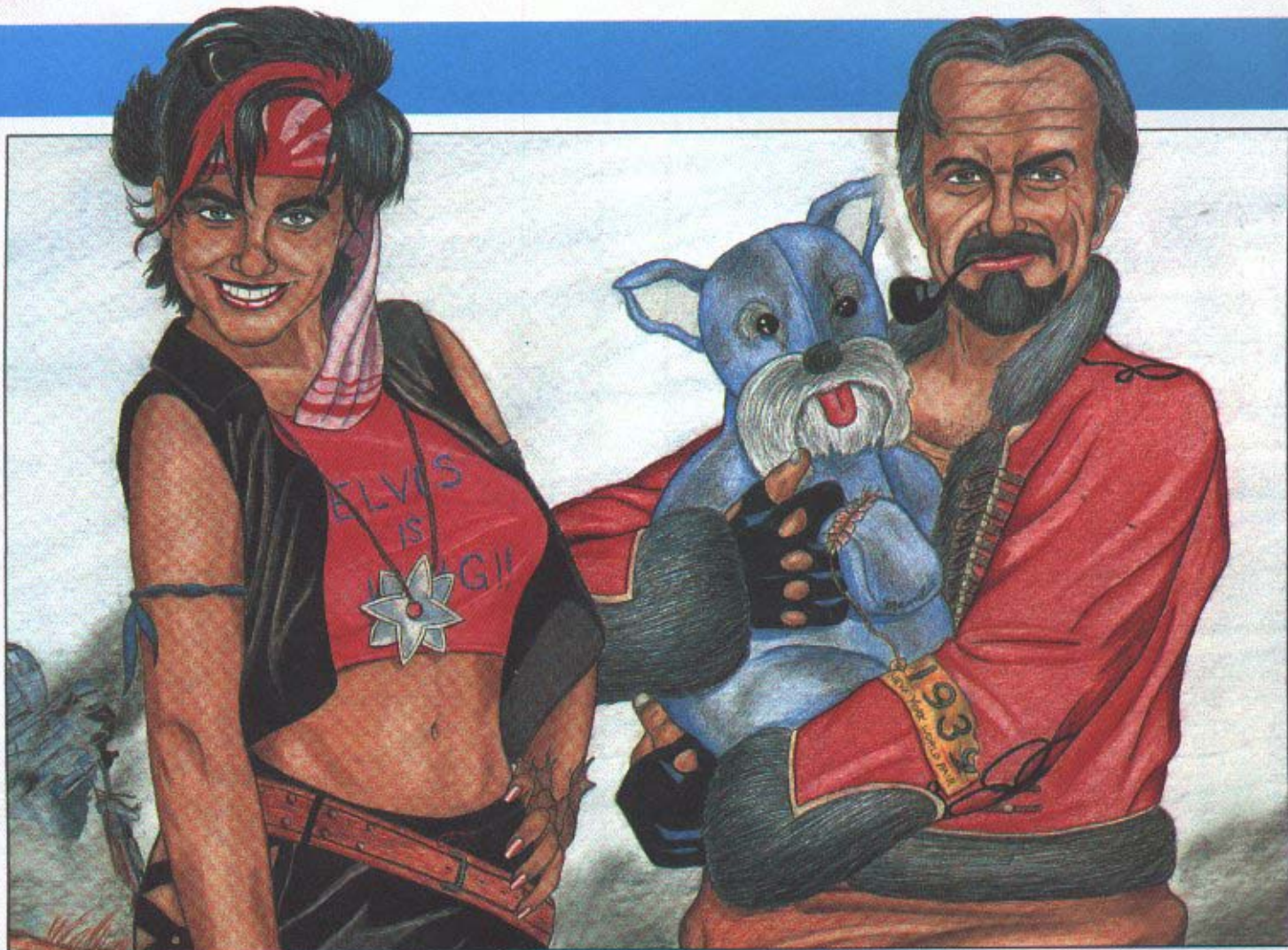
*Sir, this unit is a battalion. We've given them no reason to suspect there's an arm of the Second Guard here. Cranston Snord's Irregulars are lucky, but Kincaid's estate is isolated on a peninsula, and the causeway approach crosses open ground. One way in, one way out.*

*Would Duke Marik prefer to expend an entire regiment to destroy the Irregulars? We can't lose, sir.*

TO: Force Commander Simon X. Beckner, Third Battalion, Second Free Worlds Guards  
FROM: Colonel Josiah Kimbolton, Commander, Second Free Worlds Guards  
SOURCE: Bella I, 7 November 3020

*You said it very well, Force Commander. You cannot lose. Remember that.*





TO: Colonel Josiah Kimbolton, Commander,  
Second Free Worlds Guards  
FROM: Force Commander Simon X. Beckner,  
Third Battalion, Second Free Worlds  
Guards  
SOURCE: McAffe, 10 November 3020

*Sir, the Western District went off-line  
this morning. Techs dispatched to the  
power station, with cover. The rakshasa  
storms playing hell with instrumentation.*

TO: Captain Simon X. Beckner, Third Battal-  
ion, Second Free Worlds Guards  
FROM: Colonel Josiah Kimbolton, Com-  
mander, Second Free Worlds Guard  
SOURCE: Bella I, 16 November 3020

*Your failure is inexcusable. You are  
hereby relieved of duty. Report to Atreus 27  
November for a board of inquiry.*

TO: Colonel Josiah Kimbolton, Commander,  
Second Free Worlds Guards  
FROM: Captain Simon X. Beckner, Third  
Battalion, Second Free Worlds Guards  
SOURCE: En route to Atreus, 18 November  
3020

*Sir, I feel strongly that you've misinter-  
preted the Kincaid affair by characterizing it  
as an utter failure.*

*One lance covered the Techs at the West  
District station, though they ultimately faced  
no opposition. The remaining unit covered  
the causeway, the only rational way to come  
at the Kincaid estate.*

*The jump 'Mechs of Snord's company  
evidently walked the ocean bottom from  
Marggar's Harbor to the Kincaid peninsula.  
Reaching the seaward shelf, they hit their  
jets and landed behind us. The tactic was  
flawless; no one deals with the slime that  
planet calls an ocean. Joseph Petralona's  
entire lance folded in the first exchange.*

*When the other Irregulars crawled out of  
the ocean, I could not countenance further  
losses, sir. Not for that junk.*

*I think the exchange was a draw. Snord  
allowed us to come back for the damaged  
'Mechs, after all. Snord just took back what  
he said was his. Kincaid's collection, right  
down to the Eisenhower hand towels.*

TO: Janos Marik, Captain-General of the  
Free Worlds League  
FROM: Captain Cranston Snord, Com-  
mander, Cranston Snord's Irregulars  
SOURCE: Clinton, 27 November 3020

*Rhonda says thanks for the dog. She  
swears it was the King's favorite, a fourth  
birthday present. Glad to have it back.*

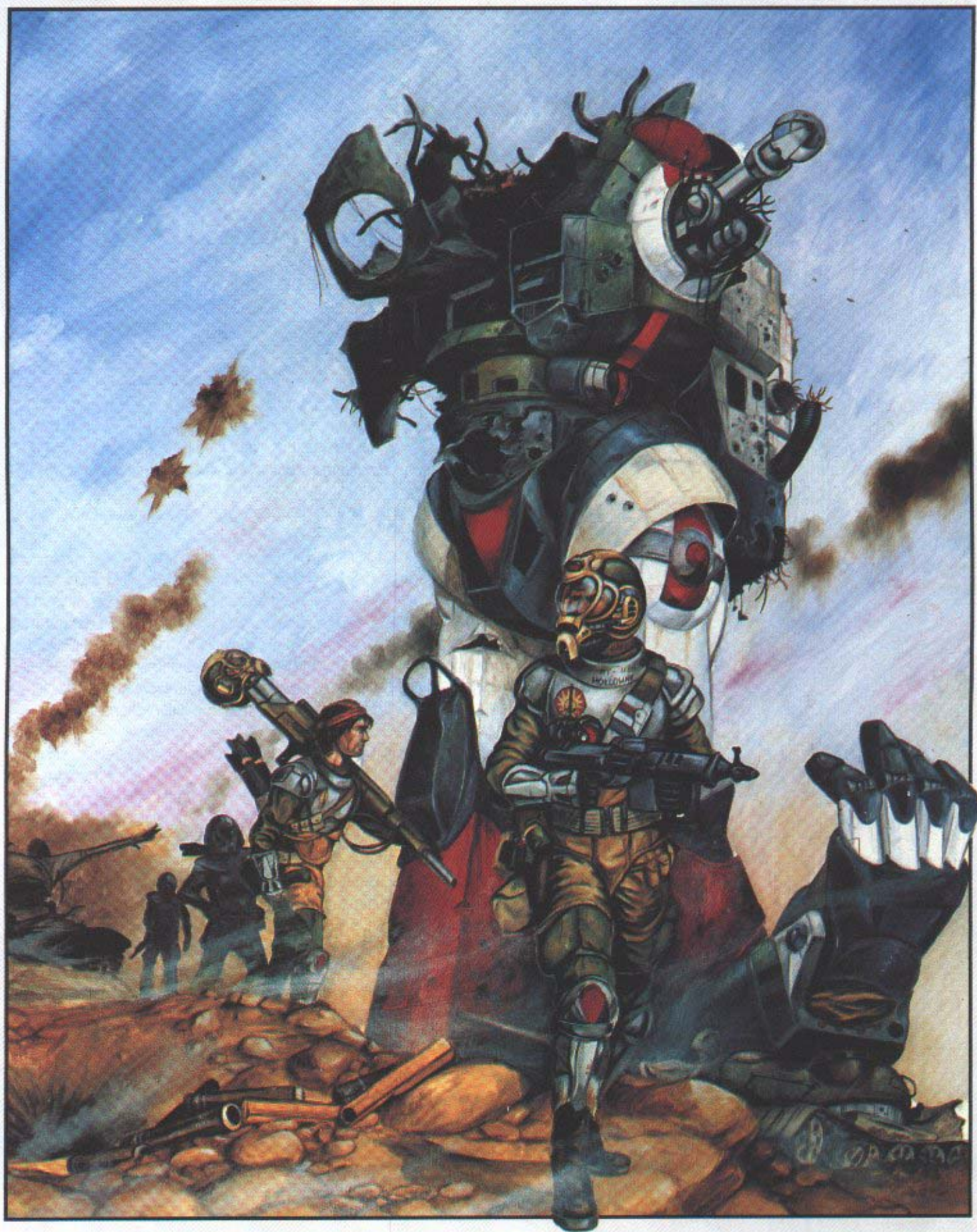
*Weather's here. Wish you were beauti-  
ful. Au revoir, Janos.*



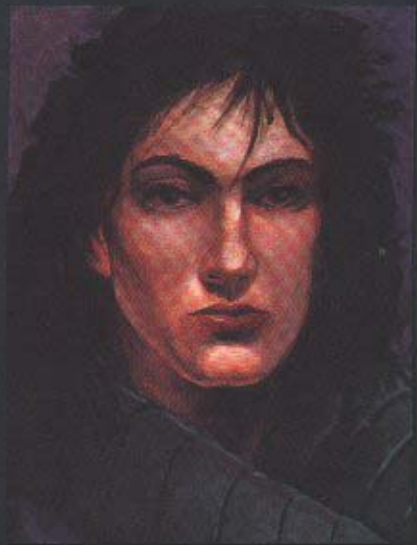
# GALLERY











# LEGION TEAM

—William H. Keith, Jr

**“Recon Two...watch your six!”**

The words brought a thrill of terror and then action. Tracy Maxwell Kent dropped her *Phoenix Hawk* into a crouch from which it could momentarily take to the sky.

“Belay that, Two!” The voice in her helmet earphones was crisp, sharp with command. “Break and roll!”

She overrode the charging sequence on her ‘Mech’s jump jets. Rocket explosions slammed the ground at her *Phoenix Hawk*’s feet as she threw her ‘Mech forward from its crouch and into a clumsy side roll. A burst of static through her commo gear marked the passing of a high-energy particle beam a few meters overhead. Gravel skittered out from under the combat machine as she slewed it sideways part way down the slope of a landslide spill, the massive Harmon laser in the ‘Mech’s right hand seeking a target. Computer-generated tracers flicked across her HUD as she sought a target lock. Nothing...

“Thanks, whoever you are,” Tracy said quietly into the microphone set into her neurohelmet’s chin guard. “Where are they?”

“Up the slope from you, to your right,” the voice said. “Range one-twenty...elevation three-oh degrees. They’re in the boulder field.”

As Tracy shifted her *Hawk*’s head, computer imagery outlined each element of the landscape as it drifted past her cockpit windshield. Upslope from her position, she could see the boulder field, an ancient tumble of glacial leavings, some the size of a small house.

There was a click in her headphones and the hiss of static as her benefactor shifted to the general command frequency. “Skull Leader to all Skulls,” the voice continued over Channel One. “We’ve got bogies playing hide-and-seek at Castle Seven-Bravo. Recon Two, hold your posit. Fire Lance and the rest of Recon, move in...fast! Command, follow me. Let’s *move!*”

*Skull Leader!* It was only then that Tracy realized that the voice over her headset had been that of the Old Man himself...Colonel Grayson Carlyle. In the sudden shock of the ambush, she hadn’t recognized him. Like most of the newer members of the mercenary Gray Death Legion, she still held the unit’s young commander in something close to awe.

The Colonel must have seen movement in the rocks and realized the hidden ambusher was drawing a bead on her ‘Mech’s lightly armored back. The enemy had been smart, triggering a salvo of missiles while laying his PPC along a line just above her head. Her first instinct would have been to cut in her jump jets, which would have sent her smack into that line of particle cannon fire. *The Colonel was watching me*, she thought, a little wildly. *He may have just saved my life!*

Where was he, anyway? She checked the tac deployment screen on her control panel and spotted the blips of green light moving over the electronic contour line map glowing on the screen. It looked as though the Colonel and his lancemates were trying to circle behind the



ambushers, trying for a clear shot at them from the yet higher slopes beyond the boulders. The rest of the company was far behind, strung out along the narrow path winding down through the mountains. It would be long, long minutes before they arrived to help.

With her 'Mech partly sheltered by the gravel spill, Tracy cautiously levered the machine's torso higher, searching first with her own eyes through her windshield, then through the electronic senses of her 'Mech's scanners. Electronic imagery was more sensitive than Human eyes but also more easily deceived by ECM jamming and decoys. Still...nothing...

Then something caught her eye to the left of the boulders, perhaps sunlight glancing off the beveled edge of an armor plate. The next moment, white light blossomed, scorching gray rock, and gravel erupted in front of her windshield as the PPC aimed manmade lightning at her 'Mech's exposed head. Hot gravel rattled like shrapnel off her *Phoenix Hawk's* armor as she dodged and lurched backward. The loose rock under her 'Mech's feet and knees gave way, and she slid feet-first and belly-down, scraping down the slope in an avalanche of skittering stones and billowing dust.

The jolt of landing jarred Tracy's teeth even through the padding of her helmet and her seat harness. *Damn! There goes the new paint job...*

Her 'Mech, dubbed the *Dutiful Daughter*, had only recently been overhauled, refurbished, and painted in the mottled tans and yellow browns that would blend it into the desolate landscape of Shionoha. The gravel slope must have scoured the *Daughter's* torso down to gray metal.

She was up and moving again now, circling to the left and scrambling up the slope once more. She didn't want to reappear in the same spot. With luck, the enemy sniper would assume that he'd scored a fatal bull's eye on her *Phoenix Hawk's* cockpit.

"Skull Leader to Skulls," Grayson's voice barked. "They've seen us, boys! Watch it!" Static hissed as PPC beams ionized air and deflected radio waves. The explosions nearby spoke of missiles loosed, of boul-







ders shattered by arcing high explosives.

On her tac screen, four green blips scattered beyond the spaghetti tangle of contour lines marking the boulder field. The enemy 'Mechs were not visible, would not be visible until a friendly 'Mech got a clear fix on them and transmitted their positions over the tactical computer net. From the movements of Carlyle's 'Mech and the others, though, it was clear that they were taking fire.

*Reason it out, girl,* Tracy told herself, dark eyes narrowing in concentration behind the visor of her neurohelmet. *The snipers must have assumed you were dead and swung around to the near side of the boulders to engage the Command Lance as it closed in.*

The situation unfolded itself in her mind. The hidden enemy would have been waiting for them in a secure ambush among the boulders. They probably hadn't spotted the rest of the Recon Lance as yet, having seen none of the Gray Death Legion's 'Mechs beyond her own. She had been on point as the Legion wended its way into these barren, rugged hills. After the enemy had popped her, they must have realized they were being flanked and swung about to take the Gray Death's Command Lance. Right now, they would be above her, under cover on *her* side of the big boulder, with their backs to her.

Which meant that she should be able to take them by surprise.

How many enemy 'Mechs might there be? Tracy wondered. She had glimpsed only one. The fact that she had been under fire from a PPC and missiles did narrow the field of possible opponents somewhat. There just weren't that many BattleMechs mounting both particle cannon and missile racks. A *Panther*, possibly...

She nodded to herself. Yes, a 35-ton *Panther*, most likely. That was a Kurita favorite. Besides, the bad guys were not likely to post something as big and as expensive as a *BattleMaster* for rear-guard sniper duty out here in the wilderness. In her mind, the enemy had already made the transition from "they" to "it." Assuming there was only one enemy 'Mech up there, it was probably a *Panther*. She should have no trouble taking it one-on-one with her 45-ton *Phoenix Hawk*.

Especially with the element of surprise.

Tracy edged the *Dutiful Daughter* part way up the loose slope, went into a crouch,

then triggered her 'Mech's jump jets. White-hot plasma shrieked from the twin verniers set below her 'Mech's jets as the 'Mech straightened from its crouch and sailed skyward. The gravel slope blurred past her windscreen, and then the *Hawk* was descending on ravening jets of flame, scattering gravel and raising a fresh cloud of dust. Her 'Mech took the shock of landing on partly bent legs as the Harmon heavy laser swung to cover a silhouette half-glimpsed against the largest boulder a hundred meters away. Even before her ID computer could bring up the target's name and tonnage, she recognized the enemy 'Mech.

A *Griffin*! She'd forgotten about *Griffins*! Ten tons heavier than her own BattleMech, slinging a Fusigon PPC like a rifle in its massive fists, and carrying a blunt, tubular LRM launcher across its right shoulder, an undamaged *Griffin* was more than a match for her own machine. Nor had her surprise been as complete as she'd hoped, for the *Griffin* was already spinning about, its PPC coming to the point.

Tracy bit off a curse and triggered her heavy laser. Coherent light stabbed into the heavier 'Mech's right side, scoring a black trail of scorched paint and half-molten metal. The enemy PPC spat lightning an instant later. The blast caught the *Dutiful Daughter* full in the chest and sent her staggering backward. While Tracy struggled to keep her 'Mech from tumbling back over the slope behind her, the electrical charge from the bolt spilled from her 'Mech in crackling forks that stabbed the ground around her. For a moment, her instruments went crazy as her charge shunts struggled with the massive overload.

Then she was moving again, circling right, her heavy laser snapping off a shot that melted rock and forced the *Griffin* to weave sideways out of her line of fire.

"Skull Leader!" she called, her voice taut with excitement and fear. "I'm back in the fight! Enemy *Griffin* behind the big rock!"

"Back away," Carlyle's voice replied. "Pull back and take cover! We've got our hands full up here!"

A quick glance at her tac display showed the situation. There had been more than one ambusher. Four red pinpoints moved among the rocks now, surrounded by the loosely woven net of green. Three enemy 'Mechs among the boulders farther up the



slope were engaging the Colonel's Command Lance as he tried to move down the hill. Behind her, the 'Mechs of the Gray Death's Fire Lance and the others of her Recon Lance were still hurrying forward, but too far...too far...

Another PPC bolt burned the air close to the *Dutiful Daughter*. She returned fire, burning deep into the armor above the enemy *Griffin's* right knee. The Colonel's order to pull out was lost in the surge of her own blazing need to strike back. She fired again, shifted, fired once more. The *Griffin's* next shot struck air but carbonized the paint on her 'Mech's left pauldron.

Tracy knew that the duel could not continue much longer. Though the *Griffin* carried only slightly more armor than the *Phoenix Hawk*, its main weapon was heavier, able to give more damage to armor and to vulnerable internal wiring with each shot than her laser. The *Dutiful Daughter* mounted a pair of medium lasers as well, one set into the vambrace of each arm, side by side with paired heavy machine guns. She did not dare fire them at the same time as her heavy laser for fear of building up too much heat.

The *Griffin* had only the PPC and its long-range missile rack. Though it could not do much with its missiles at this short range, that massive PPC would be more than enough to slag the *Dutiful Daughter* into half-fused junk.

A bolt struck her, mangling her *Hawk's* left arm. Red lights flared across her console, warning of power loss to her right medium laser, of a jam to the machine gun mounted there. Her return fire missed.

She had to do something *now!*

Inspiration whispered through the roar of explosions as the *Griffin's* missile salvo exploded around her. The key to this duel was range. Neither of the *Griffin's* weapons were as effective at extremely close range as her lasers. If she could close the range suddenly, yet stay out of the reach of those massive, metal-crumpling hands, she might have a chance.

Tracy gauged the angles by eye, then triggered her jump jets a second time. Their kick sent her sailing low across the ground, and brought her down with a roar less than 50 meters from the enemy 'Mech. The black-on-red Kurita dragon was plainly visible now, painted high on the enemy's chest and on the shield baffles flaring above each

shoulder. She could make out the unit markings as well, a starburst against a gold, setting sun. *Second Dieron Regulars*, she thought. *The Pride of Shionoha, they call themselves...*

*Kurita bastards, all of them...*

Her laser was already up and firing as she recovered from her landing. Laser fire scored hits on the enemy's arm and torso, licking greedily at the House Kurita emblem as she used it for a bull's eye. The *Griffin* brought its PPC around and fired, but the range was short, the deflection difficult. Tracy dodged, putting her machine between the boulder and the Kurita 'Mech. The gravel slope she had fallen down earlier was just behind the larger 'Mech's feet.

Another flight of missiles erupted from the *Griffin's* shoulder rack, and one connected with the *Dutiful Daughter's* already-battered left arm. Abandoning caution, Tracy began to snap off shots from both her hand-held heavy laser and the medium laser set into her right vambrace. An alarm shrilled in her ears as the heat buildup in her 'Mech threatened to shut down the *Dutiful Daughter*, but she slapped the override and continued to lay down a savage barrage of fire. *A hit! And another!* The temperature in her cockpit climbed. Tracy was drenched in sweat now, her skin glistening where her brief costume exposed it. She could hear the strain in the 'Mech's cabin-cooling system as the unit struggled unevenly to keep the cockpit temperature within habitable limits, to keep the coolant flowing through the vest she wore over her upper body.

A PPC bolt connected with her *Hawk*, smashing her to one side, but she continued firing as molten craters opened in the enemy *Griffin's* chest and shoulders. Shifting tactics, she redirected her fire down, aiming for the *Griffin's* feet. The Kurita pilot stepped back and vanished from sight as the edge of the gravel spill gave way and the *Griffin* slid down the slope with the din and dust of a boiler factory.

Tracy urged the *Dutiful Daughter* forward at a lumbering run. Having already scouted the terrain at the base of the slope, she knew what to expect, knew where the enemy must lie. She caught the Kurita 'Mech before the dust had settled, before its pilot was able to bring it to its feet. A hit scored squarely in the 'Mech's back...and another. Her medium laser burned through internal

wiring and the strap-like bundles of polyacetylene myomers. Greasy smoke spilled from the laser gash as the *Griffin* staggered erect.

A new alarm sounded over Tracy's headphones, shriller and more urgent. She ignored it, concentrating on the *Griffin* centered in the projected crosshairs of her HUD. Her thumb closed on the firing button for her large laser, but nothing happened. *Dead! All her controls were dead!* The HUD flickered and went out, her cabin lights dimmed, even the hum of the cabin cooling systems dwindled with a mournful lowering of pitch. Her eyes moved frantically from display to display across the control panel. The heat had been too much. The *Dutiful Daughter* was shutting herself down!

The *Griffin* remained standing in the line of her raised laser, but she was helpless to fire, to move, to do anything at all. All the *Griffin's* pilot needed to do was bring his 'Mech's PPC up and trigger it. It was unlikely that the *Daughter* would survive another direct hit.

The flash of explosive bolts around the *Griffin's* armored head took her by surprise. Magically, or so it seemed, the Kurita 'Mech's head unfolded, curved slabs of armor falling away from the cramped and smoke-filled cockpit. A second flash edged the cockpit's interior with orange flame, and the Kurita pilot rocketed into the air as his ejection system triggered. She watched in disbelief as the pilot's ejection seat braked on small but savagely flaring rocket jets into the dust a hundred meters beyond the immobile form of his abandoned *Griffin*. Smoke continued to gush from the ruptured armor of her erstwhile opponent.

*She had won!*

"Tracy! Are you all right?" Carlyle's voice was broken by worry and fatigue.

"Fine, Colonel. *The Daughter* shut down on me, but I nailed that *Griffin*."

A shadow fell across her windscreen, and Tracy became aware of a hulking mass near her 'Mech's right side. Pulling off her neurohelmet, she cracked the *Dutiful Daughter's* overhead hatch, gasping as cold air boiled through the opening into the cockpit. It was chill in the mountains south of the Shionoha capital, the wind carrying the bite of the glaciers higher up in the mountains of Tsintao. She squeezed herself upright in the hatch and saw Carlyle's 75-ton *Marauder* a few meters away. Behind her, the other





'Mechs of the Command Lance—Kalmar's *Shadow Hawk*, Clay's *Wolverine*, and McCall's *Rifleman*—picked their way down past the rock field. Oily smoke clawed the crisp air beyond the boulders, where at least one more kill burned.

"O.K, people," Carlyle's voice sounded over her cabin speaker. "Close up tight. We've got a long way to go before nightfall."

Camp that evening was in a sheltered circle of glacier-tumbled stone among the foothills of the Tsintao mountains. It offered the protection of a natural fortress against roving Kurita 'Mechs during the night, and a convenient staging area for their strike against the enemy spaceport the following morning. Eight of A Company's 'Mechs were parked around the perimeter, their weapons trained on the gray shadows and blacknesses of the surrounding terrain. The Command Lance machines plus six 'Mechs of the training reserve company occupied the center, close by the Colonel's tent. Beyond, to the south, the mass of the Tsintao Mountains loomed jagged against a star-gloried sky.

Tracy received her summons to report to the Colonel before she had completed her final check-out of the *Dutiful Daughter's* systems. Except for the savaged left arm, the damage was not bad, and her Tech-experienced eye told her that it would take only a few hours to repair the arm laser in a decent refit facility. Her fears for the 'Mech's paint job had been well-founded, but that was corrected easily enough, too. When the *Daughter* went in for her refit, she would get a new coat of paint. Tracy was already looking forward to the task, for it would give her the opportunity to paint a *Griffin's* silhouette on the hull to record her day's kill.

All in all, she was quite pleased with herself as she locked down the *Daughter* and set off through the dark toward Colonel Carlyle's tent.

**M**echWarrior Tracy Kent, reporting as ordered, Colonel."

Her salute was precise and correct. Though the Legion did not go in for military ostentation, she still had the habit of her earlier training. The ingrained ritual helped steady her.

Carlyle studied Tracy for what seemed like a long time, and she became more and

more uncomfortable under his stare. He sat back on his camp stool behind a folding table piled high with charts and local maps, examining her with a precise concentration that was unnerving.

If only she'd taken the time to change out of the scanty briefs, tattered cooling vest, and boots that she'd worn aboard the *Daughter*! She knew how to make herself attractive, but at the moment, her skin was streaked and smudged with alternating layers of sweat-caked dirt and grease, and her long, dark hair was plastered across her face and back in unkempt and grimy mats. She folded her arms uncertainly across her chest and waited. What could possibly be going through the Colonel's mind?

"You came to us from the Blackguards," he said at last.

"Yes, sir." He knew her combat record as well as she did. What was the problem?

"And...I believe you lost your brother." He spoke gently, almost hesitantly, but the words burned all the same.

"Yes...sir." The words were bitten off and sharp. She was determined not to let the emotion show.

"So you have it in for the Kuritans."

*Those bastards!* she thought angrily, but aloud all she said was, "Why do you say that, Colonel?"

Carlyle crossed his own arms. "We had a problem today, you and I."

"Sir?"

"I ordered you to pull out...not to face that *Griffin* one on one. You stayed put and slugged it out."

She wondered briefly why he had waited until now, instead of bringing it up right after the battle. Then she realized he must have waited deliberately, so that he could talk with her away from the rest of the company. She was grateful for the courtesy, but then decided he was condescending to her. And that was one thing Tracy Maxwell Kent would take from no one.

She threw back her head. "I won."

"*Bull!*" Carlyle roared the word, and Tracy took a step back, startled. The Colonel got up from his stool and leaned forward, his hands on the edge of the map table. When he spoke again, his voice was low but full of tremendous power. "That scrap of yours came right down to the wire. The only damn thing that saved your skin was the fact that the *Griffin* pilot couldn't have known you



were shutting down! He figured you were about to pot him another one and punched out. If he'd have hung on for one more good shot, you'd have been more than frozen out of the fight. You would have been *dead!*"

"But he *did* punch out..."

"Are you telling me you were relying on luck?"

"No, sir. I mean..." She stopped, confused. Grayson Carlyle was known across the Lyran Commonwealth for his luck...and the luck of his mercenary unit. "Don't you, Colonel? Rely on luck, I mean?"

"God help me, no! I use it, if it comes around, but I also remember that there're two kinds of luck, good and bad. If you want to live in this business, you learn not to gamble on fifty-fifty propositions. You can do that only so long before the odds catch up with you!"

"Yes, sir." Tracy spoke stiffly, without emotion. She had come to this tent expecting congratulations, and instead she was getting a lecture.

The Colonel read her mood and frowned. "You joined us on Helm," he said.

"Yes, sir. Your Exec recruited me on Galatea."

"You've been piloting 'Mechs...what? Two years now?"

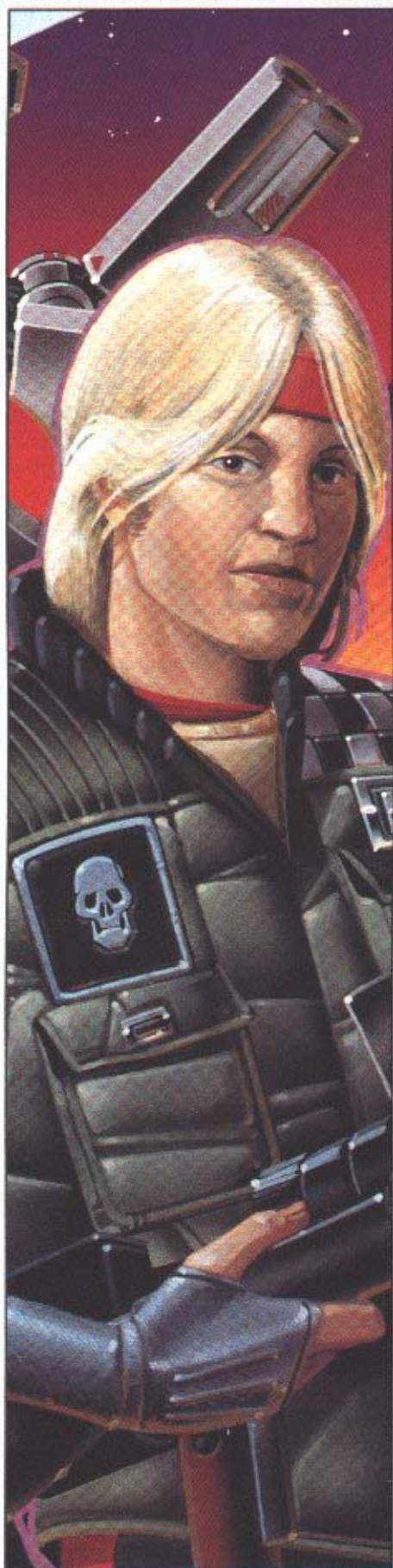
"Something like that."

It was a long and complicated story, and in any case, she was sure that Carlyle already knew her file.

Tracy Maxwell Kent had been born far across the Inner Sphere, on the world of New Avalon, heart and capital of the far-flung Federated Suns of House Davion. Her father was Lord Rodney Howard Kent, her brother Captain Sir Roderick Fitzroy Kent, and she had been the pampered daughter of one of the wealthier noble families of the Federated Suns.

The death of her brother had shattered her. She and Fitz had always been close, and news that he had died defending a nameless hill on a world in the Draconis March had left her brooding and depressed. Her decision to join the military academy on New Avalon had brought about the final split between her and her family. Especially after her father used his position to have her thrown out of the academy.

That should have been the end of her MechWarrior career, but Tracy Kent was an unusually stubborn and determined young



lady. Instead of returning to her family's estate, she'd joined the line infantry as a private, then taught herself what she needed to know to become a Tech. Soon she'd worked her way up to Tech Sergeant with the Blackguards, and eventually she'd been given the chance to pilot a 'Mech on her own.

She'd fought on Cassias, and survived, though the Blackguards as a unit did not. Cashiered after the slaughter on that world, she drifted from world to world with the *Dutiful Daughter*, her beloved *Phoenix Hawk*, until she made it to Galatea and fell in with a recruiter for the Gray Death Legion. Hoping for a chance to kill Kurita MechWarriors, she'd been disappointed that her first fight with the Legion had been against Marik forces, on Helm.

Things had been looking up after her fight today, though. Until now, that is.

"A MechWarrior cannot rely on luck," Carlyle said slowly. "What he relies on is the steadiness and the training and the discipline of his lancemates."

"Yes, sir."

"You had point this afternoon. You flushed that ambush. You fought well. But..." He let the word hang in the air a moment...a rebuke. "You weren't working with the rest of us. I gave you an order, and you disregarded it. You chose to fight it out on your own, and very nearly cost the Legion an expensive and hard-to-replace medium 'Mech." He smiled then, unexpectedly. "You also nearly got yourself killed, young lady... and that wouldn't do at all."

He looked at her expectantly, as though waiting for some reply. Almost, she opened her mouth to protest, to explain that she'd done what she'd thought best, that the situation at the time had...

"I understand, sir. It won't happen again."

"Good. Because I'm relying on you."

"Colonel?"

"All of us have to rely on each other, Tracy. We *have* to, or one day we'll meet somebody bigger and tougher than us... and it'll all be up. We work together as a team, or else we die as a mob. There are no other options."

"Yes, sir."

"Then that's all that needs to be said about it. Now...you'd better turn in. I'm going to need you tomorrow for a special assignment. I want you rested. Dismissed."





Tracy couldn't help wondering if the "special assignment" was punishment for her actions of the day before. It was all well and good to have the Colonel lecture her on being part of a team, but then he separated her from the main body of the unit to do some make-work far from where the action would be.

Shionoha was a forbidding world, a planet of rugged mountains and chill, broken plateaus, of continent-sized glaciers and small, land-locked seas that were as salty, ice-cold, and gray as the sky. The world owed its name, curiously enough, to the Terran Japanese colonists who had founded the first settlement close to the vast *Shionohara*, the salt-plain, which marked the dry, mineral-encrusted basin of a long vanished ocean.

Despite the planet's name, its predominant terrain was mountainous. Company A had made a combat drop onto the *Shionohara* flats, securing an area where the Legion's DropShips could ground and disgorge the rest of the unit's men and machines. Their primary target was Kaigun, at the site of the world's first settlement, 300 kilometers north from the drop zone. The planet's principal spaceport and 'Mech repair facilities were both located at Kaigun. Carlyle had split his force in two, the infantry and cav vehicles setting off across the mineral flats of the *Shionohara*, while A Company and the training cadre turned west into the mountains, climbing narrow, switch-back paths into the wilderness above the vanished sea. The column of 18 'Mechs had been climbing the twisting path for two days, swinging far to the west of Kaigun before descending from the mountain passes and into the agricultural lands around the city.

Twenty klicks northwest of Kaigun was an industrial center at a village called Mifune. Analysis of photos taken from orbit suggested that at least some of the buildings were used for manufacturing and storing weapons and spare parts of BattleMechs. The Second Dieron Regulars were a tough, veteran unit, one with hard-earned experience fighting in the mountains. If the struggle for *Shionoha* turned into a prolonged campaign, the Pride of *Shionoha* would have to be deprived of its sources of replacements and spares.

And that was Tracy's mission.

Her force, code-designated as Arrow, consisted of her own *Phoenix Hawk* and the six light 'Mechs—two *Locusts*, two *Stingers*, and two *Wasps*—of the Legion's training cadre.

Colonel Carlyle had explained that he wanted to give the training group some experience in an independent operation. Tracy suspected that he also wanted to get them clear of A Company and out of the line of fire. Thus far, except for the ambush in the mountain pass, the Second Dieron Regulars had been conspicuous by their absence, and Carlyle was plainly worried that the Kurita defenders had some nasty plans up their sleeves for the Gray Death mercenaries.

Carlyle's orders were succinct and to the point. "Intel says that Mifune is not protected, that the Dierons have all pulled south to protect Kaigun. I want you to destroy that factory complex. Avoid tangling with Kurita 'Mechs." His sharp glance at her had stung. "Keep those kids out of a real fight. But destroy that factory."

Tracy could only assume that Carlyle had detailed her for the mission because he thought she was a bit too eager to kill Kurita MechWarriors. The thought that he might not trust her gnawed at Tracy as she led her column of 'Mech trainees through the rugged hills toward Mifune.

*Am I really part of the Legion's team, she wondered. Or is he just getting me out of the way. And how will I ever know for sure?*

As their column crested a ridge, they saw the industrial plant for the first time. It was nestled in a flat-bottomed valley astride an oily, chemical-stained stream. The village of Mifune lay beyond, on the road to Kaigun.

The way looked wide open.

"Deploy forward!" Tracy ordered. "Casey and Babbage, pull back and watch the rear!"

By doing that, she could watch the column's rear and keep their two weakest 'Mechs, the two *Locusts*, out of the way. They started down the ridge, alert for any sign that they were expected.

The sign came, but from an unexpected direction.

"Arrow Leader! Arrow Leader! Bandits! Bandits on the ridge!"

The voice was that of Greg Babbage, one of the *Locust* pilots.

"This is Arrow Leader," she replied, forcing calm to her voice as she swung her *Hawk*



to face the ridge behind her. There was no sign of enemy 'Mechs on this side. "What is your sit, Arrow Six?"

"Kurita 'Mechs, lots of 'em!" The boy was on the edge of panic.

"Slow down, Greg. Where? How many!"

She could hear the youngster gulping down fear. "On this side of the ridge... uh... the west side. Uh... don't know how many, but we've spotted a *Hunchback*...and an *Assassin*...and there're others moving up through the rocks. They're moving up the trail."

"Arrow Leader!" It was Dolby, one of the *Stinger* pilots, and his voice sounded just as scared. "This is Arrow Two! Kurita 'Mechs, moving from the east. I see *Dragons*..."

Oh, *drek*!

"Arrow Leader to all Arrows! Fall back on the ridge crest. Now!" Tracy's decision had been immediate and obvious. The Kurita force had somehow moved unseen across the mountain path that Tracy and her men had taken, and the enemy now lay across their lines of communications with the rest of the Gray Death Legion to the west. Worse, there were heavy 'Mechs, 60-ton *Dragons*, closing from the east. So many Kurita 'Mechs could only mean that Tracy's force had stumbled across an important concentration of the Second Dieron Regulars.

It also meant that Tracy and her tiny command were surrounded.

From the crest of the ridge, she could see the Combine forces in both directions. As tense minutes dragged on, the composition of both forces became apparent. There was one lance of heavies, two *Dragons*, a *Rifleman*, and an *Orion* to the east, and at least six, possibly eight, 'Mechs among the tangle of rocks to the west. From the look of things, a Kurita company had been stationed here. Arrow's sudden appearance had surprised the defenders, but they were now mobilizing to surround and crush the intruders. The first long-range missiles were already arrowing into the rocky crest of the ridge.

"Hey! There're too many of them."

"What'll we do?"

"Arrow Leader! I'm hit! I'm hit!"

"Silence on the line!" Tracy's command cut across the babble on the tac channel. "Spread out and circle! Take a position and go prone!"

She was sacrificing her light 'Mechs' mobility by having them lie down, but

mobility was not so much an advantage here, with no place to go. The two *Wasps* would be unable to fire the SRM 2s mounted in their left legs while they were lying down, but that disadvantage would be more than compensated by the enemy's inability to get a clear shot at them.

Laser fire lanced down the slope toward the lance of heavies advancing across the plain from the industrial plant. The 'Mechs to the west were closer and more numerous, but it was harder to see them. The heavies, on the other hand, made a perfect target. Light from multiple hits washed across the *Orion* and one of the *Dragons*. The *Rifleman* pulled to a stop and swung its double-barreled arms up and around, raking the ridge line with high-powered laser and autocannon fire, but from the bottom of the slope the angle of fire was impossible. Rock shards and gravel rattled off the defenders' armor, but no damage was done. Tracy gave another command, and synchronized bursts of coherent light struck among the attackers again, staggering the already-damaged *Dragon* and blasting great chunks of armor off the *Orion*'s left leg and torso.

"Arrow to Skull! Arrow to Skull! Come in, Skull!" Though the Tek Battlecom communications system built into her *Phoenix Hawk* was high-powered, long-ranged, and heavily shielded against enemy jamming, the mountains would make communication with the Gray Death difficult. She boosted her output to full and prayed as she called again. "Arrow to Skull! Reply!"

"This is Skull Leader." Carlyle's voice was scratchy with distance and interference, but she could hear him clearly. She felt a surge of relief. "Go ahead, Arrow."

"We walked into it, Skull Leader!" In quick, terse phrases, she outlined the situation as enemy fire burned through the afternoon sky, probing their positions. "We're surrounded, outnumbered, and outweighed," she concluded. "Can you assist?"

"We're on our way," Carlyle replied. "But we're a good distance away. Can you hold for..." The pause was interminable. "Can you hold for 20 minutes?"

Twenty minutes! She'd not stopped to think about the intervening distance between the two units. In BattleMech combat, even two minutes seemed to drag on forever. But 20 minutes...!

"Skull Leader...we'll try. Come as fast as

you can!"

A rush by the western force demanded her attention then. She had posted the two *Locusts* part way down the slope amid a sprawl of house-sized boulders. There they were hunkered down with their spidery legs folded behind them, their chin turret lasers almost resting on the ground. On either side were the two *Stingers*.

She arrived as a lance of Kurita 'Mechs started up the slope, spread out on either side of the rocky trail they'd followed earlier. A 50-ton *Hunchback* had the lead, its body looking misshapen under the massively armored and cooled hulk of its shoulder-mounted autocannon. The *Locusts* had already fired, their medium lasers heating patches on the *Hunchback*'s armor to a bright cherry red. She turned her heavy laser on the same target and triggered three quick bursts. The heavy autocannon bucked and smoked with a measured *thud-thud-thud*, sending streams of high-explosive shells smashing into the hillside behind her.

She fired, moved, then fired again. The *Hunchback* was more heavily armored than her own *Phoenix Hawk*, but much slower. The defender's fire was striking it from several directions, all from higher up, and its pilot was having trouble identifying a target for its own answering fire. One of Arrow's *Stingers* scored a crippling hit on a Kurita *Wasp*, then shifted its aim to the *Hunchback* as the light Combine 'Mech collapsed to the ground. Taking fire from four 'Mechs, the *Hunchback* clumsily swung about and began to lumber back down the ridge, the *Assassin* and a *Panther* providing cover.

Tracy continued to pour fire into the retreating 'Mechs, though she mourned the loss of her left-arm laser. With yesterday's damage to her 'Mech still not repaired, she had only the medium laser and machine gun in her right arm, plus the heavy laser clamped into her right fist. She fired a last burst at the retreating *Assassin*, scoring a hit on the lighter 'Mech's leg, then scanned the terrain to left and right.

Her tac display showed that the two *Wasps* she'd left defending the eastern side of the ridge were holding on. The Kurita heavies had taken damage and were falling back. Perhaps there would be time now for a maneuver of her own. With the western enemy force retreating in disarray, she might be able to slip along the west slope to





north or south, loop down through the tangle of boulders until she flanked the western force, and convince them that the defenders trapped on the ridgetop had just received reinforcements. The confusion might allow her to extricate her entire command. It would be no good sending one of the others. *Stingers*, *Wasps*, and *Locusts* would be no good for the job she had in mind. Her *Phoenix Hawk*, though, with its jump jets and heavy laser, was perfect.

"Arrow Leader to Arrow Two!" she called. "Dolby, come in!"

"Go ahead, Arrow Leader." He no longer sounded scared, but his voice was still dry and tight.

"You're in command. I'm going to try to flank 'em."

"What...now?"

"We have them on the run, Dolby. Just hold them. But be ready to pull the group out when I give the word!"

"Uh...O.K..." He sounded uncertain.

Explosions savaged their way along the ridge crest, blasting great chunks of rock

and dirt skyward. Tracy glanced at her tac display, and saw red blips astride the ridge to the south. With a shock, she realized that the Kurita forces had flanked their position, having sent one of the two west-slope lances south and around her by straddling the ridge. They were moving toward her now with the slow determination of a heavy earth-mover, ripping the landscape with shell and beam in an effort to root the defenders from the ridge.

But that could be good! It meant that there were only four enemy 'Mechs along the path to the west, and those were battle-damaged and in disorder. If she could flank them, they would scatter, moving south through the boulder fields to join their companions. The way would be open for the Arrow force.

"Hang on, Dolby!" she called. "Hold them off for five minutes, and I'll have a hole for us to move through! Attention all Arrows! Arrow Two is in command! Hold tight and pour it on! I'm going to open a door for us off this ridge!"



She triggered her jump jets, keeping her 'Mech low to the ground in a series of bounding hops that carried her down the slope. Behind her, the ridgetop was blotted out by black smoke and a rain of dirt and sky-borne debris.

"Arrow Two! This is Seven! I'm hit bad!"

"Arrow Two! Arrow Four! The heavies are moving! We're taking fire from the east!"

"Arrow Two! Respond, please!"

Tracy brought the *Dutiful Daughter* to a halt at the base of the ridge. She could hear the panic rising in the voices of the cadre apprentices. Ahead, she could see a pillar of smoke where one of the 'Mechs they'd engaged a moment ago was now burning.

And yet...

"Arrow Two! Arrow Two! Come in, please!" That voice was touched by stark terror. Who was it...Lannetti?

"Lannetti! This is Arrow Leader! What's the problem?"

"Arrow Leader! Dolby's 'Mech is down! I think he's dead!"

Oh, damn...

And with that moment's anguish came a greater one. *I've gone and done it again, wandering off on my own after half the Kurita assault force.*

She spun the *Dutiful Daughter* at the base of the ridge and fired her jump jets. In a long, sailing bound, she skimmed to the crest of the ridge.

Smoke choked the sky, where missile trails snarled and tangled amid the pale flash of laser beams. She spotted Dolby's *Stinger*, collapsed against a boulder on the east slope. Close by, the other *Stinger* was holding off a *Panther* in an unequal duel that could not last more than a few seconds.

She jumped again, bringing her 'Mech in for an unsteady landing just up the hill from the *Panther*. Her large laser burned, sloughing half-molten chunks of armor from the Combine 'Mech's left pauldron and torso plating. The remaining *Stinger* chose that moment to charge, and Tracy saw the numbers that identified it as Lannetti's 'Mech. He caught the heavier *Panther* as it turned to face its new attacker, colliding with it in a crash that sent the *Panther* teetering backward, its feet clawing for a foothold in the loose gravel.

Tracy's second shot tore into wiring and internal structure exposed by the earlier shot. Flame belched, orange against oily

black. The 'Mech's head flew apart and its pilot ejected, leaving dead metal burning on the ridge below him.

The heavies were at the base of the ridge to the east, already starting up. Shouting orders, Tracy urged the wavering line of trainee pilots around to face this new threat.

"We've got to get out of here!" she heard someone wail.

Tracy was about to respond, but Carolyn Lannetti's voice cut in before she could decide what to say. "Stow it and fight, Foster! We've got Tracy back with us and help's on the way! Isn't that right, Tracy?"

"Right you are. Arrow Five! Move to your left...behind that big rock. Target the *Orion*! Carolyn...help me with the *Dragon* on the right..."

Again, white flame speared down the side of the ridge, catching the heavy Kurita 'Mechs as they began to lumber up the slope. The *Dragon* lost a right arm and the autocannon it mounted. The *Orion* was limping, with black-molten damage showing at its right hip and knee. Unable to get a clear shot, they withdrew again toward the factory buildings across the plain.

Then the pair of *Locusts* on the west gave warning of another charge.

The battle continued that way, with long minutes dragging into an eternity of an hour. The 20 minutes promised by Carlyle had long since gone by, as the Gray Death ran into a heavy concentration of Dieron Regular 'Mechs somewhere to the west. How long it would take to break through this new barrier was anyone's guess, but the Arrows could not hold out much longer. All of the 'Mechs were redlining their temperature gauges, the heat overloads from continuous weapons fire threatening to shut them all down. The *Wasps* had long since run out of missile reloads, and enemy fire had smashed Greg Babbage's *Locust* into uselessness. The apprentice had escaped from his 'Mech unharmed, and during a lull, he had managed to pull the bleeding and unconscious Vic Dolby from his crippled *Stinger* and to drag him to the shelter of an overhanging boulder. The five remaining 'Mechs flattened out in a close ring, belly-down on the ridgetop, and continued to fire at everything that moved below them.

Tracy snapped off a shot from her large laser at the damaged *Hunchback* toiling up the slope below her, saw sparks flashing

from damaged circuitry exposed in the machine's torso. Heavy-caliber autocannon shells cracked into the boulders around her.

Briefly, she was aware of screaming coming over the tac com. When she shifted her 'Mech's position slightly, she caught sight of Foster's *Wasp*, ablaze like a gigantic torch for a horrid handful of seconds. Then the *Wasp* exploded in flaming, ragged chunks of metal.

Tracy tasted bitter defeat. She was gasping with the stifling heat that pervaded her cockpit, a heat that had long since overpowered her cooling unit and left her weak and dizzy. Heat cramps spasmed in her calf and stomach muscles. The *Dutiful Daughter* had received massive damage, her jump jets ruined, her shoulders and upper torso shredded and torn by shell and beam. With Foster's death, Tracy's team was down to four 'Mechs, a *Locust*, a *Stinger*, a *Wasp*, and her own *Phoenix Hawk*. Not one of them had escaped heavy damage.

*I should have kept going, once I was clear of the line, she thought. I could have broken the Kurita line then. I lost the chance when I went back to be with them.*

Had she not returned, though, how long would the MechWarrior apprentices have lasted, without her experience to steady them? There was no answer in might-have-beens, and it was too late for the handful of them to attempt to break through the Kurita line now. A fresh salvo of missiles smashed among the rocks and she drew a bead on a Kurita *Catapult* in the valley to the west.

A *Catapult*! They've got reinforcements now! So long as Tracy and her men faced only a company, they'd had a chance. To attempt to face down a 65-ton *Catapult* was another story. She saw her laser bolt catch the ponderous *Catapult* in one leg, watched metal burning without slowing the machine's advance in the slightest.

A *Trebuchet* followed. *Oh, God, no!*

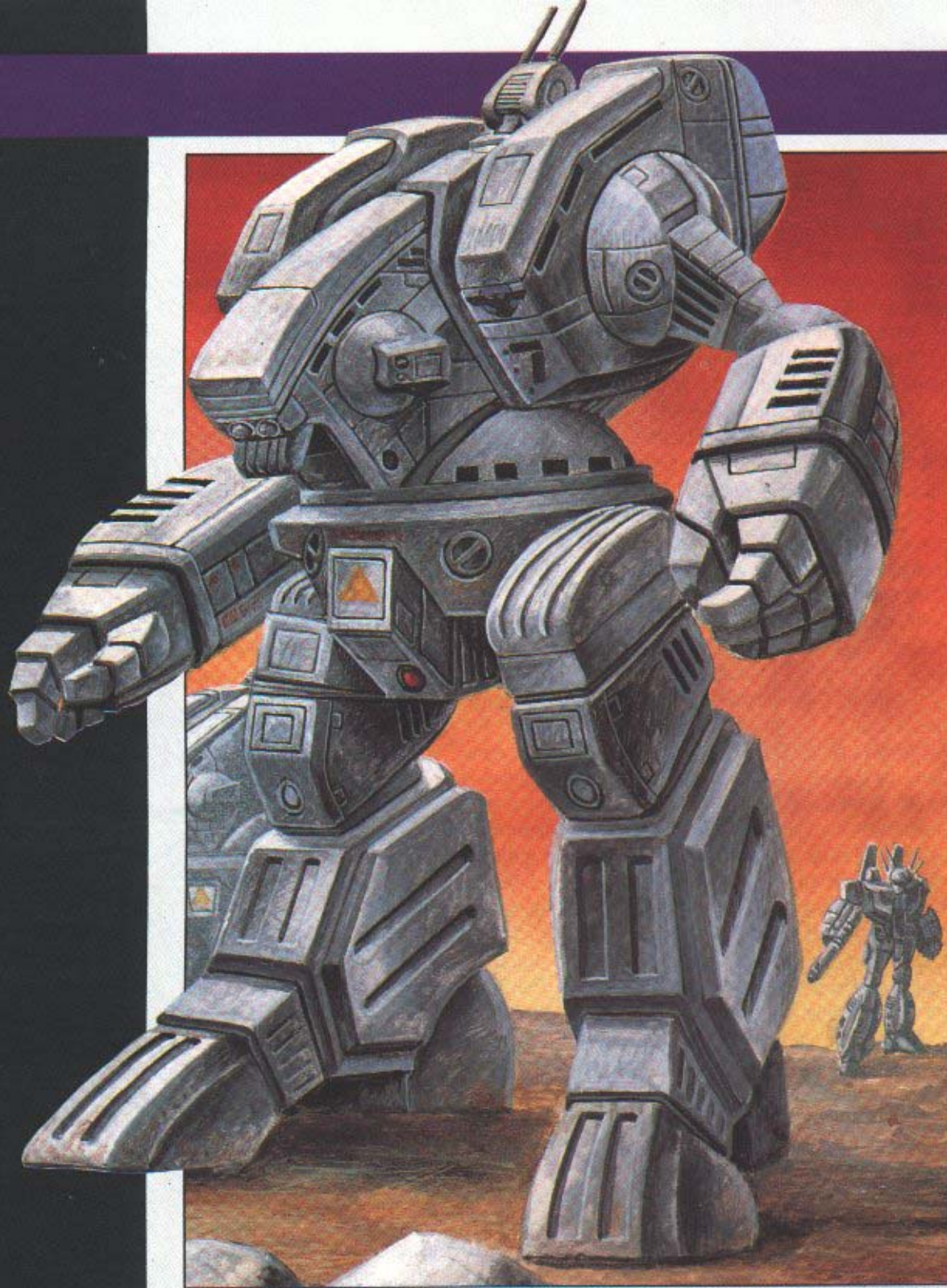
It looked like the *Treb* was in trouble, however. Its left arm was missing, and black smoke spilled from its side. Tracy became aware of other 'Mechs, all marked by the starburst-on-sun of the Dieron Regulars, all damaged...all retreating.

Toward her!

"Hey, Arrows!" she snapped. "On your toes! Fresh meat!"

More and more Kurita 'Mechs appeared among the rocks along the slope below





them. There were at least two companies there, most of the 'Mechs battle-damaged. At the moment, all were spilling in nearly uncontrollable confusion toward the east.

And Arrow Detachment occupied the ridge squarely in their path.

"Arrow Leader! Arrow Leader! This is Skull Leader!" The familiar voice was much clearer now and very, very welcome.

"Colonel! Where are you?"

"Two clicks west of your position, and

closing! We have you spotted on the ridge west of the factory. Sit tight and don't move! Just keep firing from your position!"

"Acknowledged, Colonel. We're burning them down!"

On the face of it, Arrow Detachment was in a terribly exposed position, smack in the path that the fleeing remnants of the Kurita battleforce were taking. They had been roughly handled in a series of lightning engagements among the mountains to the



west, and by now, their pilots were probably thinking only of saving their 'Mechs...and themselves. When the 'Mechs in the lead of the Kurita column began to take fire from the crest of the ridge separating them from the Mifune factory complex, their last reserves of discipline vanished. At almost precisely the same time, four of Carlyle's 'Mechs came smashing up from the south, having looped around the fleeing 'Mechs' southern flank to strike them from the side. Taking fire from three directions, the Dieron Regulars' last shreds of control evaporated, and individual BattleMechs began to scramble for safety across the rocky ground along the ridge side to the north.

When Carlyle's forces linked up with the defenders on the ridge, only two 'Mechs remained operable enough to greet them. Having been wounded early in the fight, Paul Casey had bled to death in the cockpit of his *Locust*. Tracy Kent was unconscious, a victim of heat prostration.

**T**he victory at Mifune Pass promised to become yet another spectacular victory in the annals of the Gray Death Legion. Carlyle had managed to deploy his forces in such a way as to split his more numerous opponents into three groups among the broken ridges and hill-sides west of the factory complex, and his deployment of a small force of 'Mech trainees in a fixed defensive position had been nothing short of brilliant. If the regimental historians neglected to point out that the deployment had been accidental, that Carlyle's sudden turn-and-march to the east had been made to rescue Arrow Detachment, that Arrow Detachment's position on the ridgetop where it played anvil to Carlyle's hammer was all the result of luck, pure and simple, they could, perhaps, be forgiven. Grayson Carlyle did not object to being known as a lucky MechForce commander, but he hated it to look as though he relied on luck to carry off his victories.

Tracy regained consciousness in a field hospital set up at Kaigun. The city had surrendered after the Kurita disaster at Mifune Pass, but Carlyle did not yet have enough men on site to secure the city against saboteurs and assassins. A formal occupation would have to wait until House Steiner Drop-Ships could arrive with Lyran troops and reinforcements. In any case, the bulk of the

Dieron Regulars remained intact, somewhere north of the city. Meanwhile, the Gray Death was maintaining a defensive position that would allow them to retreat and maneuver, if necessary.

"How are you feeling?"

Tracy opened her eyes and saw Grayson Carlyle seated beside her cot. "Like a 'Mech stepped on me."

"That's to be expected. The Doc tells me you'll be up and around in no time."

"And my people?"

"Foster and Casey are dead. The rest are fine. Vic Dolby smashed his head against his control panel when his 'Mech was knocked over, but he's already back on duty. We even recovered his *Stinger* intact."

"That's good." She started to say something more, then bit back the words.

"What is it?"

"I...I..." She tried to order spinning thoughts. "I guess I didn't do so well, huh?"

"What do you mean?"

"First you had to chew me out about not following orders the night before...and then I went and blew it completely. We never got near the factory complex. And you told me to keep the youngsters out of a fight. I didn't...and now two of them are dead."

Carlyle leaned back for a moment, thinking. "I don't see that you had much choice, Tracy. According to the people with you, you were cut off and surrounded before you even knew there were Kurita 'Mechs in the area." He frowned. "Bad intelligence, that. But it couldn't be helped."

"But..."

"You lost two of the kids. Again, no choice. You saved four, and yourself. From the way Carolyn Lannetti is talking, you were the hero of the hour, holding the line together, firming the kids up when they needed it, deploying them to meet new threats. It sounds like it was quite a fight."

"It was that."

"By holding on when I told you to, you scared hell out of the bunch I was chasing—just when they needed scaring. We'd slammed into them ten clicks from your ridge, and it took us over an hour to win through. By the time we broke through, they were pulling back toward Mifune, but they were still in fighting shape. I gather from one prisoner we took that they figured they were completely surrounded when they retreated smack into your bunch perched up on the

ridge. Must've been a rude surprise for 'em. They hit your fire and scattered, and then we mopped up."

"Then...we won?"

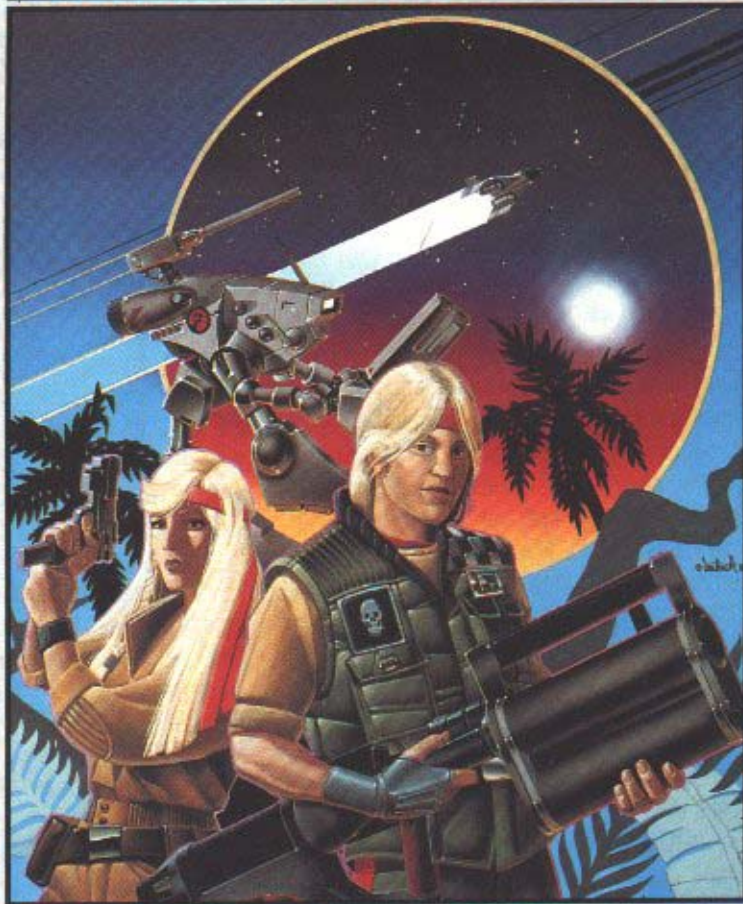
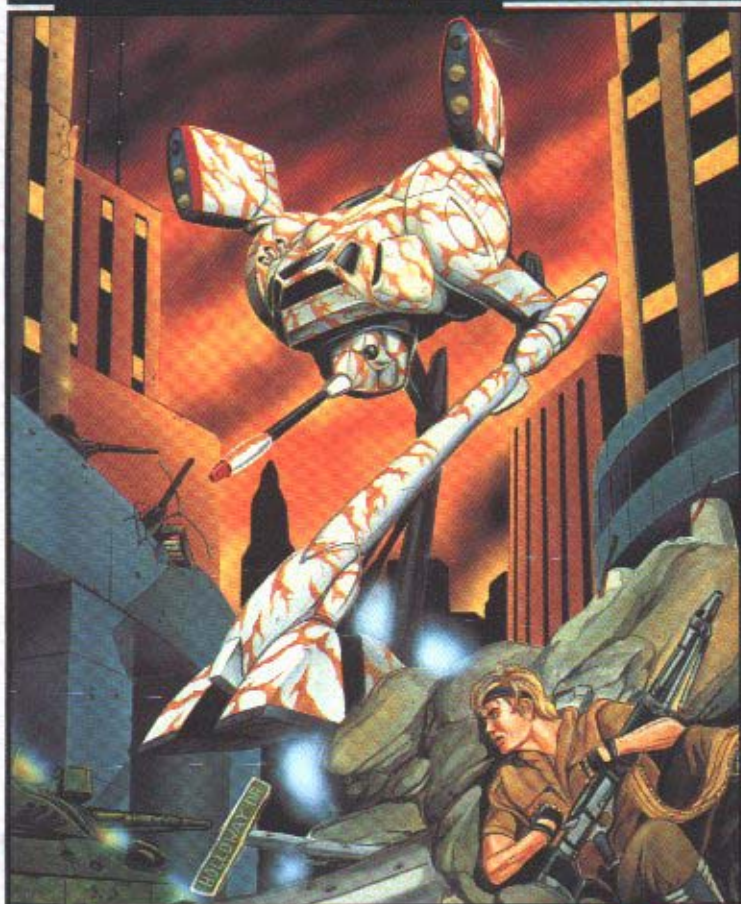
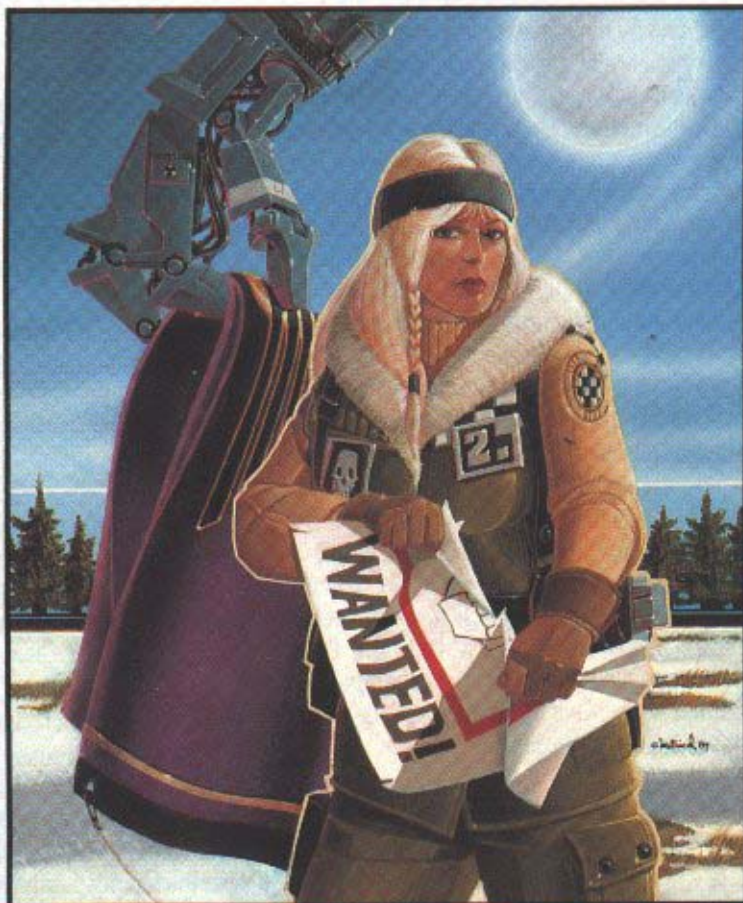
"Oh, indeed, we did." Tracy was startled by the grin on the Colonel's face and puzzled by his emphasis on the word "we."

Then she realized what he was getting at, that the victory had been won through her holding the training cadre together and in place. Had she left the recruits and pursued her own plan, they would have lost it all. Instead, she had pulled her team together, dug in, and they'd slugged it out together.

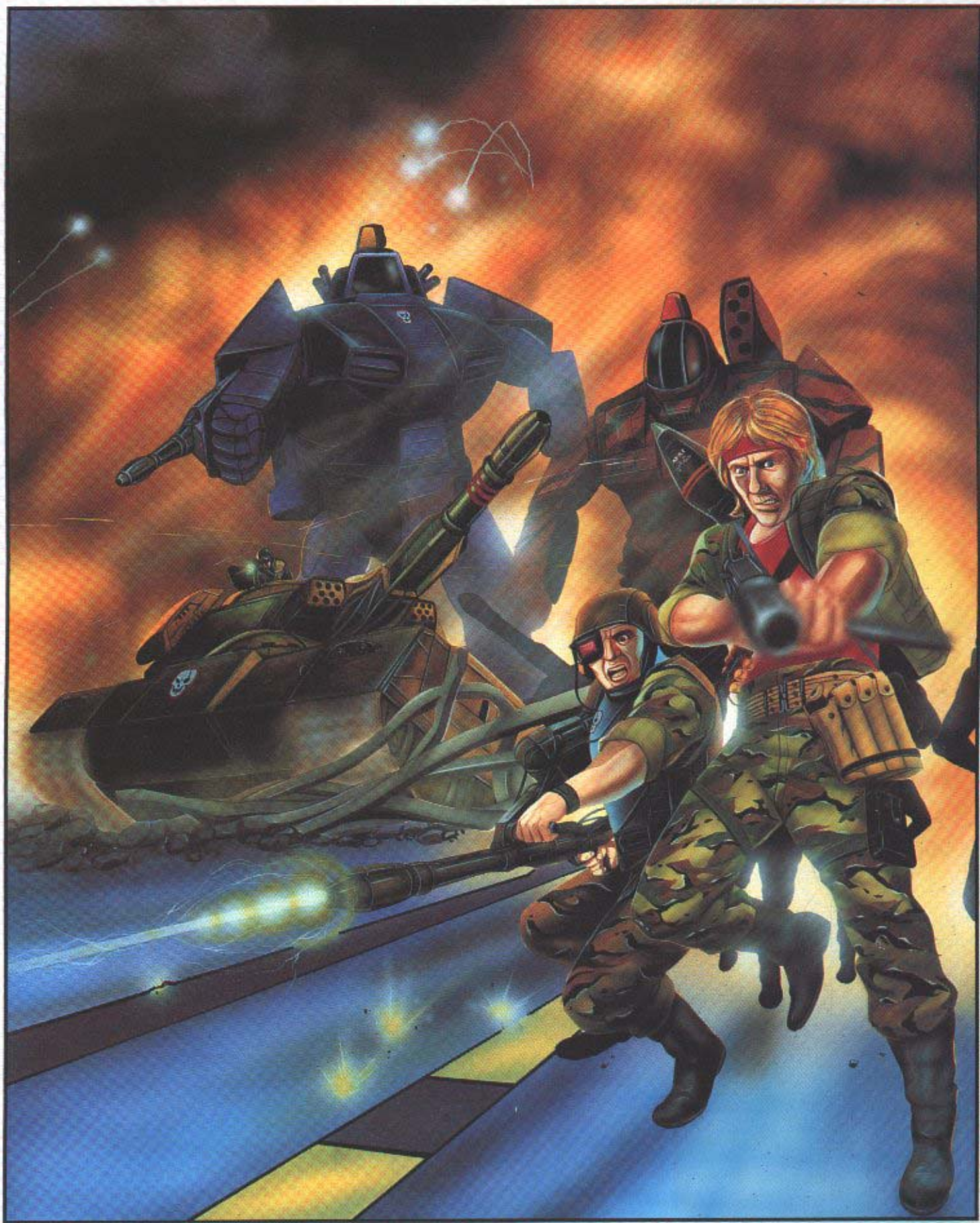
*Together.* A victorious team. She grinned back. "Yes, sir. I guess we did."



# GALLERY



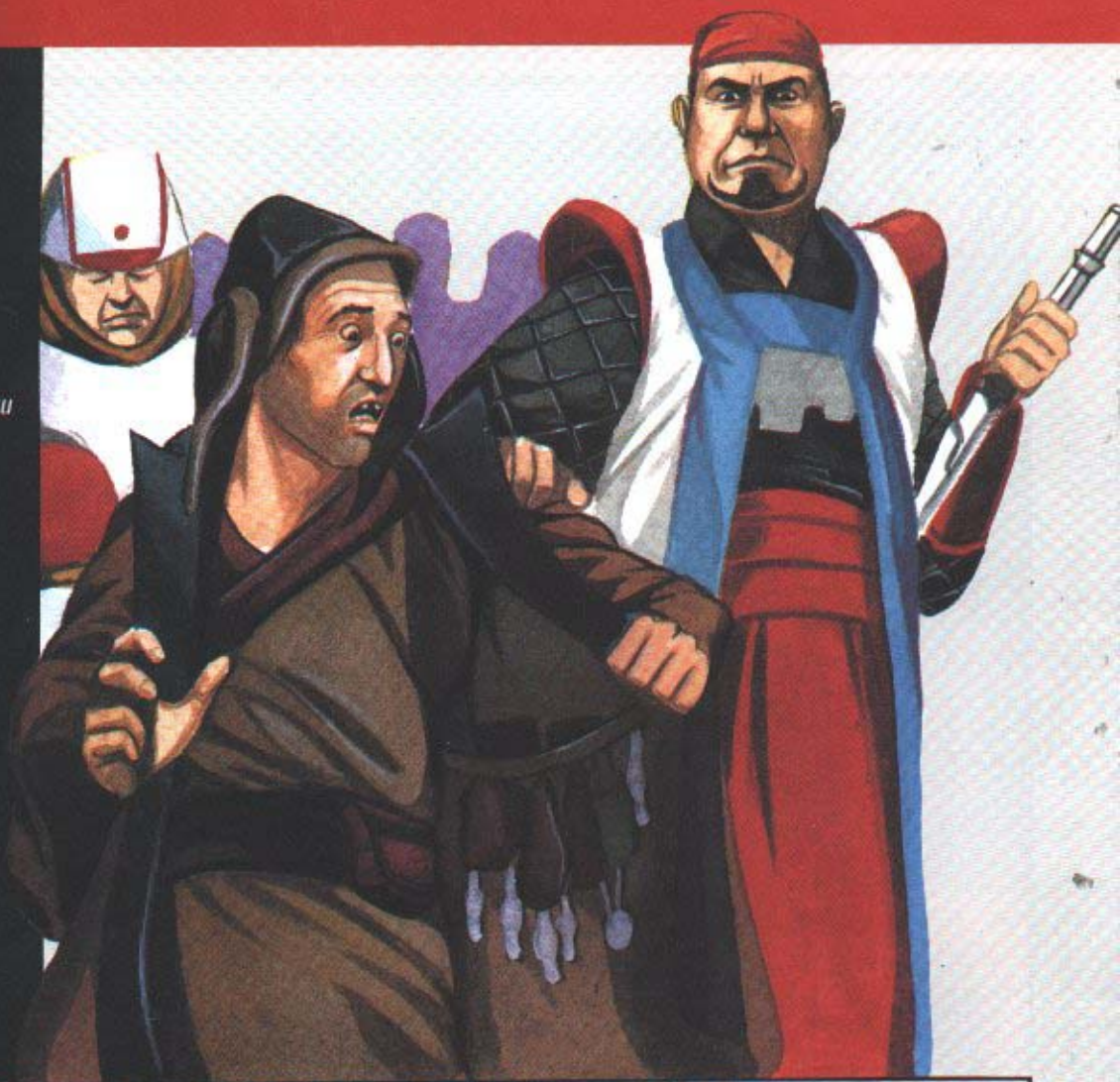






*Where lies the honor  
in bonds with men of terror  
or naked power?*

Author unknown  
From *A Collection of Warrior's Haiku*  
Watanabi Press  
Corant City, Albiero



## *Where Lies the Honor*

—William H. Keith, Jr

**T**he Prefect's hand came down on the shoulder of the street hawkling's shoulder, and I thought the little man was going to climb right out of his robes. "So, little man," Prefect Hassan roared. "You defy me, *ne*?"

"No, Lord!" The hawkling's voice rose to a falsetto squeak, his eyes bulging with terror. "Please, Lord Prefect...I was just leaving! As you yourself commanded!"

The Prefect hauled back on the man's arm, pulling the flap of his traveling cloak open. The inside was lined with bottles, flasks, containers, and a small purse bulging with crumpled Company chits.

Holding the squirming man in the grip of his right hand, Hassan motioned with his baton of office, and Okabi and I stepped forward to do our duty.

"Your name?" I said. Somehow I managed to keep the tremor out of my voice, to assume the aura of authority which went with my uniform. A crowd was already gathering, natural enough in a city accustomed to the usual orderliness of the Combine's rule. Kawabe's sun



was only halfway to the zenith, but already the streets were baked dry, the dust heavy in the stifling air. The heat bore with it an oppressiveness that lay over the watching crowd. Was it the heat that maintained the crowd's silence, or something more?

"Name!" I commanded again. I was nervous with so many of Marakani's citizens watching, my temper raw with heat and fear. I shoved the man as I pulled him from the Prefect's grip.

He twisted away from me, anger flushing his face. "Aw, fer... You know who I am!"

The barrel of my shotgun caught him in the solar plexus, doubling him over. He gasped, clutched himself, and gasped again, fighting for air.

"Answer!"

"Gu...Gunnar Holmes," the little man said. Any fight had been driven from him by the blow. "I was leaving town, really I was! I had affairs I needed to see to..."

"I'd say your affairs are about to be settled for you," I said. I nodded to Okabi, who shifted the combat shotgun in his arms to cover the prisoner. I slung my own weapon, twisted Holmes about, pulled his arms behind his back, and linked them together with wrist restraints.

"You'll have time to explain your crimes later," I told him. "At your trial."

For a horrible moment, I thought Holmes was going to faint. There are few things less dignified than the sight of a pair of troopers from the Civilian Guidance Corps dragging an unconscious prisoner off to the holding cage, especially when the troopers are as large as Okabi and me, and the prisoner is as small as Holmes. I could have slung him over my shoulder like a sack of grain and carried him myself, but it is far more respectable to be seen *marching* a prisoner to detainment. It proves to watching civilians that your authority is sufficient to force the miscreant to submit to you of his own free will, proves that it is useless to resist the lawful orders of the CGC. It says so in the Guidance Corps Manual.

"Please!" Holmes wailed. "You don't understand! My wife and children, they're starving!"

Hassan grinned broadly at that. "Then you should have had the honor to starve yourself to death, Holmes. That would have spared your family your disgrace! As it is now..." The grin broadened, calculation

brightening the Prefect's eye. "Perhaps they can help pay your debt to me."

"No, Lord, please!"

"Silence," I growled. I brought the shotgun on its shoulder sling back to my hip and nudged him in the side with it. "Behave with honor in this, and it will be easier for all of us. Let's move."

The public cages were not far.

**Y**ou have to understand that Marakani is a decent, orderly city. Kawabe, like so many of the worlds of the Draconis Combine, is not rich in natural resources. Most of the people are poor, and the economy is dominated by a handful of big, military-run combines. There is a factory outside of Marakani that produces viden extensors for BattleMech containment dampers, and a modest wire drawing plant that gives the city its principal export. Most of Marakani's citizens are employed in one of those two plants, both of which are owned by the monolithic Kawanashi Enterprises. Those who don't work for the Company work on the agroplantations that surround Marakani like a patchwork quilt, irrigated green against the dusty tan of the Kawabean desert. Life is hard here, but it is satisfying as well. Marakani's population numbers 20,000 or less, and at times it seems that everyone living there knows everyone else.

Prefect Vander Hassan was not a native of Marakani, or even of Kawabe. He had been born and raised on neighboring Shaul Khala, and it was said that the malicious glint in his eye was that of the *Saurimat*, the predatory secret society of mercenary assassins native to that world. He had arrived on Kawabe, it was rumored, as hired bodyguard for the chief executive of Kawanashi Engineering. When the workers' revolt broke out at the Kawanashi plant in Eibo, Hassan was in the right place at the right time, managing to blunt the workers' rush toward the administration bunker with a heavy machine gun cradled in his massive arms...and to save Kawanashi's president from an unpleasant death at the hands of the mob at the same time. His position as Prefect over the Marakani Workers' District was said to be a reward for his services to the firm.

The title "Prefect" might be translated as "chief of police" on some worlds, or as "mayor," or simply as "chief bureaucrat."

Hassan was something of all three, master of the local work force in the employ of Kawanashi Enterprises, keeper of the peace of our town, and our representative before Lord Hideshi, the Planetary Chairman.

Chairman Hideshi was the ruler of Kawabe, but he was far away in the capitol at Itamiyama. So far as we were concerned, Hassan was our absolute monarch, feudal lord and master of 20,000 souls.

He looked like an absolute monarch, too, when I brought Holmes before him late that afternoon, at the Prefecture Headquarters on the hill above the town. The Judgement Hall was a place of austerity, of bare tile floors and a frosted glass ceiling that admitted diffuse, white sunlight. The few art objects on their pedestals about the room were enhanced by the spartan interior: a porcelain bowl so thin it was translucent, a tower of fantastic and chimerical beasts carved from jade, an alabaster vase of haunting simplicity. Hassan, whatever the people in the street said of the man, was a man of delicate artistic sensibilities. Dressed in his red robe of judgement, he reclined on the divan on its dais at the end of the hall.

Before him on a table were arranged the bottles and pouches Holmes had been carrying inside his robe when we'd arrested him. They were patent nostrums mostly, tonics and waters to promote health and heal sickness. There were a goodly number of charms as well, small, carved figurines hanging from silken scarves, designed to be worn about the neck to ward off evil or mechanical failure. The workmanship was quite good, and I wondered if Holmes had made the charms himself, or if he had bought a consignment from elsewhere and was peddling them as middle man.

It made little difference. The luck charms had not helped him.

Holmes made the required obeisance, then stood with a barely suppressed tremble, awaiting judgement. Among the scattering of minor nobles and Guidance Corpsmen in the hall, there was little doubt about what that judgement would be.

"Corpsman Yancey!"

I stepped forward, snapped my best parade-ground salute, and responded. "Here, Lord!"

"You were witness to my instructions to this person last week, were you not?"

"I was, Lord." Hassan was going by the



book on this one. Could he have been sensing unrest among the citizens under the hard hand of his rule? It was impossible to say. Certainly, in a situation where he was both accuser and arresting power, judge and jury, he had to take care that his judgement appear fair, that it follow accepted and approved tradition.

"Then you know that I, myself, commanded that he cease peddling his wares in the streets of this city." He indicated the table and the handful of wares displayed there. "He has continued to peddle his...wares despite our merciful warnings."

"I heard your command, Lord. It is true."

Hassan turned on Holmes, who now was trembling openly. "Then there can be but one judgement, is that not so?" He smiled, a sight to chill the soul.

"Mercy!" Holmes cried out, and he fell face down at the foot of the dais. "Mercy, for my family's sake!"

Hassan laughed. "Your family will be cared for, out of the munificence of the Company. Take him away."

I was glad that my part in the business went no further than returning Holmes to his cage, that it was Hassan's chief executioner who took over from there. The man had been fairly warned, tried, and condemned by the proper civil authorities. There was certainly nothing I could do, no reason for me to attempt to obstruct justice.

Yet I wondered at the sickness in my soul as I gave Executioner Orloff the key to Holmes' cage.

"Well, thankee!" Orloff said in his cheerful way. "We'll give him tonight to think about it, and start first thing in the morning!"

I struggled not to be sick.

Such feelings had been becoming more and more common as I watched Lord Hassan secure and build upon his power in Marakani. The structure within which most of the citizens worked was no different than that in a thousand other towns and villages across Kawabe, no different, I daresay, than the conditions in tens of thousands of cities across the vast expanse of the mighty Dragonis Combine. Marakani was dominated by Kawanashi Enterprises, a corporate entity that served as mother and father and family to us all. The corporate rule was, on the whole, benevolent. Corporate schools trained our children, corporate hospitals cared for our sick, corporate stores provided us with all of our needs, redeeming our

pay chits with food and housing and the necessities of life. Those citizens who were not directly employed by the Company could barter for those services with produce or goods.

It was only reasonable that Kawanashi's directors did not care to see peddlers and street hawkings such as Holmes shuffling about the streets of Marakani, selling their goods for far less than the Company itself could afford to provide them. While Kawabe's ruling elite did not exactly discourage competition, such practices as deliberately undercutting the Company's prices in an effort to sell inferior goods were frowned upon. Peddlers like Holmes were encouraged to join the Company, in an effort to provide the citizens of the community with uniform excellence of goods and services for sale.

Unfortunately for Holmes, this wasn't possible. He'd been fired from a minor branch company belonging to Kawanashi Enterprises a couple of years before when he'd fallen behind in his rent. Unable to find other work in a town where non-Company jobs were rather scarce, to say the least, he'd been forced to go to work as a street salesman in order to keep his family fed...and to keep up with the debt he owed the Company. His records showed he'd been threatened with arrest a number of times already... usually when he was behind on his payments. Still, he might have been able to struggle along, until Prefect Hassan decided to shut down the city's independent merchants. Marakani's independents had been warned repeatedly for the past several weeks that they would have to pack up and move elsewhere, that their services would no longer be needed in this city. I, myself, had taken Holmes in only the week before, to hear Hassan's personal warning that he had to get out of town. If he chose to ignore that warning, it was his own look out, right?

Yet why did it feel as though my honor had been soiled?

And to the people of Kawabe, honor is everything.

I could feel the resentment of the people of the city, as tangible and heavy as the heat, as I resumed my foot patrol through the dusty, sun-baked streets. It felt as though the eyes of all the people were on Okabi and me as we made our way past market stalls and through crowds that



## We are known, in fact, as "friendly persuaders."

seemed to turn quiet once the two of us appeared. A Civilian Guidance Corpsman's uniform is designed to call attention to its wearer. The red and white stripes on forearms and shins, the red and white cap with its leather hood, even the stunner ostentatiously displayed at the left hip all are designed to make the police highly visible, a deterrence to crime and a comfort to law-abiding citizens.

We are known, in fact, as "friendly persuaders," but Okabi's expression beneath the brim of his cap was anything but friendly now. His dark eyes glinted like obsidian chips, and his normally impassive mouth was twisted into an unreadable expression.

I knew my face must bear the same message.

"Yance," Okabi said.

"That one is acting suspicious." He jerked his thumb toward the marketplace, and I saw the look of stark terror spread across one farmer's face as he caught Okabi's gesture and assumed we were talking about him. I had already noted the furtiveness of his behavior, the way he kept looking to left and right and over his shoulder as he threaded his way down the street. He was a typical agroworker, the black muck of the irrigation ditches still clinging to his trousers and boots. He carried the produce he had to sell at the marketplace in a pair of baskets slung from either end of a pole balanced across his shoulders.

The look on his face as he saw Okabi pointing him out was enough to raise my suspicions. Until that day, I would have set after the man at once, ordered him to halt, and searched his person and his bundles. But I saw before me the face of the street peddler, Holmes.

"Let him go," I said.

Okabi's dark eyes hardened. "The man is up to something. We should stop him... search him..."

"Let him go!" My shout was loud enough to drown the subdued hum of conversation around us, to turn heads in our

direction. The farmer hurried off into the crowd, thanking whatever gods he knew that he'd been allowed to pass. What had he been up to? I didn't know, nor did I care.

"We are bound of our honor to serve the Prefect," Okabi said carefully. He was staring hard at me.

"Honor?" I said.

The word bore a great weight for the people of Kawabe, as it did for many of the

gars and hawkings, merchants and moneylenders. "These are our people, Okabi. I was born and raised in a town not twenty clicks from here. You were raised here, in Marakani. Don't we have an honor-bond with them as well?"

"That man could have been smuggling food from the country. Or been dealing in black market Company chits. Or be carrying weapons."

"I don't care." I searched for the man but couldn't see him any longer. He'd been swallowed by the crowd. Bitterness crowded my thoughts. "Whatever he was up to, I hope he gets away with it."

"You are thinking of the man we arrested earlier. Holmes."

"What of it? What did he do to deserve having Lord Hassan descend on him that way? How much was Holmes' street business hurting the Company? If he was lucky—very lucky—Holmes's might have made ten thousand a year...and most of that would have gone to pay his back debts to the Company."

"And tomorrow his fresh skin will be displayed on the drying racks outside of headquarters. I know. But ours is the way of *bushido*."

The expression on Okabi's face as he said it told all. *Bushido*—the Way of the Warrior—was the ancient warrior's code brought to Kawabe centuries before from old Earth itself. It bound us to our master, Prefect Hassan, in our willingness to kill and in our willingness to die. I knew Okabi was as hurt by Holmes's arrest as I was...but he would die by his own hand before he would betray his master. I was subject to the same code. I had grown up on Kawabe, and the people and their ways were my own.

But there was agony in serving this foreigner who exploited my people, as there was agony in considering his betrayal.



peoples of the Draconis Combine. A man was raised from birth to know the paths of honor and the webwork of responsibilities that bound him to his parents, his family, his city, his lords, and his way of life. To break any of those bonds was to sever or stain those bonds of honor, and, for most Kawabeans, death was preferable.

"Honor," Okabi replied. "Hassan is our lord, and we are bound by our honor to serve him." The dark eyes narrowed beneath the visor of his cap. "We are bound by oath to serve him...and to fulfill our duties."

I nodded to the people in the street around us, shopkeepers and vendors, beg-





**M**y place of duty the following day was in the Judgement Hall as part of Lord Hassan's personal guard.

The Prefect occupied his divan on the raised dais at the end of the hall. A servant stood beside him, a bowl of kiwi grapes in her hands, from which he helped himself from time to time. Around his fat neck was a silken band, and one of the luck charm pendants Holmes had been selling dangled at his breast.

"First on the day's agenda," he said. "On the matter of the street hawking, Holmes. He still owes a considerable debt to the Company, which, unfortunately, he is no longer able to pay. His account shall be settled today, through his surviving family."

The family was there, in the hall before him. Holmes's wife was an older woman, once beautiful, but careworn and ragged now in the widow's white garb of mourning. His son was tall and lean and heavily muscled, with defiance and dread mingled in his eyes. Holmes's daughter, a slender girl in her early teens, was radiantly beautiful. Where her father had been short and dark, she was tall, with long auburn hair and eyes haunting in their fear.

"You!" Hassan barked from his divan. His hand indicated the mother. "Old woman! You can do housework, I suppose? Clean? Cook?"

"Y-yes, Lord..." Her voice was rough and tortured, her eyes on the luck charm around Hassan's throat.

"Then you shall be found work as a domestic. I know an official in the Company who can use your services at his estate. Two years, indentured service. You." He scowled at the boy. "The Company will be able to use you. The Ginoyama mines for you, I'd say. Three years' indenture." His eyes fell on the daughter, and the expression on his face made it clear that he'd been saving the best for last. "For you, my dear, I think we can find something very, very special."

He beckoned, but the girl was unable to move. She was shaking, her arms folded in front of her.

"Come forward!" he demanded. "Guard! Bring her to me!"

One of the other Guidance Corpsmen in the room took her by one arm and walked her up to Hassan. Hassan watched them approach, his eyes sparkling with unconcealed anticipation. "I'd like to have a better

look at you, my dear. Undress. Display for us your charms..."

"I protest!"

The shout from across the hall caught everyone by surprise. Hassan half rose from his divan, glowering at the interruption.

Okabi stood in the hall, the light from skylight above gleaming along the curve of the *wakizashi*, the short sword, in his hand. Okabi was off duty this day, and for that reason alone would not have been permitted to enter the Judgement Hall with a weapon, but the formal *wakizashi* was counted on Kawabe more as personal ornament than weapon, an emblem of honorable citizenship for anyone of the warrior class. The blade held aloft, he approached Hassan's divan, stopped, and kneeled ten paces before the Prefect's dais. Weapons around the room swiveled to cover him, ready to cut him down, but his posture and his expression froze every man in the place.

"I protest, Lord," Okabi said again. He was not wearing his Guidance Corps uniform, of course, but a simple white robe over tunic and trousers. He loosened his belt as he knelt, then brought the knife down to his stomach, and I knew at that moment that he was preparing to commit *seppuku*, to die to save his honor.

Okabi must have felt trapped, as I felt trapped, caught between his obligation to his lord and his own sense of what was right and wrong. Unable to resolve the conflict, he was about to choose the one alternative that would give him an honorable way out. I saw Hassan's eyes widen with surprise. As a native of another warrior people, he would know what it meant to face death, but I wondered if he understood the conflict his actions had set afire within Okabi...and in myself.

"You'll stain the floor, Okabi," Hassan said slowly. His eyes found mine. "You... guard. Take his knife before he hurts someone."

I stepped forward, my feet leaden. Okabi watched me come, the blade still catching the light, grasped between his hands with the point against his belly.

When does a master cease being a master? When he behaves like an animal, a creature no longer worthy of respect? Or when the servant is forced to choose between personal virtue and the empty ritual of service to another?



Three long strides took me to Hassan's side, the shotgun slung from my arm coming up against his head. The other guards in the room started, then leapt forward.

"Halt!" I cried. There was a moment of chaos, as voices babbled confusion and anger. Okabi's eyes met mine, dark and unreadable. "Silence! Silence everyone!" The voices died away, and the hall was silent except for a low and unsteady whimpering coming from the man beside me. I held Hassan's head with one arm, the muzzle of the shotgun pressed against his face with the other. "One move without my saying so, and I shorten him by a head!"

"No...no!" Hassan was sobbing, his eyes bulging with terror. "Please...Yancey, isn't it? We can talk, Yancey! We can talk!"

I jabbed him to silence with the gun and fixed my eyes on Okabi. The Corpsman had not moved since I'd made my move. "Okabi! Your death would be meaningless here!"

"If it is my death," he replied quietly, "it is not meaningless."

"But your life can have more meaning than your death." I nodded toward the girl, still standing a few paces away, then toward the mother and son. "Take them...get them out of here." I saw indecision struggle with pain behind his eyes. "Please, Okabi! Quickly!"

"My responsibility is to my sworn lord, to Hassan..."

"Your sworn lord is going to be dead in a few minutes! I am releasing you from your oath! Do you understand?" Hassan certainly understood. He twisted in my grip, struggling wildly, and I nudged him with my gun.

Okabi struggled a moment more. Then calm returned behind those dark eyes. The *wakizashi* flashed again as he tucked it back into his belt. "You!" I nudged Hassan again. "Give the orders to let them go, or you die a messy death."

"Do...do as he says! Do as he says!"

"You!" I nodded toward the guard who had brought the girl forward. "Give Okabi your headset."

The guard removed his headgear and handed the radio transceiver to Okabi, who clipped it to his ear and opened a private circuit. "What the hell are you doing, Yancey?" I heard him mutter, checking that the line was open.

"Learning to live with myself," I said. "This has been building for a long time, ever

since this...this animal came to power."

"You can't get away with this," Hassan said, wiggling against my headlock.

"Maybe not. But I'll tell you this. I'll be listening as Okabi takes these people out of here. If he's stopped...if he's fired at, I'll know it, and you will die."

"Don't kill me!"

"Give the order! Let them go!"

I knew then that the stories of Hassan being a member of a warrior sect were lies. No warrior would have begged for his life...or given in to my demand. I backed up with my prisoner away from the divan until my back was against the wall, and held him there in a death's grip, my gun against his head, waiting for endless minutes until I heard Okabi's voice in my earpiece again.

"We're clear, Yance. The lady says she knows someone...someone who'll smuggle us out of the city. Seems there's a fair-sized underground here."

"Not surprising," I said. "Not with a monster like this in charge."

"Her son has gone to get help." I heard Okabi chuckle. "He's coming back with a guy now. Yance! It's the guy we saw yesterday, the farmer...remember?"

"I remember. Good luck, Okabi."

"Thank you. What about you?"

"Taken care of."

"Then...good luck, Yancey."

"What is it you want, Yancey?" my captive asked as Okabi broke the com link. I released him then, keeping my back to the wall and my shotgun pointed at his chest. He watched me warily as he rubbed his sore neck. "What do you want?" he asked again. "Every man has his price, and I can meet yours! All you have to do is name it..."

What was it I wanted? I remembered the face of my father, the day he returned to Marakani and told us that he was now one of the Dispossessed. A MechWarrior in the service of House Kurita, his Mech had been shot to pieces around him in the fighting at Mallory's World. The Regimental DropShip had returned him to us, that he might tell us he was no longer a warrior, but a simple man without caste or position or responsibility...a man with nothing left except his honor.

He brought us the money he'd earned fighting House Davion, then died the next morning as the sun rose above the mountains. *A man without honor is not a man*, he'd said. He died a man.

The others in the room watched silently. Most had their weapons pointed at me, but others wavered.

With Hassan as hostage, I could probably make it outside the headquarters, there to lose myself in the crowds. Okabi had found the underground that existed within the city. Perhaps I could find it as well.

But the choice was between life...and honor.

My finger tightened on the trigger, and the heavy caliber weapon bucked in my hand. The pellets smashed into Hassan's chest and face at a range of three meters, spraying the shards of Holmes's good luck charm in bloody gore across the room.

"Honor," I told the corpse.

I didn't even feel the blasts of his bodyguards' weapons an instant later.





# Natasha

K E R E N S K Y :

B I O - M E D I C A L R E P O R T

-Tara Gallagher & James Lanigan

**M**isha Auburn  
Archival Report on Natasha Kerensky DBA the Black Widow  
Security Clearance: Eyes Only  
Number 2 of 3 copies

#### Object:

Natasha Kerensky is one of the best known and most successful MechWarrior leaders currently active. Kerensky has worked for four of the five Successor States in the last 15 years. Some insight into her motivations, methods, and goals may prove useful in keeping her employed here, or in neutralizing her, should she leave.

Also, Kerensky's origins are unknown. Especially in light of her name, it is important to know as much as possible about potential problems, conflicts, or hidden agendas.

#### Methods:

Personal Interview 4/7/3023  
Medical Records, Chukchi III, 3020  
Personal papers of Natasha Kerensky  
"Natasha Kerensky: The Woman, The Myth, The MechWarrior," Reader's Digest, May 3021  
Photographs and holographs from Lyran Commonwealth and ComStar Archives  
Various unsourced material

#### HOLOGRAPHIC/PHOTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

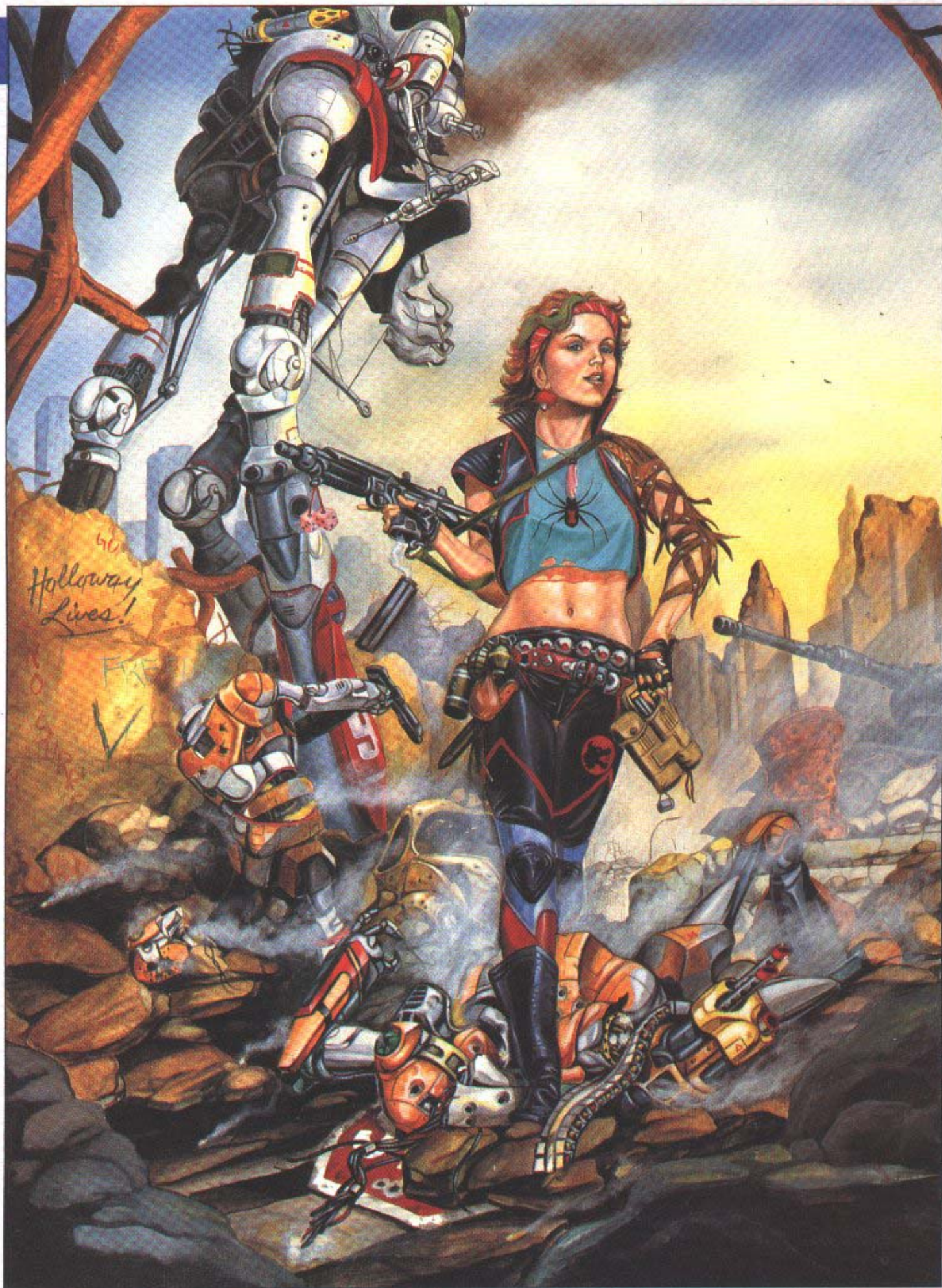
Remarkably few photographs and holographs of Kerensky exist in our archives. Intelligence suggests that the situation is the same in other Houses. This is in keeping with the minimal amount of data extant on Kerensky, but is even more suggestive of deception, or at least coverup.

Computer analysis of existing physical evidence suggests consistent facio-cranial structure, but alterations of fat and muscle formation. The pictures suggest the same woman with periodic reconstructive surgery.

Those pictures with positive dates suggest facial alteration as of the following dates: 3007\* major, 3010\* minor, 3013\* minor, 3015 minor, 3017 major, 3019 minor, 3020 minor, 3022 minor, 3024 major, 3026 minor.

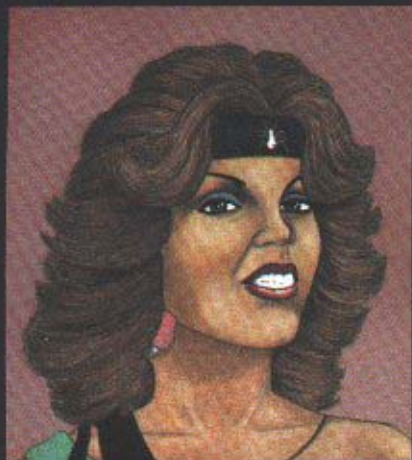
\*Dates of identification inconclusive.





610  
Holloway  
Lives!





#### MEDICAL REPORTS

Medical examination by Lyran Commonwealth Official Physician, as condition of employment by Lyran Commonwealth Armed Forces, is incomplete. On medical history questionnaire, Kerensky lists date and place of birth, parents and date of menarche as "unknown," and family medical problems as "none." Dr. Bona, the attending physician, was unable to get more than "time and temperature," that is, a reading of pulse, blood pressure, and temperature. A blood sample revealed no diseases, and then disappeared from the lab.

Dr. Bona did note irregularities in skin appearance highly suggestive of scarring and plastic surgery. Certain shaping of the ears and mouth especially suggested this, and there was evidence of possible burns and skin grafts on Kerensky's arm, although they had been treated to be invisible from a slight distance. No dental records are available, but Dr. Bona's report suggests the possibility of some replaced teeth.

Kerensky probably has suffered at least one instance of severe injury and treatment, including reconstructive surgery by a highly skilled practitioner. There is no way to tell from current records if Kerensky has undergone surgery for merely cosmetic reasons.

#### INTERVIEW WITH NATASHA K. APR 7 3023

MA: Thank you for your time.

NK: I've always considered history the most important discipline. It's my duty to share my experiences.

MA: With your long and varied career—you've served four governments on dozens of worlds—it's hard to tell where to start.

NK: You might try the beginning.

MA: (Laughs) Good answer. Where are you from?

NK: Human space, I presume.

MA: Well, maybe you could tell me what was the first planet you remember?

NK: Father traveled a lot. I really don't know where we were.

MA: Uh huh. What did your father do?

NK: He was a 'Mech driver, of course. My mother was an engineer. Biological, I think. That seems right.

MA: Genetic?

NK: Yes, she was my mother.

MA: What was your father's regiment?

NK: I really don't know. I was young. I wasn't very political.

MA: I presume you inherited your father's 'Mech.

NK: Oh, no. No.

MA: Why not?

NK: Oh, Misha, dear, I'd rather not talk about that. It was very long ago.

MA: How long ago?

NK: It might have been yesterday, I remember it so vividly. I...I really can't talk about that.

MA: O.K., then where did you get your current 'Mech?

NK: From the wreckage of dozens of battles. The left arm was mostly captured on New Wessex. Both of the feet, or maybe just one of the feet, came from New Delos. You can't tell the pieces apart because we paint them all black.

MA: Why black?

NK: Because I'm in mourning for my life.

MA: That's horrible. What's wrong?

NK: God, Misha, that was a joke.

MA: Chekhov?

NK: Chekhov.

MA: How did you join Wolf's Dragoons?

NK: I was young. It was spring time. We were Mech Warriors.

MA: I thought you said you would help. Do you want to go down in history, as a flippant, snotty bitch?

NK: I don't much care. I've fought in...what...a hundred battles, a thousand battles? It could be a million as far as I know. I've fought for anybody who offered a decent contract and a couple who didn't. And the universe is not much different after all that. I could go on fighting for another hundred years and it would still look the same.

MA: Then why do you do it?

NK: Isn't that obvious? I like it. I like the pay. I like the people I'm with. I like the life. It's interesting. It keeps me young.

Mostly, I like the battlefield. Just when you've seen everything, someone finds a new devious wrinkle and you're back where you were 20 years ago. That keeps me young.

And, it's all I know. You might like to raise orchids for a living, but all you know is history. So, you have to love what you do.

Anything else you'd like to know? Some grooming tips for my fans?



MA: As a matter of fact, I would like to talk about your appearance.

NK: Now, don't try to make me sound shallow and vain, Misha. Something about how Kerensky laughed, tossing her raven tresses over her shoulder. That sort of thing.

MA: Blond.

NK: Whatever.

MA: There's no denying that you are a striking woman—a large part of the Natasha Kerensky mystique.

NK: Ah, yes. The belle dame sans merci. The sweet young thing who will blast your nuts off. The kitten with a whip. That mystique?

MA: Well, these pictures of you running across battlefields in improbable outfits.

NK: Well, you know that MechWarriors dress skimpily because of the heat and tight space inside a 'Mech.

MA: And many good-looking MechWarriors have used that to advantage when faced with capture. I'm talking about other clothes.

NK: Like skin-tight leather pants?

MA: That's a good example.

NK: The pictures you are alluding to are publicity shots, posed on the field after the rubble has started to cool. Some are even shot inside studios and then combined with different backgrounds. (Laughs.) I hope this isn't a shocking deception.

MA: No. It is part of my job to recognize posed pictures from action shots. The problem is, there aren't many action shots of your unit. You don't have a unit photographer or cameras in your 'Mechs, do you?

NK: No. I think that is a ridiculous practice. If we make a brilliant move or a gross blunder, we can remember it. We don't sit around arguing who finished off which *Marauder*. We have no need for such vanities.

MA: There are very few combat pictures of the Black Widows. It seems anyone you fight ends up with their 'Mech-mounted cameras busted.

NK: Hey, it's a battle out there, not a holovid studio. Was there something you wanted to know about us?

MA: How is it that you never look the same in two pictures?

NK: Different hair, different makeup, different clothes.

MA: Different face?

NK: That's mostly a trick of the



Mand



lights, and makeup, and hair. Look, if everyone is sure of what I look like, there's no mystery. More important, I'm easier to spot off the field, when I'm an easier target. And I hate being mobbed by adoring fans.

MA: It's remarkable. It's like there are several Natasha Kerenskys.

NA: Perhaps there are. Perhaps I'm not one of them. Oooooohhhh scary! Anything else we should let posterity chew over?

MA: Oh—what do you wear to a battle?

NK: Something nice. I like to dress for dinner. Eighty percent of all MechWarriors are men, and you know what they're like. Easily distracted.

MA: Dress for dinner?

NK: It's a custom among some upper classes...

MA: I know. I thought perhaps that was what you called going into battle.

NK: Perhaps. They don't call me the black widow because I have eight legs, you know.

#### Interviewer's Notes

From this interview, it is painfully obvious that Kerensky does not talk about her past, and is adept at not dropping so much as a clue. She does exhibit a concern with youth and age, as these are mentioned more than any other single theme. As with her "emotional" outburst, it is difficult to tell whether this is real feeling or clever manipulation by a master of the art.

The only time Kerensky was slightly hesitant was in response to questions about her appearance. Perhaps this is because few have dared to query her about these matters.

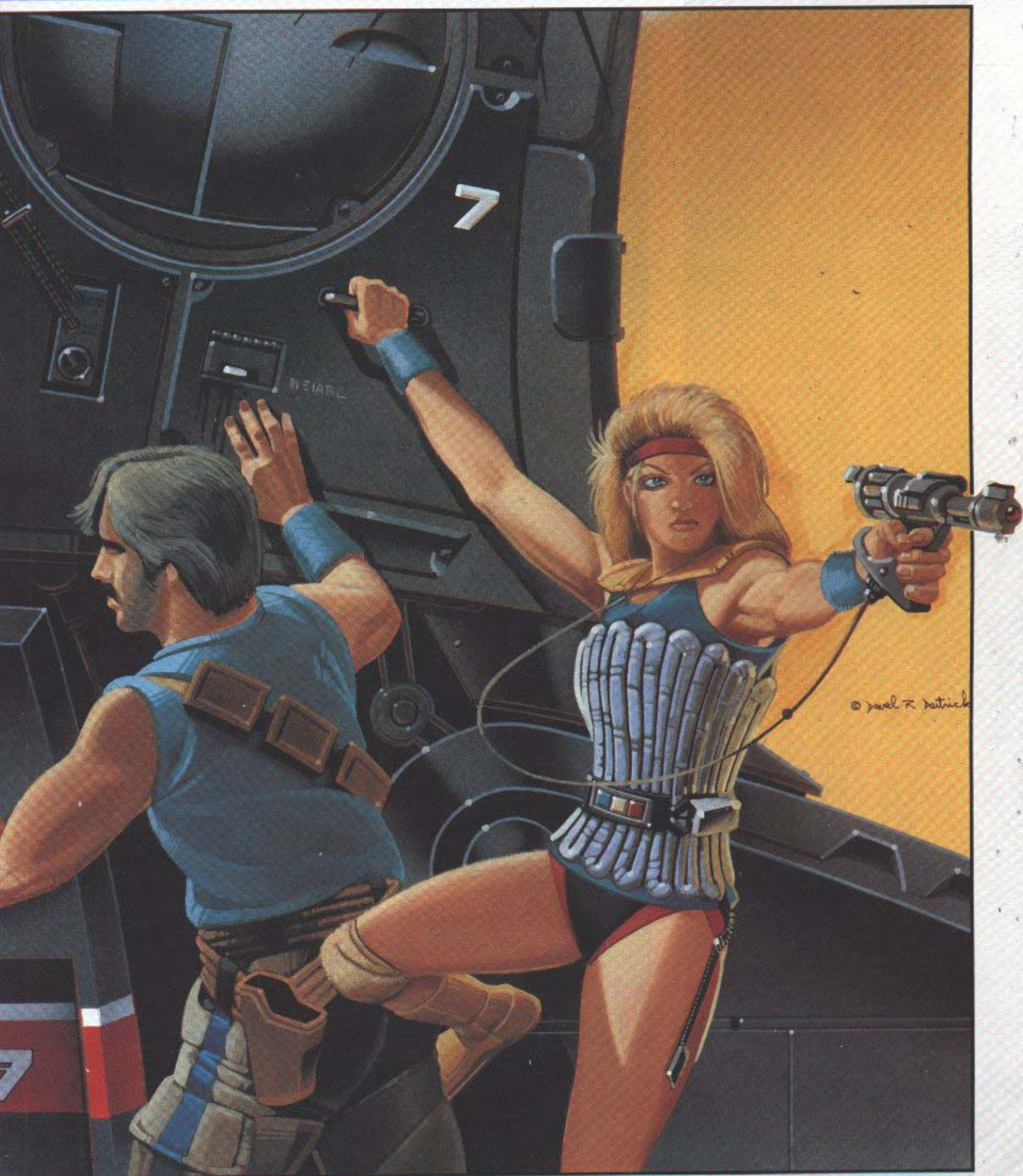
#### Supervisor's Notes

The schoolgirl who wants to practice being a historian is an excellent role with further uses while it is still available, Misha. Unfortunately, Kerensky was no place to start. Getting an interview with her was quite a coup, but she's impentriable.

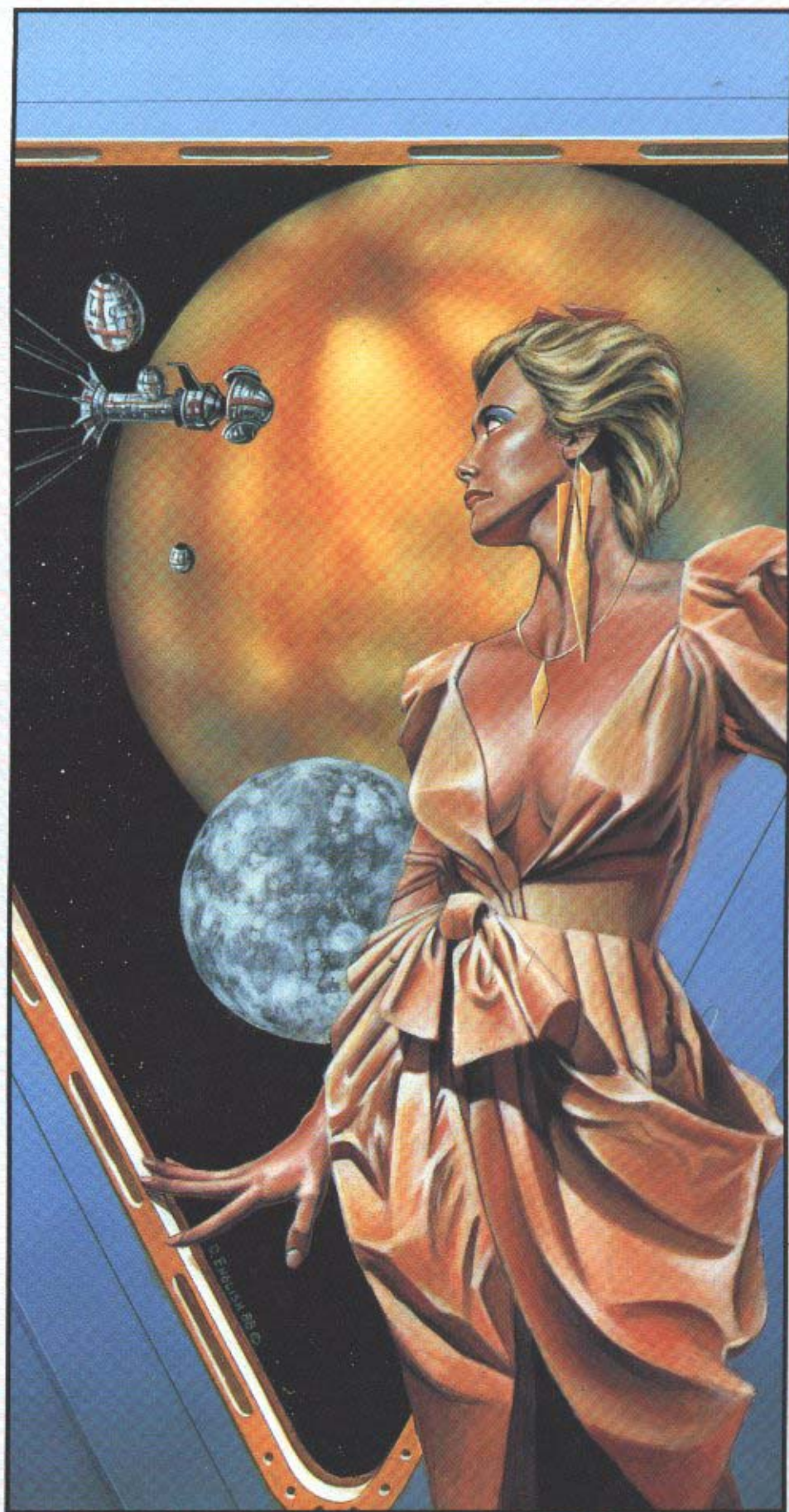
All this tells us is that Kerensky is just another woman who may have had plastic surgery to preserve her youthful good looks.



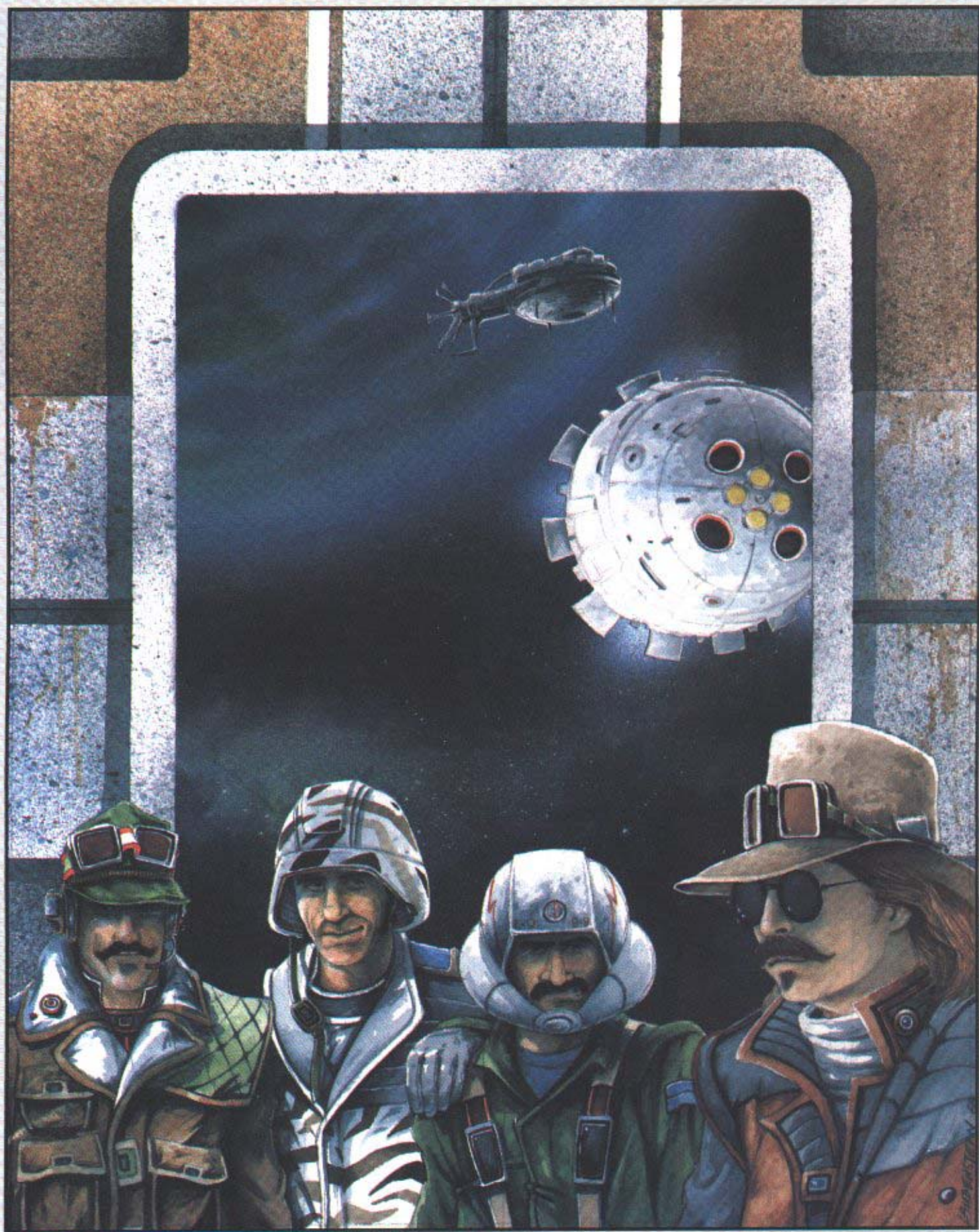














# PAINTING THE TOWN

—Mark O'Green

**"N**o more." Sergeant Gunnar Toshira stood, steadied himself against the armored personnel carrier's uneven movement, and pulled off his helmet. After wiping the sweat from the bald strip down the center of his short-cropped black hair, he tugged the helmet's padding loose. "Somebody please get the hatch. I'm burning up."

Before anyone else could move, Recruit Miko Wanabe quickly slid out of her sling seat and started working the upper hatch mechanism.

Toshira prodded the cooling unit. "No more of this." He readjusted the padding and bent to test the helmet again. "Twice a year we cross the desert to Sibitsu Station and at least once my helmet fails."

The hatch popped open. A folding fan of late afternoon sunlight slanted to the back of the vehicle. Recruit Wanabe eagerly turned to Toshira, smiled, then hustled back into her place.

"Twice a year. One week out—" Dust swirled in and circled Toshira. He sneezed once and was about to again when the dust he inhaled triggered a coughing fit. Voice raspy, he tossed the offending head gear to the painted steel floor. "That's it. My last tour."

The helmet skidded into the feet of Recruit Aragi Naiku. He arched his long neck and glanced down, trying unsuccessfully not to smile as he reached out to pick up the helmet.

Sergeant Toshira opened his hands, gesturing for Naiku to toss the headgear back. "Going to take a picture of yourself with my helmet?"

Naiku's smile opened into an expanse of white teeth as he dropped his free hand to the camera bulge in one pocket. His eyebrows flicked twice, and then he gently tossed the helmet back to his Sergeant.

"By the way, Aragi, got that timer working yet?" The Sergeant made another pass across his bald patch. "What a relief it will be. No more gadget-crazy Recruits. No more riding in rolling steel cans." He coughed again. "I will have a *life*."

Toshira heard laughter. Wanabe nodded furiously and clenched one fist in a gesture of determination. "I, too, plan to go on to be a pilot. It is a good thing."

"Wha—" Realizing that the Recruit had interpreted his words to fit her personal dream, Toshira smiled gently. "No, Miko. I'm not going to be a 'Mech pilot. I meant a life where I don't get up before the sun. One where I don't guard paint factories in the middle of a desert."

From the back of the APC, hard face illuminated by wavering light, Corporal Toragi Mannimoto called out, "She's expecting a big promotion for opening the hatch. She will become an officer *and* a man!"

More laughter from the back. Miko flushed, wishing she could sink through the webbing and disappear into the bulkhead.

"And I won't have to put up with too-smart troops," Toshira said.

Naiku patted Miko reassuringly and addressed his Sergeant. "Then returning your helmet makes me head of Internal Security Force."





Toshira snorted. "No. I think that position is already filled," he told Mannimoto.

The Corporal glared back. "The woman has to learn her place."

"As you should learn yours, Corporal?" The Sergeant held eye contact for a moment, then moved to the hatch opening. Before disappearing, he turned back. "No more."

Toshira stared to the southwest, across the top of the Scorpion tank left and forward of him, searching for specific mountains. The armored formation was staggered, supposedly to reduce dust, but even the foothills were hazy. Toshira bent down. "Not too much longer."

A voice from below called out. "Sergeant? Is Teddy Kurita going to be there?"

"*Teddy*? A close, personal friend of yours?" Toshira tried to identify the speaker.

The only answer was Naiku's snicker.

Toshira's face wrinkled up, and his mouth became a wide gash as he mimicked Aragi's smile. "No, *Teddy* is not coming. Why would he want to come here?"

"Do you question the way of authority?"

"No, Mannimoto. I'll leave that to you."

Toshira heard murmurs as he stretched back into the hatch opening. He stood silently, enjoying a rare breeze that had suddenly come up.

In the distance, he could now see his landmark hill, a worn mound with a pasty white streak. Old Man's Curse, he called it. Anyone who saw it once was destined to see it enough times to become old, too.

A speck of sand made him blink. As his eyes caught a hint of blue, he looked back to Old Man's Curse.

#### *The top of the Scorpion was gone.*

Then the concussion hit. Shrapnel tore noisy holes in the surrounding air. The force buffeted Toshira and he rolled with it, tucking his legs to a fall inside the vehicle. "Full speed!" he yelled to the driver. "Veer right!" Then he shouted. "We're under attack!"

The squad scrambled, and a series of nearby blasts rocked the APC. "Right side hatch," Toshira barked to Wanabe, who was already breaking the seal.

The Sergeant glimpsed a figure moving to the turret. "No! Prepare to evacuate!"

Mannimoto raised his head. "Continue!" He pushed through two crouching soldiers. "Toshira, we must fight!"

Toshira started toward his Corporal. "First we contact the station. Aragi?"

"Just static, Sergeant."

Long seconds passed as Toshira and Mannimoto glared at one another. They heard explosions outside, but only the hissing of the radio inside.

A nearby blast sent the APC sliding to one side. As the Sergeant regained his feet, he ordered sharply, "Everyone out!"

Wanabe went though first, one hand on her rifle, the other on the opening to swing to the left. Naiku swung right. Toshira passed in between. The two Recruits hesitated, but followed Toshira.

At the sound of nearby impacts, Toshira spun and threw himself over a small dune.

Wanabe and Naiku dove beside him.

Mannimoto was just meters clear of the doorway when an autocannon volley split the opposite side of the APC. The explosion threw Mannimoto even further away as debris sprayed into the air. The vehicle lifted briefly, teetered on a track, then thudded back into the sand.

Toshira took a breath to calm himself and restrained Naiku from heading back. The Sergeant had witnessed the effects of high-velocity impact on an APC before. He remembered how the interior metal peeled away and turned to shrapnel. And he remembered what it did to the men inside.

Mannimoto lifted his head to see.

As the smoke and dust cleared, the Kuritans watched a 'Mech lance close on the broken armored column.

"*Marauders!*" Wanabe said, gaping.

Toshira grunted and scanned the battlefield. The 'Mechs had hit the tanks first. The only Hunter was destroyed, its turret mostly gone, and the top shredded and peeled back like a child's toy. All of the Scorpions showed damage, too. Few were operational, with only one unscathed. Troops scattered across the sand, some firing, others looking for leadership. Toshira tried his communicator but got only the buzz of static.

Naiku readied his rifle and aimed at the closest 'Mech.

"No!" Toshira grabbed the Recruit's shoulder. "Don't make yourself a target." He pointed west. "Start that way. We must get to the station."

"We must stop the 'Mechs!" Mannimoto turned and crouched in the sand.







"Recruits Wanabe and Naiku, if Corporal Mannimoto does not follow my orders in five seconds, you will shoot him. When we reach the station, you will file reports on how the Corporal refused to do his duty to protect Sibitsu Station. Four, three—"

Mannimoto turned, saw raised rifles, and scrambled over to the Sergeant. "It is not I who am without honor. We must fight!"

"You're right, Mannimoto...But not in open desert." Toshira grabbed the Corporal's jerkin and spun him to face the burning APC. "This is not a time for *mushin*! Being of the no-mind will not kill a 'Mech!"

At that moment, Naiku started back toward the battle. Loping along, he pointed at a smoldering Scorpion and the lone figure limping away from it.

Toshira released Mannimoto and scanned the battle scene. Two Scorpions fired and hit the same point on one *Marauder*. Smoke issued from its underside.

Wanabe pushed out of the sand. "Lords of the House. They're perfect."

"You are blinded by desire, woman." Mannimoto pushed her back down. "One of them is burning!"

Flames belched front and rear, then the canopy flew off, followed by the reports from several small explosions. The 'Mech folded forward and fell into a burning heap.

"See. It falls."

"No, the armor."

Toshira sensed something in Wanabe's voice. "Explain."

"No patches." Wanabe gulped down dusty air. "*Marauders* have special armor no one knows how to make anymore. Any time one is hit, it must be repaired with lesser armor. These 'Mechs show no patches."

Touching Toshira's arm, Mannimoto added, "And no insignia."

Toshira shook his head. "All your 'Mech studies pay off, eh, Miko?"

"She dreams the impossible." Mannimoto glared at Wanabe. "You do not understand the Kurita ways. A woman of your status will never, never pilot a 'Mech."

Naiku and the injured soldier, a woman nearly his height, approached.

Toshira broke cover, met them, and positioned himself under her free arm. "Lance Corporal Gudmansen, isn't it?"

"Edith A., Sergeant Toshira."

"Glad you could make it. Let's move."

They watched the fighting as they ran.

Only the three remaining *Marauders* still moved, and one hobbled with a damaged leg. All of the armored vehicles were stopped, abandoned, or destroyed.

Red and blue streams played over the previously untouched Scorpion. Its front end ruptured, the turret lifting off the body and gouging into the sand behind.

Naiku wiped sweat from his eyes. "We cannot stop them."

"It has been done before." Wanabe turned her head in time to watch a *Marauder* rake autocannon fire across a burning Scorpion. "On Garrison, when Katrina Steiner pulled her 'Mechs, the ground forces still destroyed fifteen of our lances."

"A lie," Mannimoto spat out. "Propaganda. And our woman believes it."

Gudmansen clenched her teeth. Wanabe just stared ahead.

"Even Kuritans can learn the hard lesson, Mannimoto." Toshira shrugged under Gudmansen's extra weight. "We'll get to station and see if we can teach them one."

The station's outline finally appeared, a dark line that the fading sunlight could not reach. The line accented the base of the mountains that rose to become an expanse of black wall.

Naiku unslung his rifle. "Should I fire shots to get their attention?"

"Wait." Toshira resorted to binoculars. "That won't be necessary. The 'Mechs have already been there."

They continued cautiously. As they approached, the scene became clearer. There was a breach in the six-meter high wall south of the gates. The front gates were twisted open, another broken Hunter just inside.

The remnants of the squad passed through the gates, greeted by concrete-gray debris scattered on concrete-gray streets.

"This place would look dead even without the rubble." Gudmansen shrugged free of her support and hobbled over to the cold Hunter. She sat and examined her leg.

Toshira nodded. "Economics. The material for making the marking dyes was abundant, so the base was built here instead of having to haul the materials across the desert." He moved to the Hunter and leaned against a heavy tread. "And built cheaply."

"And ugly." Naiku pulled his camera free, and focused on a blown-out section of wall, but did not press the button.

"And ugly." Toshira pulled out his field

phone, wishing he had more advanced equipment. "Let me try this antique again. Keep your heads up."

Wanabe pivoted and aimed binoculars through the gate.

Mannimoto crouched by Toshira and the tank tread, rifle ready.

"Aragi." Toshira pointed up. "Check the base for movement."

The lanky Recruit scaled the Hunter, sat, and scanned.

Keeping his own eyes to the east, Toshira squeezed the phone button. "Sibitsu Station, Sibitsu Station, replacement unit at—replacement unit inbound...Anyone at Sibitsu, reply please."

Everyone waited quietly. The only noise was the crackle of static.

Then it changed. The fuzzy sound became more intense, louder.

Toshira stood. "Aragi, look outward."

Naiku swiveled a half-circle left, then swung back. "Incoming! From the south!" He leaned for a better look. "One—no—two *Marauders*. I can just make them out."

Mannimoto hunted for a better position. "Now we know why it took so long."

Wanabe turned to Toshira. "They probably have support and reload down south."

"Makes sense. Judging from the hole in the wall, at least one of them came from the south the first time." Toshira tilted up his head. "Aragi, get down here. Time to move."

"Why?" Mannimoto demanded. "Let's end it here. Next you'll suggest surrender."

"Toragi—"

"No. No more talk. My father's told me stories of Steiner prisons. It's not the place for a soldier to die."

Gudmansen hobbled in front of Toshira and shrugged. "I've heard stories, too."

Recruit Naiku landed in the sand beside them. "What can we do? We don't have the arms to stop them."

"We'll check the armory."

Mannimoto slapped his hand against the tank. "Think we'll find one of these?"

"Let me ask you something, Mannimoto." Toshira tightened the circle. "How old were you when you were named?"

"Five. Like everyone else. But—"

The Sergeant gently pulled Wanabe around to face the others. "Miko, how many districts in the Draconis Combine?"

"Five, Serg—"

"How many Pillars, Mannimoto?"



"Five—"

"Wanabe, virtues?"

"Five." Wanabe nodded, smiling.

"Gudmansen, the winning number in House Dice is..."

She nodded. "Five."

"What?"

"Five, Sergeant!"

The Sergeant swept his hands, palms up, inside the circle. "Aragi, how many soldiers here?"

The lanky Recruit's face stretched into another grin. "We are five, Sergeant."

Toshira looked again at a thoughtful Mannimoto. "We are five."

Toshira and Mannimoto had guarded the base before and suggested the armor repair shop as a base. The front of the twelve-meter high building had collapsed in the earlier battle, but there was an opening large enough for Humans to pass through. A smaller passage through rubble led to a connecting warehouse in the rear.

The sprawling repair area was clear of vehicles, except for a functional industrial exoskeleton. Unable to put weight on the wounded leg, Gudmansen resorted to the machine for movement.

"Too bad we don't have a tank," Gudmansen said, lifting a paint sprayer. "We've got enough chemicals to fix one."

Toshira stepped back from a large pit used for working under armored vehicles. "Like what?"

"Got it all here. Dozens of sprayers. Thermo-chem, softens armor with heat. Iso-therm, cools and hardens it. Even acid to melt wreckage away."

Toshira hurried to the workbench. "Show me." Over his shoulder, he called, "Miko, does this work on 'Mechs, too?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

Mannimoto appeared in the front opening carrying two empty inferno launchers. "Armory's gone. Found these in the street."

Naiku ran through the opening. In his haste, he bumped into Mannimoto. "Sorry, but look what I found." He held up a bulging satchel. "Grenades, thousands of them!"

Reaching into the bag, Mannimoto pulled out a fist-sized container. He twisted the top and threw it at a wall.

Naiku dove to the floor as a blue smear blossomed on the wall.

Mannimoto hauled him up and pulled another grenade free. "Worthless dye mark-

ers."

"Not necessarily." Toshira crossed the concrete space and took the grenade from his Corporal. "Miko, would the paint block sensors on a 'Mech?"

"Yes, but radar would go right through."

Gudmansen turned the exoskeleton. A metal foot stepped on a loose bolt and it shot across the floor and pinged off the wall. "Just get the 'R' mode. Got metal flake in them. Used to paint targets so we could see them and locate 'em with radar, too."

Toshira reached up and snagged Naiku around the neck. "I think we need to talk."

**"L**et's go through it again." The Sergeant moved lug nuts in a pattern on the floor.

A sound interrupted him.

Although it was muffled through the passage, all five Kuritans could easily make out the loudspeaker broadcast. "Sho-sa Theodore Kurita. Come out and surrender. No harm will come to you, Commander Kurita."

"They heard the same rumor we did." Wanabe moved closer to the opening.

Toshira shook his head. "Whoever they are, they were given wrong information."

Mannimoto brushed off concrete dust. "Only one man here is the Prince's height."

Everyone turned to Naiku, who looked surprised, then showed his wide smile.

"More likely it's me," Gudmansen snorted.

Toshira stood up. "Since we can't tell which of you is the real Teddy Kurita, I guess you'll both have to stay here." He staved off protests with a raised hand. "We need you to set up things anyway. We'll just go waste some time playing with the 'Mechs until you're ready."

While Naiku and Gudmansen started preparations, Toshira, Wanabe, and Mannimoto found one of the giant machines by the sounds and moving lights.

Mannimoto moved a block in front of the *Marauder* and sprayed a man-sized image on the concrete wall near a doorway. He waved a flashlight down the street, hoping to attract the 'Mech's attention. Then he ran to the corner and sprayed another wall.

At the same time, Toshira and Wanabe climbed stairs to the top floor of a building across the street. A twinkle near the window caught Wanabe's eye. She moved to the



opening and kneeled. "Sergeant, shell casings. Others fought from here."

"Let's hope our attack plan meets with more success." He prepared his grenade.

They heard crunching as the 'Mech strode down the street. Toshira sprayed the window area with isotherm to wipe out any heat trace.

The *Marauder* rumbled forward, passing under the window where Toshira and Wanabe hid. The 'Mech closed on the heat-painted doorway, rotated its autocannon, and fired a burst into the building.

Wanabe, Toshira knew, had never actually seen a weapon of that size fire, and the power startled her into a crouch. Throwing a paint grenade was the furthest thing from her mind. "Lords of the House!"

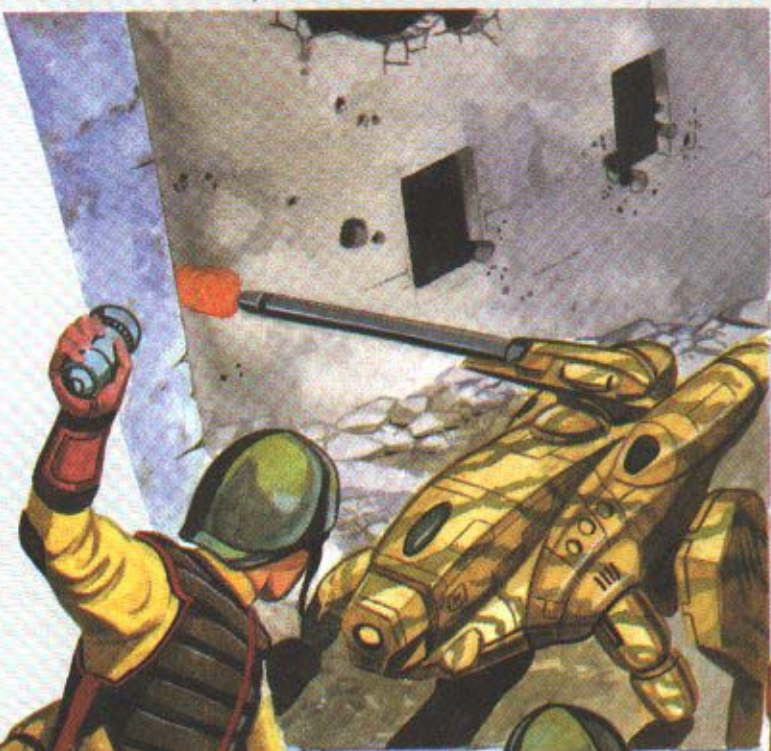
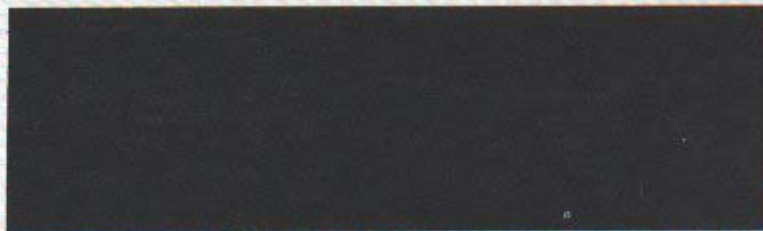
Too busy to reply, Toshira used the autocannon burst as a chance to lob his grenades.

As the concrete wall crumbled from the 'Mech's onslaught, the first canister of paint hit. A blue blotch, deep and oily-looking in the low light, blossomed just behind the *Marauder's* canopy. Paint dripped down the sides and headed to heat sink openings.

The 'Mech stopped firing. It hesitated, scanning.

Two more small packages flew out the upper window and spread paint across its surface.

The *Marauder* fired again. A blue stream sizzled down the street and



crushed the corner where Mannimoto had used the thermo-chem the second time. A red laser bolt from its other arm passed through the window above Toshira and Wanabe. Chunks of ceiling fell free and dust filled the room. A thumb-sized piece of concrete ricocheted off Toshira's helmet.

"Maybe this thing isn't so bad after all."

They sidestepped debris and ran to the door. "Ready? Now!" Toshira called out. They pivoted, threw another grenade blindly through the window, then started down a hallway toward the back of the building.

The 'Mech outside spotted the third volley of paint. It moved its left arm slightly and the PPC spewed a neon-blue stream through the window.

The ceiling collapsed, covering the room with rocky debris. Dust poured out the window, spectral smoke in the moonlight.

Then came silence. The *Marauder* stood still in the street and waited.

Mannimoto scrambled up a rubble pile to the roof of another warehouse.

Toshira and Wanabe quietly picked their way through wreckage down a back stair to the street.

A few minutes passed, and the Kurita mice taunted the cat again.





With paint grenades, Toshira, Wanabe, and Mannimoto harassed the 'Mechs throughout the night. Whenever the *Marauders* clustered, the Kuritans set off two or more diversions at once: small fires in the streets using broken cigarettes for timing fuses, thermo-chem graffiti, burning rags dragged on long ropes. Anything to make the 'Mech move.

Gudmansen released the barrel she held in the claws of the industrial exoskeleton. The formed plastic rumbled down the ramp, picking up both speed and pitch. There was a *doink* as it impacted another barrel at the bottom of the mechanic's pit.

She repeated the exercise several times, then clumped over to a pallet of plywood sheets and hauled them to the pit.

Toshira and Wanabe, exhausted and paint-spattered, ducked through the opening. "Where's Aragi?" Wanabe leaned carefully over the edge of the pit and peered down.

"Waiting at the site. Should be ready. Took the last load of sprayers out a long time ago." The metal ramp scraped across the floor as Gudmansen tugged it into a corner.

Toshira flexed his jaws, ears aching from the shrieking sound. "Ahh! Maybe we could just make them listen to that until they surrendered."

"Who's surrendering now?" Mannimoto appeared in the doorway.

"Ooop!" Wanabe, startled, spun around and slipped in an oily mess under the pit edge. She teetered briefly, then regained her balance. "Don't do that!" She glared at Mannimoto, who smiled.

Toshira and Gudmansen exchanged surprised glances. The Sergeant looked at Mannimoto suspiciously. "Why are you in such a good mood?"

"I'm having..." Mannimoto scrunched up his face thoughtfully. "I'm having fun."

Toshira nodded. "Better than being shot in the desert?"

"So far." Mannimoto moved to the wash facility. "What's this doing?" He pointed to a hose pouring water into a rubble heap.

The exoskeleton legs made short scraping noises before they thudded into the concrete as Gudmansen trudged over. "Just an addition to the plan."

"Let's go, Mannimoto. Aragi's probably going crazy waiting." Toshira grabbed a

quick drink and headed out.

On top of a three-story building, Naiku watched the glow of the coming sun. He fidgeted and peered over the edge at the alley below. He'd finished setting his equipment two hours earlier and his biggest battle now was with his own patience. An hour earlier, he'd even tried his hand at haiku. After painting his first line on the rooftop—"The struggle of men"—he decided that he had no gift for poetry.

A rock skittered behind him on the rough roof surface. A signal from Mannimoto to be prepared. Naiku crouched by the large vehicle batteries lined up a meter back from the roof's edge. Wires sprouted from both the battery terminals, those from the positive leading to an assortment of switches scrounged from the repair shop and arranged in a long row. The thick collection of wires from the negative terminal gathered with the bundle from the switches and disappeared down a hold punched into the roof.

Naiku looked at the switch to his left, then to his right. "Ah, but which way will it come? Which switch first?" He glanced again, then picked up the one on his right.

He heard the whine of a power plant behind him, followed by the distant thud of footsteps. He sprawled out facing the alley, keeping his profile low. Anticipation pumped up his heart rate and made his breathing shallow.

A rock bounced on the roof and came to rest less than a meter to his left. "He did that on purpose," Naiku hissed, then he crawled across to pick up the switch farthest left.

The noise from the 'Mech increased and then split into two. One swelled in volume and closed from behind and left. The other jumble of sounds moved perpendicular to the first, behind Naiku and off to his right. He heard the crunching of 'Mechs stepping on rubble. Lighter sounds of movement came from the alley below.

Naiku's breath came faster. He inched toward the building's edge. The fingers of his left hand curled over the corner and he slowly pulled so that he could see the alley.

A burst of fire from below and right nearly made him trigger the first switch.

It was one of his own, he realized. "Fake out," he whispered, trying to calm himself. He considered going back to the batteries and using them to restart his heart. Instead, he took a deep breath and peeked over,



prepared to watch the powerful machine enter the trap.

The *Marauder* turned the corner and Naiku stifled a laugh. Instead of the sand and olive tones he'd expected, the 'Mech was an explosion of brilliant colors. Splashes of blue, orange, and red cascaded down the machine and disappeared into its heat sinks.

As the prismatic 'Mech stalked down the alley, Naiku remembered why he was sprawled on the roof. He triggered switches, activating paint sprayers to release a fine mist in front of the parti-colored *Marauder*. A shortage of acid meant some sprayers contained thermo-chem.

The 'Mech left a swirling trail as it moved rapidly through the spray. Two-thirds of the way through the alley, it slowed, rotating side to side. Its sensors, paint-covered, couldn't maintain images and had to constantly reacquire them.

No rifle fire taunted it to move on. The Kurita soldiers were content to let it stand in the corrosive alley. Finally, it exited. As the *Marauder* rotated its torso left, rifle shots pinged off its right side. The 'Mech stepped right, trying to turn its torso and arms to face its attacker while it moved.

The combined effects of heat and acid had peeled and bunched the metal in the rotation ring like mud in front of a skidding tire. The gyros attempted to compensate, but the torque forces propelled the torso forward. The pilot tried to use the 'Mech's arms for balance, but the arm movements were also impaired by the corrosion. The *Marauder* took two staggering steps and fell canopy-first into a concrete warehouse.

With a metallic screech, the canopy jumped its track. Twisted open and held on one bent hinge, it vibrated briefly as the engine sounds died away.

The street was silent. Then, the patter of feet closing on the downed giant echoed through concrete canyons. As the other three soldiers cautiously approached the 'Mech, Naiku called from his high vantage point, "The pilot's trapped, but his arms are moving. He's reaching for something."

Wanabe broke away from a covering wall and positioned herself to see the pilot. She raised her rifle and sighted. "Whatever it is, doesn't look like he can get it."

Mannimoto scrambled up the torso of the downed 'Mech. "He's taken something."

By the time Mannimoto reached him, the

pilot was already dead.

Wanabe moved to the cockpit area and peered inside. "No insignia. Even the normal manufacturing information is missing."

First checking both ways, Toshira crossed the street to join them at the 'Mech. "Thank you, Miko."

Mannimoto finished his search. "Nothing on the pilot."

Toshira scanned the cockpit. "Miko, can you tell what he was reaching for?"

"Something down here." She pointed below the canopy rail.

Naiku arrived and stared over Wanabe's shoulder. He reached inside, fingering a switch and following a wire harness. "Might be a destruct switch."

"What? That's not standard." Wanabe looked at Naiku, then to her Sergeant.

Toshira motioned to the Recruits. "You two check on how Gudmansen is doing."

They hesitated, then jogged down the street. Mannimoto nodded at the pilot's form. "An honorable man. Knew his duty."

"An honorable man...Almost like a good Kurita soldier."

"I see you had a similar thought, Toshira." Mannimoto checked the brightening sky. "No insignias."

"Clean 'Mechs."

"High-priced operation."

Toshira pulled off his helmet again and absently rubbed his bald spot. "But mercenaries don't usually commit suicide."

"And in such a hurry."

"Don't follow you there."

"They haven't rested. At least, not long." The Corporal stood and paced. "As no other 'Mechs have been sighted, it appears these hit the base and the armored column. And then came back here and kept coming at us all night instead of moving off."

"Maybe a deadline."

Mannimoto reached out his hand to help Toshira up. "I don't know. But it will make interesting conversation when we get back."

"When we get back?" Toshira grabbed the hand and pulled up. "Why, Corporal, you're becoming an optimist."

Three blocks from the repair shop opening, a *Marauder* rose from behind a rubble pile, facing their direction.

"Move!" Not waiting to see if Mannimoto would listen, Toshira pushed the Corporal through the entrance. "Hurry up, everyone. About one minute to company."

The 'Mech charged down the street, stopping in the middle of the block to scan with its clogged Dalban HiRez.

Inside the opening, his back against the wall, Toshira struggled to stay put and monitor the 'Mech. "He's still got some sensors." He snapped his head right, looking expectantly at Naiku. "Ready?"

Naiku frantically worked on the trigger and shook his head.

Toshira, trying to buy time, picked up a sprayer and filled the opening with an isotherm mist.

The 'Mech set one giant metal foot onto the rubble and shifted its weight forward. The footing held and the *Marauder* waded into the debris.

Everyone heard the crunching sounds. Mannimoto mouthed, "Move," and waved urgently at the Sergeant. Toshira started inching away from the opening.

The 'Mech jammed its arm into the opening. The metal-on-concrete noise filled the repair area.

Toshira stared into the muzzle of the Hellstar PPC, felt the radiating heat. He'd never been so impressed in his life. The instant seemed to stretch in time, with all going in slow motion.

The effect broke as the 'Mech lifted its arm and cleared away concrete.

Toshira leaped sideways, caught his balance, and streaked for the rear opening. "Ruuuunnn!"

Mannimoto pulled back and headed through the destroyed warehouse.

Wanabe dragged Naiku through the opening. "He doesn't want to use his weapons. His sinks are clogged!"

Snickering, Naiku regained his feet.

Concrete shattered and fell off reinforcing bars.

Pale and out of breath, Toshira scrambled up the rubble. He slipped halfway though. "Gudmansen out? Ropes ready?"

The obstruction finally split in half and toppled to either side.

With help, Toshira got to his feet. "Aragi, go back so we can pass the signal to Gudmansen." He crouched beside Wanabe and peered back into the repair area.

Emerging from the dust, the 'Mech entered the repair shop and stood there. Only a dripping sound could be heard as liquid trickled from the hoses of the wash tanks.

Mannimoto continued running, passed



by Gudmansen and the ropes, and left the ruined building.

The 'Mech thudded another step into the room and stopped, easily spotting the gray-painted plywood covering the pit. The *Marauder* started around the obvious trap.

Toshira waved his arm at Naiku, who passed the signal to Gudmansen.

Ropes slithered backward through the exit. Two figures armed with infernos popped up at the far corners of the room.

Reacting to the sight, the *Marauder* swung its arms and fired both PPCs. Bright blue lanced into the corners, obliterating the stuffed clothing and empty weapons.

The 'Mech staggered back. Toshira and Wanabe could see waves of heat rise from the machine.

Paint-blocked heat sinks were unable to deal with the intense build-up. The temperature in the cockpit shot up.

"I don't see how the pilot can breathe," Wanabe whispered.

The *Marauder* brushed against wash hoses designed for water only, not the solvent pumped into the tank by Gudmansen. A flame danced across the 'Mech's left arm and leaped to the hoses. Rubble interfering with its backward steps, the 'Mech pivoted to spot the opening.

Wanabe, mixed emotions obvious in her voice, pulled on the Sergeant's tunic. "He's going to make it out!"

There was a burst of rifle fire from the far doorway. Streams of liquid poured out of the tank onto the *Marauder*. A blue tunnel of fire, like a slow burst from a tiny PPC, darted from the 'Mech up to the storage tank.

Toshira and Wanabe ducked as the explosion engulfed the *Marauder* in flames.

Miko, unable to control her curiosity, lifted her head enough to watch the 'Mech stagger backward. "He's not going to eject."

The *Marauder's* leg thrust to the rear, trying to stop the momentum. The tip of the foot scraped concrete, flattened, and put its weight on burning gray plywood. The machine crushed the covering and toppled into the mechanic's pit.

Wanabe turned away as 75 tons of *Marauder* landed on a dozen brittle plastic barrels filled with thermo-chem.

Sitting on top of the broken Hunter at the main gate, Toshira cupped his hand over the old communicator's mouthpiece. He shook his head at Mannimoto. "This is typical. Headquarters wants to know if we'll need transportation back."

An eyebrow-less Mannimoto shrugged. "Gudmansen and the others should be back soon. They seemed confident that they would come up with something. They're got some talent."

"That they do." Toshira smiled and removed his hand from the phone. "We're—"

A familiar engine note and thudding sound stopped conversation. Both soldiers straightened.

Toshira whispered into the communicator. "Stand by."

Mannimoto cocked his head, then





turned away from the gate. "Toshira," he said. "Back here."

A *Marauder* stalked slowly up the street, dragging an engine-less APC. Canopy gone, its body stuck facing left, arms frozen, the paint-splashed 'Mech looked more like an amusement park statue than a war machine.

Recruit Miko Wanabe sat in the pilot seat, showing a huge grin. "Need a ride, Corporal Mannimoto?"

Chewing his lower lip, Mannimoto turned to Toshira. "You know, there are some things I regret saying."

Toshira started to point at Wanabe, then couldn't think of an appropriate reply and merely waved his hand aimlessly.

"Edith figured out how to get it on its feet and Aragi bypassed the start sequence." Wanabe indicated the top of the APC where Naiku and Gudmansen sat. "So, Sergeant, want a ride?"

Toshira pulled his helmet off and wiped his bald spot. A squawk from the radio brought him back and he lifted the handset to his ear again. "Oh, sorry. Yeah, transportation? Ah, let me get back to you."

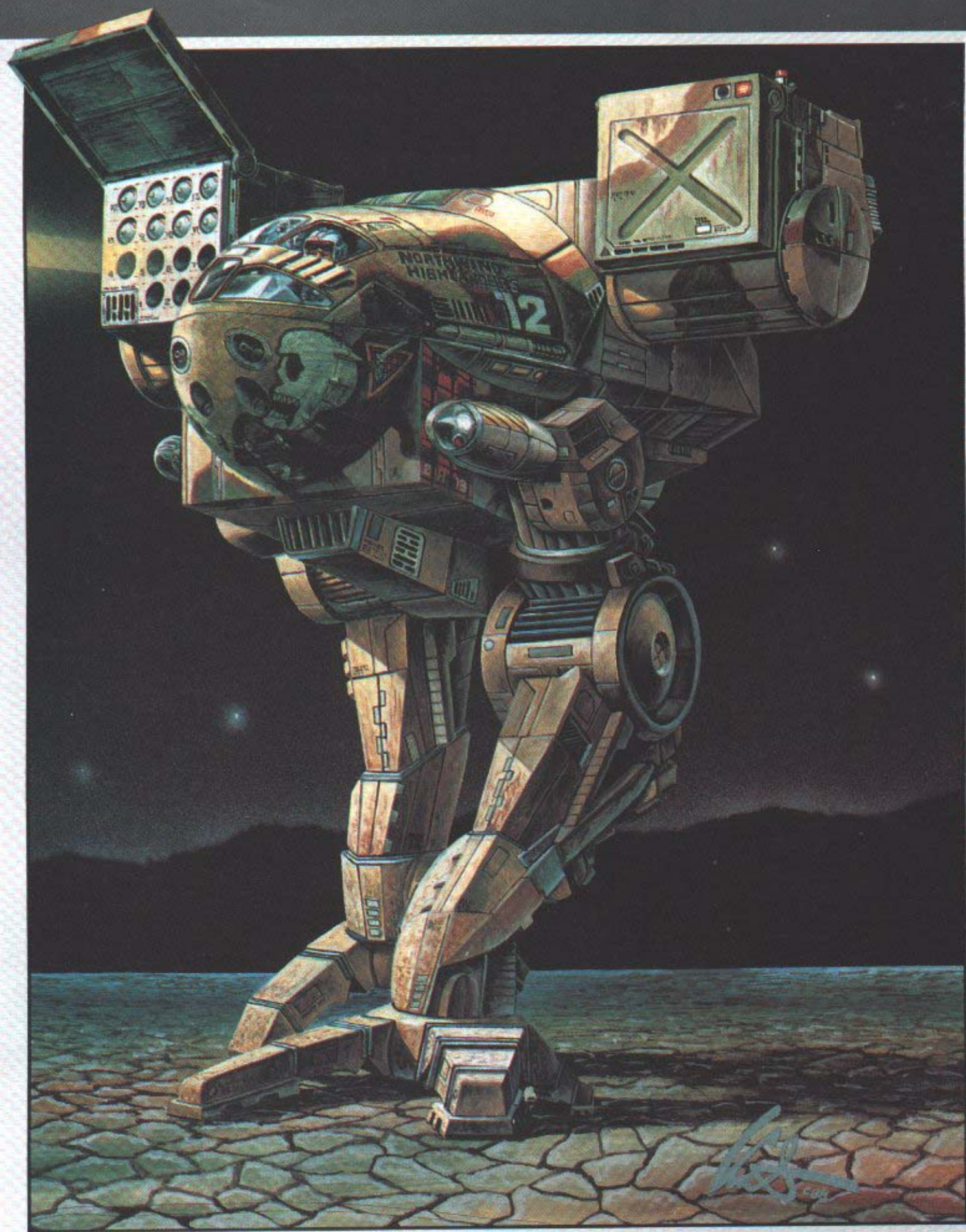




# GALLERY









# THE RACE IS NOT TO THE SWIFT

—Bear Peters

**“...St. George...Three...incoming...”**

**T**he snarl of the radio faded, inaudible amid the rattle of falling shrapnel. Encased in his *Shadow Hawk*, Captain Cyrus St. George did not fear the flying debris, only the incoming missiles that caused it.

He cut from the command frequency, on which he had been alternately requesting and demanding close air support, to his tactical link with his Lance Sergeant Major. “Say again, Sergeant. Your transmission’s garbled.”

“Captain St. George, we’ve got a problem with Swords Three.”

“Sergeant, can you nail it down? I’m trying to pry free some fighter support from H.Q.”

“Sir, I don’t think Swords Three can wait. Their C.O. was taken out over 20 minutes ago. There doesn’t seem to be any real command over there.”

The Captain looked out over the terrain that separated him from his right flank, not liking what he saw. The rolling ground provided too much opportunity for the enemy to form up beyond a ridgeline for a counterattack. The good news was that there were no Steiner fighters in the steel-gray sky for the first time today.

“What’s their active strength, Sergeant?”

“They have three ‘Mechs still operational—a *Wasp*, a *Hermes II*, and a *Stinger*. C.O.’s gone, and they’re being hit on the front by long-range stuff, same as us. We will fall back on your position as soon as I can reach Swords One.”

“Aye, sir. We’ll be there. Count on it.”

As the Sergeant’s *Wolverine-M* moved away from Swords Two’s perimeter, Captain St. George muttered to himself, “Just buy me a minute or two to form up the company, and find out what’s going on.”

Ever since the Solaris strike force had deployed, things had seemed to get progressively worse. Though the disguised DropShips had reached the landing field unscathed, the trouble began as soon as the troops had reached their primary targets. That’s when the hammer fell. The Lyrans counterattacked, first with fighters in relatively weak strength, then with huge unreported concentrations of ‘Mech forces. The regiment, the 33rd Marik Militia, took it on the chin for about three hours. When the Lyran attack seemed to slacken, Colonel Drinkwater, the 33rd’s C.O., dispatched the 131st Battalion under Force Commander Sen Sho Keshii to strike into the suburban hills. Where went Keshii’s 131st, so went the Captain’s ‘Mech Company, The Swords of St. George, with its Swords One, Two, and Three lances.

They had been successful at the onset, but soon bogged down after they had left the city proper and penetrated the rolling countryside. After the first hours, it became obvious that the Lyran forces were winning the air war. First, the Marik fighters became scarce, then completely unavailable. Without air support, the thrust had ground to a halt. While St. George



was talking to the Sergeant, Regimental had come on his command frequency with word that there was no available air support in the 33rd's theater of operations.

"Swords One, Swords One. This is Swords Leader. What's your status? Over."

"Swords Leader, Sergeant Harris here. We are holding on to this front for now, sir. Where's our fighter support? We're being cut to ribbons."

Sergeant Harris? "Where's Lieutenant Tragg?" St. George could not keep the worry from his voice, for his command structure was unraveling fast.

"The Lieutenant had to punch out, sir. That last fighter wave hit us with inferno cluster bombs. His *Marauder* couldn't take the heat. Reactor overload." The Sergeant sounded wretched. "He didn't make it, sir."

"Take charge, Sergeant. You're in command over there. Now report. What opposition are you facing?"

"We've got a lot of long-range stuff coming from our front, but nothing that's a real problem." The Sergeant paused. "Unless those fighters come back."

Harris's unspoken question hung in the static-filled air: *What happened to our fighters?* Captain St. George wished fervently that he knew.

"Swords One, fall back behind that ridge to our rear. Sergeant McHaigh should be digging in there with Swords Three. I'll be providing cover for you both."

"Captain, does this mean we're pulling out? What about the..."

"Sergeant, fall back to the ridge. That's an order."

For the moment, the Captain's communication link was silent. The Steiner forces would soon begin to notice the fall-off in counterfire. Before his position lay a row of foothills stretching like a washboard up to a line of mountains in the distance. The enemy fire was coming primarily from the ridgeline just ahead of his position, and from a forested ridge to his right. Swords Three had reported a light lance probing his flank. If he took his *Shadow Hawk* and Lipescue's *Crusader* sharp right into the light lance, he just might avoid most of the long-range fire. It might also convince the Lyrans that the company was trying to wheel right for a breakthrough in that direction. If nothing else, it might confuse them.

"Lippy, move over here. You and I are

going to look for a little trouble on our right. Bryant, take your *Wasp*, and fire at random from all along our perimeter. I want you to fire, then move, trying to act like you're a whole company. You got that?"

"Yes sir, Captain. Fire then run, all along our front."

"That's it. Shoot at everything that moves on the Steiner front for about fifteen minutes, or until they get mad and come in after you. Then run like hell for that ridgeline behind us. One and Three will be there to back you up."

"Gotcha, sir."

"Give'em hell, kid." St. George knew it was no time for trite phrases, but Regimental had not left him much else.

"Ready, Lippy?" he said. "Follow my line ahead, and we'll give them the old bait and switch."

The two large units moved off in the direction of the tree line to the right. The terrain consisted of fields covered with grain up to the 'Mechs' ankles. There were no houses to be seen, and any indigs must have fled hours ago.

He could still see the shocked faces of the populace as the Swords had raced through town. They had overrun the defenses at the power plant and then dug in. Then came the counterattack. Though the rest of the 33rd was taking heavy casualties, the 131st battalion did not lose a 'Mech. They had been ordered to drive into the countryside in an attempt to draw off the heaviest forces until reinforcements arrived. The 131st had struck out from the power plant in waves. One company would go out until it stalled. Then another would thrust through its predecessor's position until it, too, ground to a halt. The waves continued one after another, deeper and deeper into the enemy positions, until the Steiners gave up and fell back. Holding the power plant and the 131st's rear was a mercenary lance, Seguin's Strikers. The rest of the 131st was spread out on either side of a corridor about three kilometers wide and thirteen long, with The Swords of St. George at its point. Then the whole Marik drive stalled. Instead of drawing off the heavy forces hammering the rest of the regiment, they had drawn down the wrath of the Lyran air arm. Meanwhile, the 33rd's counterair continued to shrink.

Moving his *Shadow Hawk* into the trees, St. George left the missile barrage behind.

Watching his readouts with eager eyes, he wondered if Swords Three could have been mistaken.

Suddenly, a *Locust* moved out from behind a dense thicket, probably masked from his sensors by the foliage. When St. George let loose a volley of short-range missiles, the light 'Mech's pilot sprinted straight away from the advancing *Shadow Hawk* like a frightened rabbit. The missiles hit near the right leg assembly, but the *Locust* just kept on moving.

"Lippy, I've got one dead ahead. Find some cover, and be ready for my return."

"Roger, Cap. That thicket might do it. I scrunch down and think tiny thoughts."

The Captain charged on, opening up with both his autocannon and his laser. The *Locust* rolled its machine guns back around to the rear firing position, but it was a move of sheer desperation against the thicker armor of the *Shadow Hawk*.

St. George's laser fire began to tell. The right leg servomotor on the *Locust* flared in a cascade of sparks, and the fleeing 'Mech spun, off-balance, to a halt. Then the autocannon zeroed in and began to hammer the lighter 'Mech's body. Its pilot tried frantically to bring to bear its medium laser, the only weapon that might be effective against the *Shadow Hawk*. It was no use, though, for the beams stabbed ineffectually into the surrounding trees. With the damaged leg, all the *Locust* could do was churn the ground where it stood.

St. George launched an SRM volley into the torso armor, and the explosion touched off the *Locust*'s remaining machine gun ammo. The light 'Mech sagged down on the damaged leg, smoke pouring from every vent in its torso.

"Got one, Lippy. Be ready. This should really set them off."

All hell broke loose around his 'Mech as the missile fire resumed in force. With their own 'Mech gone, the Steiner forces weren't holding back. Captain St. George lunged forward, avoiding the worst of the barrage by moving in the one direction they would least expect.

He burst from the cover of the forest onto a plain, the unseen far side of the ridge in front of the Swords position. Moving up the plain were seven 'Mechs. To the rear was an *Atlas* firing LRMs blindly into the forest. To the left was a *Warhammer* and a







pair of *Wasps*. To the right and moving up quickly was a *Rifleman*. In front of his *Shadow Hawk* and screening him from the fire of the rest were two *Cicadas*.

Without hesitation, he let the closest *Cicada* have it with his whole weapons array. His autocannon tore into it, while the medium laser drew a blazing red scratch down one of the Steiner machine's legs. His SRMs meanwhile scored a direct hit on the enemy 'Mech's torso. The injured *Cicada* reeled back in shock and surprise. The Captain took his opportunity, and dove back into the cover of the now smoldering forest.

"Look out, Lippy. We're only going to have one shot before we fall back. There're two lances out there and they look confident of support, so make it good."

"What are we looking at, Cap'n?" came back the *Crusader* pilot's voice.

"If we're lucky, a *Cicada*, but after the surprise I just gave one I met back there, look for a *Rifleman*. He was almost as close." Sweat was pouring down St. George's face. Weapons fire and rapid movement were sending his 'Mech's heat up to the danger point.

By now, the LRMs had stopped firing. The huge Assault 'Mech that had been supplying the fire was no doubt moving up to support its smaller fellows. St. George decided to take this opportunity to charge straight back up the path. It seemed a long time before he passed the smoking wreckage of the *Locust*, its torso now glowing a dull red. Despite the relative dampness that seemed to pervade the area, the 'Mech's burning had ignited the surrounding foliage.

"Here we come, Lippy. Heads up!" the Captain called out.

"They'll never know what hit 'em!" Lipescue's voice sounded eager.

St. George gave a silent prayer of thanks to whatever gods there be that his company had at least a few veterans to leaven the kids. If they hadn't, this attempt to fall back would have become a rout.

The Captain's *Shadow Hawk* thundered past the ambush position. Lipescue's *Crusader* was barely traceable through the thick shrubbery and the background of smoldering underbrush.

"I'm going to hook back up the path a

bit. If it is the *Rifleman*, you'll need a little help to finish it off quickly."

"Don't turn too soon, sir," came the *Crusader* pilot's reply. "We don't want him to think you're going to make a stand before he gets to the party."

"Roger that, Lippy."

As the Captain moved up the path, he contacted the lonely *Wasp* he had left in the Swords's old position.

"Trooper Bryant, Trooper Bryant. This is Captain St. George. Come in."

"Bryant here, sir."

"What does the front look like?"

"I can't tell too much. Over where One used to be, there's some movement, but they seem cautious about the center."

"After our original breakout drive, I'm not surprised. They probably think we're loading up for another thrust. Lay down some fire in the direction of One's old position. Then let the front have about a two minute fare-thee-well, before you fall back. Lippy and I should be done here by then."

"Yes, sir. I'll keep them guessing." Bryant's voice was excited.

"Don't be late. When we come out of the forest over here, there will be two very angry lances on our tail. I don't want any part of my company cut off. Not even a measly *Wasp*. Ya got that?"

"Roger that, Captain. I won't be longer than four minutes."

A clearing appeared on the left, blasted out of the forest by the day's missile fire. The *Shadow Hawk* turned into it and came back down the trail. He could see nothing of the ambush site. Good, St. George thought. *We wait and see if they took the bait.*

"Here he comes, bold as brass," Lipescue called out. "It's the *Rifleman*, all right. He's coming on at what passes for a run in those cans. He doesn't see me, though. Looks like he's dead on your trail."

"Don't tip our hand, Lippy. I want him."

"Oh, sir, you wound me." The *Crusader* pilot's voice was ironic.

The wait seemed to stretch from seconds into hours. They had to strike and get out now, or risk being cut off.

"A little closer. C'mon," the trooper coaxed. "There you go. Don't be afraid." There came a ground-shaking concussion

that the Captain could feel through his 'Mech's armor. "Gotcha!" Lipescue exclaimed. "Twelve SRMs, straight into the right-turret arm. Blew the sucker right off. There're parts flying everywhere."

The Captain bolted back down the trail in time to see the maimed *Rifleman* turn to bring its undamaged arm to bear on its tormentor. Lipescue's *Crusader* was pumping laser fire into the injured 'Mech, but its pilot seemed oblivious to the damage.

"Here comes the cavalry," St. George yelled.

As the distance closed, the *Shadow Hawk* opened up on the left turret arm with its autocannon and laser. Chunks of machinery flew from the *Rifleman*, but it refused to go down. The Steiner 'Mech's autocannon began to blow chunks out of the forest behind Lipescue's *Crusader*, which would lock down on him in an instant.

The *Shadow Hawk* skidded to a stop and let go a volley of SRMs at the Steiner 'Mech. The *Rifleman*'s autocannon and laser arm swept fire across the *Crusader*'s torso plates. The *Crusader* unleashed a volley of twelve SRMs straight into the relentless weapon arm, engulfing the valiant *Rifleman* in a hell of 14 simultaneous SRM impacts. When the flash died away, the *Rifleman* was left a smoking pillar, armless and afire, but still standing.

"That was one tough bastard," murmured the *Crusader* pilot. "I'm getting out of here before he blows."

"How're you, Lippy? He managed to get his guns to bear there at the end."

The *Crusader* headed up the path toward St. George. "Battered but unbowed, Captain. He only nicked me!" The 'Mech showed the scorch of the Steiner's laser, but seemed functionally unimpaired.

"Double time, trooper. We've got too many hostile callers to linger here too long." The Captain took a last look back down the path as the *Crusader* passed him by. His heat sensors picked up something very big and very hot coming through the forest along the path he had made. This time, he could see other 'Mechs traveling parallel to the path, smashing their own way through the undergrowth. Leaving the smoldering *Rifleman* behind, Captain St. George headed back to the 131st Battalion's lines.



"Oh great, when did the rain start?" St. George reached the position behind the ridge, where the Swords of St. George were dug in.

"It was a couple of minutes ago, Cap'n."

St. George could make out the form of his unit's top noncommissioned officer, Master Sergeant Allen McHaigh. The venerable old *Wolverine-M* that McHaigh piloted bulked out of the gathering gloom like a moving house.

"Report, Sergeant McHaigh. What is our position and our unit strength?"

"We're dug in behind this ridgeline for about a click in either direction. What good this diggin' in is going to do, I can't tell. A and D companies have already pulled out."

"McHaigh, the unit strength."

Yes, sir. Company B of the 131st battalion now consists of Lipescue's *Crusader*, your *Shadow Hawk*, and this old can of paint. Swords Three can toss in a *Hermes II*, a *Wasp*, and a *Stinger* that we might as well leave behind. As for Harris's boys in Swords One, there's his *Hunchback*, another *Wasp*, and a *Locust* that's about as useful as that *Stinger* in Three."

"Where's Bryant? He was supposed to be here before Lippy and I got back."

"Don't know, sir. There's been a lot of activity back in our old position. We've not heard a word."

The Captain's mind raced. Unit strength was down by a fourth, two of his unit commanders out. His support positions were falling back behind him. The only good thing was that the rain would hamper the fighters as much as it would slow down his troops. It could be worse.

"What the hell is that coming across that field?" The voice was Sergeant Harris.

"Geez, Sarge," called one of the Swords One's troopers. "It's a *Wasp*. Looks like one of ours. He's at a dead run. Waving his arms to beat the band."

"It's Bryant," Captain St. George cut in. "Harris, take Swords One out to meet him. Get him back to this position."

"Yes, sir! C'mon, Swords! We've got work to do!"

A twinkling of weapons fire on the left betrayed the previously invisible position of his company's left flank. The fire was answered by more sinister twinkling in the sky overhead. The ground rocked to missile and cannon fire from the Steiner fighters.

"Hold your fire, everyone." There was steel in St. George's tone. "The fighters are pinpointing us in this gloom by our weapons fire. The rain's reduced our heat signatures, so they're grasping at straws."

"Cap'n St. George, Harris here. We're on our way back."

"Any casualties, Sergeant?"

"Our *Locust*'s slowed a bit, but he's not reporting any serious damage. We got off light. The damn fighters blew it wide."

"When you get Bryant back here, I want you to take your lance and fall back. There should be a road about three clicks south of here. Fall back to that point unless you encounter our troops dug in and holding."

"Yes, sir."

"Sergeant McHaigh, you heard that?"

"Aye, sir. You'll be bringing up the rear with Two, then, sir?"

"Aye, yourself, McHaigh. Now fall back."

The Captain could see the salient they had worked so hard to punch into the Lyran forces being squeezed like a tube of survival rations. He was becoming more and more uneasy about the fact that it was a merc unit protecting the regiment's rear.

**T**he *Wasp* stood directly in front of his *Shadow Hawk*. The trooper was belching a report over his onboard loud speaker. "Then they came in fighters, and I lost my radio to a near miss."

"Is that when you decided to disobey orders, and probe the enemy force, trooper?" St. George cut in.

"Well, sir, I could see them moving about a bit. They seemed content to hang back, so I loosed a few rounds. Then I shut down everything but leg servomotors to cut down the I.R. signature, and moved up under cover of the rain."

"Go on, Bryant. What did your little sojourn net us?"

"Yes, sir. What we've got up front there are Lyran regulars. At least one medium lance. That's what's been laying in the rocket fire on us until now. When I got close enough, though, I could see elements of an Assault Lance moving up. Over where one used to be was another medium lance, and a lot of light stuff. Recon, maybe." Self-consciously, the trooper added, "I kinda got lost and ended up going a little sideways, or I wouldn'ta been late, sir."



"That's good enough for now, Bryant. We'll talk more about this later." Captain St. George paused, then added, "Join the Sergeant and get ready to fall back. And try not to get lost on the way, trooper."

"Sir? Yes, sir." The *Wasp* moved off into the rain.

"McHaigh?"

"Aye?"

"We've got what looks like the elements of a Steiner battalion on the front and the left. The forces Lipesue and I ran into were all members of Hansen's Roughriders, a merc unit of at least battalion-strength. We're outnumbered at least four or six to one on this front. We can't hold out against that and their air superiority. Take Bryant and get back to Harris at the road."

There was a moment of silence while the unit's top Sergeant took the information under consideration. "Any word from Battalion, Force Commander Keshii?"

"Sergeant, the only thing I'm getting from Battalion is a lot of static. The 131st is being probed all up and down the length of the salient." To himself, the Captain said, *They've probably already run out on us, damn it.* "It might be a good idea if you keep to the center of the corridor as you fall back. Narrow our front to about one klick and form up as two lances. Then hold up with one while the other falls back. Like our thrust out, only in reverse."

"And in miniature, sir. Don't worry. I'll hold the babes together, and we won't lose touch with you and Lippy." With that, the Sergeant broke contact, gathered Bryant, and moved off.

St. George switched to operational and tried to reach the unit that was, he fervently hoped, still holding the power plant.

"Swords, calling Seguin's Strikers, come in. This is Cyrus St. George calling for Julian Seguin."

"What the Hell do you want, Academy boy? We're just a little too busy here for social calls."

St. George recognized the irritating whine of the mercenary Captain whose unit had been attached to the 33rd regiment for the duration of this assault. "Drop dead, Seguin. I need to know anything you can tell me about Hansen's Roughriders."

"What I'll tell you is that I'm taking my lads and getting out of there because we'll be too damn close to them as well. They are a

regiment backed up by an air wing and assault units. Alone, they're a match for the 131st on its best day. Offense intended."

It was worse than the Captain had figured. "The ones we blew up didn't seem that tough, Seguin."

"Just you wait and see—now that you've gone and made them mad." The merc Captain's tone had changed, though St. George could not identify what it was. "Did you call just to count your kills? If so, we're a little busy here, St. George."

"I'm out here at the end of the line, Seguin. Tell me the status of the 131st. What's the salient look like from there?"

"What salient, boyo? You're the only intact unit still in there. All that's left are odd 'Mechs too slow to run or guys who didn't get the message. The rest have been pouring through here like there was no tomorrow. Which, according to Regimental, seems to be the case."

"Great," Captain St. George snarled. "Tell me one thing, you damned pirate. Will you and your rats hold the end of the sack open until we get there?"

There was a long silence before Captain Seguin's voice came back, all business. "How far out are you, St. George?"

Now to give him the bad news. "About 13 kilometers."

"Well, Academy boy, there are still some rats running out down the line, and that will keep the bag from closing on you further up, at least for a while. The merc Captain paused. "My lads and I are more than a match for any bunch of Academy boys, Steiners, or Mariks. We'll hold until you get here. Mind you, boyo. We stay until you come down the pipe. Till then, you're on your own."

"Seguin, if you're not there when I get there, I'll come looking for you. Got it?"

"Sounds like fun, Academy boy."

Something cut in on the mercenary's tactical band. St. George couldn't hear what was said, but when Seguin picked up the ops link again, his voice was subdued.

"You'd best hurry if you want to get your babes out of this mess in one piece, boyo." The merc sounded grim.

"Roger, Captain Seguin." St. George signed off.

"Roger yourself, Captain St. George." To himself, the merc Captain said, *And good luck. You're gonna need it!*

St. George turned to Lipesue. "What's your LRM supply look like, Lippy?"

"After the last twelve hours, I'm mighty low on all the consumables. SRMs are lowest, one volley left, both launchers. LRMs, two volleys." The veteran didn't sound all that concerned, despite the fact that without his missiles, his *Crusader* was little better armed than a light 'Mech.

"O.K., Lippy, now we wait. The Steiners should be coming in a few minutes."

The two giant battle-machines stood silently just at the edge of each other's vision. Over the com, the men inside listened to the sounds of Keshii's 131st battalion coming apart at the seams, unable to withstand the force of superior air power and ever-increasing ground strength.

*My god*, St. George thought. *Where are the Lyrans getting all this firepower?*

"Captain?" It was Lipesue, on tactical.

"Got something coming?" St. George scanned the right side of the front, where he expected to see the leading edge of Hansen's Roughriders any second.

"Yep. Three recon 'Mechs, moving up. Look like regular Lyrans. No merc support." Lipesue's voice was calm.

"Get a lock on one. Let me know when you have something." The Captain's mind snapped back to his unit.

"McHaigh, are you in place?" he called to his two retreating lances.

"Aye, Cap'n. They haven't clamped down yet. Also, sir, I've picked up calls from an element of Leonard's Lions. A pair of *Riflemen* about three klicks to our rear. Their unit bugged out piecemeal and left those two cans to fend for themselves. I took the liberty of telling them that they were to hold until we get to them. I also told them that they were now members of The Swords of St. George, and that they should remember that St. George looks after his own."

"Very good, Sergeant. Do you think they'll be there when we get there?"

"Well, my little speech seemed to buck them up. And the thought that a company was coming to back them up seemed to please the hell out of them..."

"I've got one of the little beggars locked." Lipesue broke in.

"Let him have it, Lippy! Then fall back at the run. They'll bring in the damned fighters



on your rocket flare."

"We're on our way, Sergeant," St. George told McHaigh.

To the Captain's left, the flare of the *Crusader's* rockets lit the falling rain. He could see the giant machine begin to fall back even before the glare had subsided. The intensity of the rain dampened the effectiveness of his I.R. sensors, and so he could not make out the advancing enemy line. Then he felt the barrage hit. He too fell back.

Behind them, the ground rocked as the rain-blinded fighters groped for their 'Mechs.

The ground rolled beneath them, as the warriors covered the three kilometers to the company's position in what seemed to be an instant.

Captain St. George burst into the center of the Swords' formation bellowing orders. "McHaigh, take Swords Three and Bryant, and fall back to those *Riflemen*. Then hold. Got that?"

His veteran Sergeant responded in the affirmative, and began to pull his unit out.

"Harris, you and Swords One, stick with me and Lippy." The Captain's mind raced to put all his plans together. Using the company band, he called out, "O.K., Swords, this is how it goes. We're out of air support, but as long as the rain holds, we're reasonably safe. Don't stay in one place after you fire. Move at least fifty meters in any direction. The fighters will hit your last spot, hard. We are also about nine kilometers from our lines, and it looks like we can expect very little support on the way back. Sergeant McHaigh is falling back three clicks to pick us up some reinforcements and dig in. Swords One will hold here until he calls us from his position. Then we'll fall back through his line three clicks, and hold for him. We will continue to fire and fall back through each other until we reach our own lines. Has everyone got that?" There was a smattering of yeses, punctuated by Lippy's customary "Yo".

"Harris, take the left flank. Lippy, you take the right. Everyone keep your eyes open and on those I.R. sensors."

The rain closed in around the troops, locking each 'Mech into a blank walled box. Were it not for their instruments, each man in Captain St. George's unit would have thought himself abandoned. St. George could see the thin steam of the rain flying off

his heat sinks, and thanked whatever battlefield luck had brought this deluge. Without it, his Swords would be lost.

*Damn it, he thought. What's taking McHaigh so long? Their retreat from the front didn't take this long.*

"Harris. Anything?"

"No, Captain. All clear." The Sergeant's voice seemed surer than when he had first reported his Lieutenant's loss at the front.

"Lippy?"

"Safe and sound, Cap'n. You're not nervous are you, Cap'n? Those Steiners won't even reach here until tomorrow. They still think we're setting them up." There was humor in the veteran's voice that St. George didn't share.

"Just remember, Lipescue, you indolent scrap dealer, they've got a merc unit out there to show up if they're too lazy."

"That's O.K., sir. We took them down a peg. They'll think twice, too." It seemed nothing was going to dampen Lippy's spirits.

"Captain St. George? Harris. I've got some movement to our rear, about 500 meters back."

"I'll move over to take your end, Harris. You get back there and report." St. George wished fervently for a heavier contingent of machines. A *Battle Master* would make all the difference in the world right now. As he moved to cover the left flank, he reflected on the fact that a *Locust* and a *Wasp* were holding the center of his line. If the Steiners pushed even halfway hard, the center would fall through.

Suddenly the dogs of war erupted in full cry, as every receiver channel in the Captain's 'Mech started to bellow at once. On Regimental, he heard the order to board the DropShips!

Over the battalion frequency, which till now seemed given over to chaos, came the voice of Captain Patel, Force Commander Keshii's second-in-command. He was ordering all units of the 131st, however scattered, to form up on the spaceport.

On his company frequency came the voice of Sergeant McHaigh calling for support. His position was under a probing attack, at least lance-strength at both ends of his line.

To cap off the pandemonium, Sergeant Harris's voice cried out over Swords One's tactical frequency, "Captain St. George, I've



got a *Wolverine* leading a lance trying to cut us off. Engaging to prevent penetration."

"Swords One, pivot on the left flank and fall back 500 meters. Look for Sergeant Harris and hostile action. Lippy, fall back 500 meters. You are officially the right flank and the middle. If anything turns up, report, then fall back to McHaigh's position."

Captain St. George fell back. He could see the firing. As he approached the battle, he could feel the ground vibration caused by the *Hunchback's* autocannon 20. Harris at least was still up and active.

The gusting rain parted like a curtain on a stage, and for a brief instant, St. George could see the entire field of battle for about a kilometer in all directions. There, dominating the muddy grey-green field, was Harris's *Hunchback*, gouts of flame pouring from the massive autocannon. In front of the *Hunchback*, belching a thick rope of oily smoke, stood the Steiner *Wolverine*, burst open in a hideous manner. Spread out over the field, three other 'Mechs moved up. Two were indistinct, right on the edge of the next marching line of rain. The third squatted on huge birdlike haunches, its blunt, bullet-shaped fuselage unmistakable. It was a *Stalker*, one of the most formidable fire support 'Mechs ever built.

"Harris, punch out!" St. George convulsively fired all his weaponry at the *Stalkers* as though he could call back the fist of doom about to be unleashed on the *Hunchback*. As the Captain watched in horror, the assault 'Mech loosed its full barrage of long- and short-range missiles at the doughty *Hunchback*. A shattered comet with a tail of black smoke slammed into the Sergeant's 'Mech. In an instant, it dissolved in flames, a pyre from which there was no escape. With the finality of that closing act, the squall line swallowed the "actors" like a fadeout.

*We gotta get out of here, St. George's mind screamed. We're trapped.* Instead of giving in to these fears, the Captain's voice rang out with unnatural calm over tactical. "Swords One, fall back on the double. Do not, repeat, do not attempt to engage any enemy forces on the way, but fall back on McHaigh's position immediately."

"Lippy, you still have one more LRM salvo?"

"Yo. I was kinda hoping to save that one for my scrapbook."

Though the veteran's attempt at humor

was welcome, the image of Harris's 'Mech vanishing under the *Stalker's* assault had cooled the Captain's taste for banter. "Be ready to fire on the run, at my target coordinates, on my command. Now fall back."

The terse orders had the desired effect. The sole reply was a crisp "Yo". St. George moved through the rain in a direct line toward McHaigh's men, a line that would take him straight into the path of the Steiner *Stalker*. There was no sign of the giant assault 'Mech. The Steiners must have seen his forces moving up and mistaken them for something more than what they were. Harris's determined resistance must have misled them into thinking he had powerful back-up. St. George strode past the remains of the *Hunchback*. It looked nothing like the man-shaped machine it had once been. The pieces were so small that most of the flames had already gone out in the downpour.

**O**ut of the rain loomed the distant heat signatures of a line of 'Mechs firing to the right and left.

"McHaigh?" The question was superfluous.

"Aye, Cap'n." The Sergeant's voice sounded happier than he had a right to be. "You can fall back through us, sir. We got a little help, though they won't stay long. Or so they say."

"Help? Who?" the Captain couldn't think who was left. Regimental was pulling out, and battalion had come apart.

A third voice cut in, "Wake up, Academy boy. The Steiners are hot on your tail, and I don't intend to stand by here forever, just so you don't get your machines dirty."

"Seguin, what the hell? I thought you were going to but out if we got caught up the line." The Captain was astonished that the merc had stuck his neck out for them.

"Academy boy, you make me regret coming back for you. You're the only one of the tin soldiers on this whole planet that hasn't come completely apart. You stick up for your men. And you took in those two orphaned *Rifleman*, stiffening them up enough so that they would stay alone in the salient until McHaigh..."

"Sergeant McHaigh," McHaigh said.

"...Sergeant McHaigh could come for them." The mercenary Captain paused to catch his breath. "Let's just say I'm impressed. Now don't go and spoil it by stand-

ing around here all teary-eyed with thanks."

"Swords of St. George," the Captain growled into the radio. "Fall back to the power plant. On the double."

The battered Swords formed up and began to fall back, and Captain St. George joined them.

"How do you like that? Not even a 'thank you kindly, Captain Seguin'." The merc's tone indicated he hadn't expected one.

"He's got a lot on his mind; you old pirate." Sergeant McHaigh put in before he, too, turned and walked off into the rain.

The Captain of Seguin's Strikers watched them go. He'd hit upon the most effective way to slow down the regular Lyran forces. He hoped the confusion would slow Hansen's Roughriders, too. At least enough for the Academy boy to get away. Now, he thought, *how does that speech go? Something about being an unemployed mercenary unit looking for a hire. Yes, that sounded about right.*

**T**he Swords of St. George raced through the power plant, and into the city. The rain that had hidden them throughout the retreat diminished to a drizzle.

"McHaigh, we'll take parallel streets back to the spaceport. You take Swords Three and Swords Two, and head back on the main drag. I'll take what's left of One and our two new recruits..."—the Captain surveyed the map on his tactical readout—"and follow you by 30 seconds on this side street off to the left. It seems to make it almost all the way to the port."

"Aye, sir. You'll be our reserve. If anyone cuts us off, that is."

"That's affirmative, Mac. If you encounter any resistance, move around it, if you can. Anything too tough to move around, we'll just have to punch through." Before St. George could say anything further, they were interrupted. All the 'Mechs froze for an instant. The sound was like a roll of thunder that went on and on. The company's 'Mechs scattered, each trying to find some kind of building to squeeze up against for cover. The sound reached a crescendo, the roar of a fighter wing coming in low. The evil-looking *Seydlitz* fighters flashed past overhead.

"Lord, that was a full wing of Lyran fighters." Breaking in on St. George's battalion frequency, the unfamiliar voice came



from one of the *Riflemen*.

"He's right, Cap'n," added Lipescue. "They were heading straight for the port!"

"McHaigh, move out. Now!" St. George ordered. "Keep to the sides of the road, but go, on the double."

With a hasty "aye," the Sergeant's *Wolverine* moved off at the head of a column of six 'Mechs, the remains of two of St. George's lances.

On Battalion, St. George contacted the *Riflemen*. "Are you ready to move out?"

One of the *Riflemen* raised its right weapons arm, and a voice over the radio came back. "I'm Corporal Jones. The lady in the other 'Mech is Private Cho. We're with you all the way."

"O.K., Jones, you're my backup. We're moving out on this side road. If anything goes wrong, you'll get hold of Sergeant-Major McHaigh immediately. Got that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then follow me on the double." With that, the Captain took off after his retreating lances.

The sky in the direction of the spaceport was being ripped and torn by the contrails of gyrating fighters. Even as Captain St. George watched anxiously, a DropShip clawed through the swarm trying to reach deep space.

**T**he Swords moved through the vacant city unobstructed. The pace they set caused the heat to rise to unbearable levels in his own *Shadow Hawk*. St. George knew it was the same for all his men, but he dared not stop.

The fighting over the port continued. Communications from Regimental had stopped minutes ago. The only sounds coming over his radio were reports from his own company.

McHaigh reached the gates. "We're at the port, Captain. Should we wait and form up before we move in?"

"Don't stop," St. George ordered. "Bust straight on through. Watch for fighters, but don't stop!"

"We're bashing through the perimeter fencing now, Captain. The fighters seem to have pulled out." The Sergeant's voice sounded odd.

"Good. They've pulled back to refuel. Get to the DropShip, Sarge. We're right behind you."

"We're almost there, just past these warehouses. Captain, there's a lot of smoke coming from the flight line..." McHaigh's voice faded out.

"Oh, God, no." The voice that cut in was Lipescue's. The despair gave it an ugly sound.

"Sergeant McHaigh, report!" There was silence. Captain St. George felt the icy hand of fear clutch his heart. His lance charged through the fence. If anything, his speed increased as he bolted the last few meters past the walls of the warehouses that led to the flight line. The *Shadow Hawk* emerged onto the tarmac.

The 'Mechs of his company spread out in a half circle like mourners at a funeral pyre. Against a backdrop of grim gray sky and straggling undergrowth stood the burning DropShip.

Captain St. George moved forward like a man in a nightmare. This was the one contingency he had not foreseen. He knew they would wait for him, and so they had, to the bitter end.

Silence. Then the other "guests" started to arrive from among the port's outbuildings. An *Atlas* loomed up and came to a halt as a *Cicada* raced by.

Over St. George's radio, on broad beam, came a voice. "It almost worked. The merc's surrender slowed down the regulars, but we came right on through. Formally, sir, Hansen's Roughriders would like to offer the men of The Swords of St. George 'alternate transportation.'"







# FINAL EXAM

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# FINAL EXAM

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# FINAL EXAM

## -Bear Peters

**T**ension filled the large, dimly lit room where a trio of men hunched like witches over the cauldron-like Tactical Plot Simulator.

The oldest of the three looked with concern at the scenario laid out on the plotting board. Sigmund MaqAloo General (retired), Professor of 'Mech Deployment and Assault Strategy, hoped the actions of the elder of the two students would not confirm his fears.

The elder student, Cadet Willis Crawford, reached out to touch one of the miniature fighters that represented his DropShip's close-fighter support. A sigh went up from the surrounding auditorium, and then the rest of the class, hidden in the darkness, held its collective breath, most praying for disaster. To redeploy now, before the DropShip was down





and the 'Mechs on board dispersed, was either a bold stroke or a foolish error.

At Cadet Crawford's right hand stood the flamboyant Anton Marik, younger brother of Janos Marik, Captain-General of the Free Worlds League. Anton, the nominal second-in-command on this assignment, could offer assistance or opinions, but so far, Crawford had taken the drop on his own. Anton could not have been more proud if he had evolved this new assault variant himself. Even at Princefield, an Academy that fostered intense competition among all of its students, these two had formed a bond of friendship.

With a momentary flicker, the computer display of the potential enemy defense zones and DropShip attack lances changed. The enemy response opportunities grew. The class grumbled like an invisible animal closing in for the kill. Professor MaqAloo pinched his lip in a characteristic gesture of disapproval. Anton's faith never faltered, however, as his classmate redeployed the fighters further out, and sharply diverted the descending craft to an alternate landing site.

The computer, its defenses taken by surprise, diverted to cover the feint. Crawford's fighters hit the computer's 'Mech concentrations. The enemy fighter counter-attack was drawn off by the fighter feints. During the precious seconds it took the simulation to redeploy, Crawford recalled his fighters and deployed his 'Mechs to mop up the ground resistance.

The lights in the auditorium came up, and the class began to babble its assessment of the new and innovative tactic.

"Well done, Will!" The young Marik slapped his friend on the back.

Professor MaqAloo cleared his throat and stepped over to face the young man.

"Cadet Crawford, that was clever work, taking into account the computer's tendency toward a conservative defense."

"Thank you, sir." Crawford interrupted enthusiastically. "I knew I could draw off its fighter reserves."

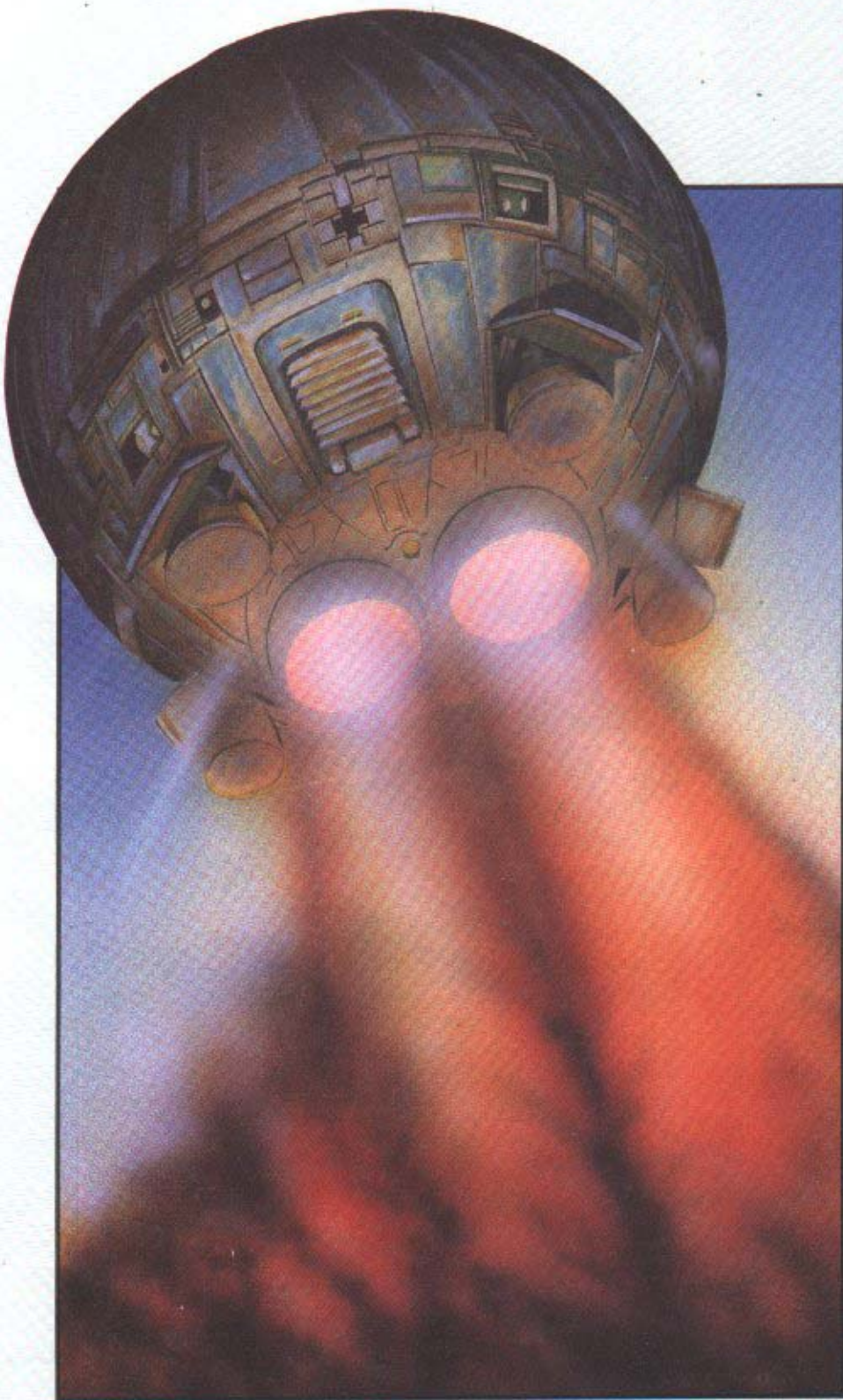
"That's enough, Cadet," the old man said sharply. "You have fooled the machine, and so you are guaranteed a favorable grade. However, if you tried that stunt in the face of *Human* opposition, you'd lose that DropShip! Keep that in mind."

With that, the Professor turned and stalked off with crisp military precision.

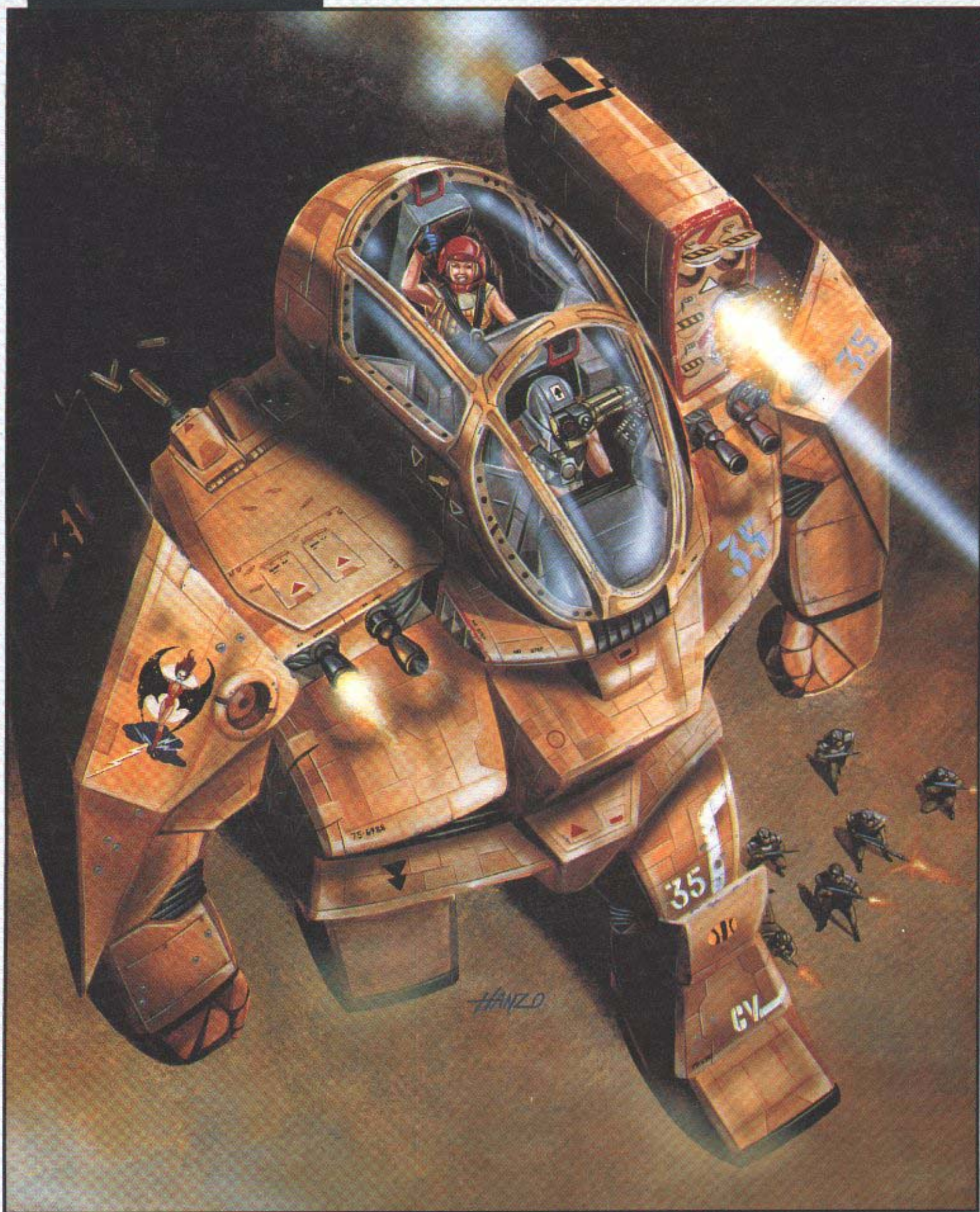
"Don't mind that sour old rust heap," Anton Marik told the man destined to become his closest friend. "C'mon. Together we can lick anything."

As his younger friend turned to go, Willis Crawford felt a cold chill run down his spine.

Was the Professor right? Was there some angle he hadn't covered? No way. The old man was just a washed-up war horse, too rusted out to accept a new idea. With his own military talent and Anton's backing, what could possibly go wrong?















# THE JUDAS BLIND

—Michael A. Stackpole

**S**omehow I'd hoped that growing a bushy black mustache would be enough to disguise me because getting killed this early on would certainly hurt any chances of the mission coming off as planned. Actually, the plan was for me to avoid being killed at all—at least my version of it did. Still, some of the Intelligence types who were scoping this thing out for Duke Michael Hasek-Davion allowed as how survival was not 100 percent necessary to the mission's successful completion. Real rays of sunshine, those guys.

When I noticed a trio of long shadows stretching behind me down the rubble-strewn alley, I realized my mustache and ratty street clothes had not concealed my identity from the residents of the *sawararenai* slum. Pulling myself up to full height and expanding my chest in an effort to appear more menacing, I only wished I'd been endowed with my brother's height and heftier build. The three people producing the shadows behind me responded to my gambit with the low hum of a vibroblade.

Dressed in a leather flight jacket one size too small for his ample belly, a tall, heavy-set man drifted forward from the alley's depths. He came close enough for the weak yellow light from the street to illuminate his cruel face. With a full, fleshy face that even three days' growth of black beard could not harden, he had the complexion a mushroom would have envied. The man narrowed his piggish little eyes, then smiled to show me both teeth he still claimed as his own. "We got us a good prize here, *nan datte?*"

I raised both hands and opened them toward him as nervousness tied my stomach in knots. "*Sumimasen, anata.* I am not familiar with the streets of Hakkishu. Perhaps you could direct me back to my hotel?"

I caught the dip of his head in the half-light a second before it registered upon the brain of the man he meant to signal. The vibroblade's murderous hum zeroed in on my back like an angry wasp, but I dropped to one knee, ducking under my attacker's slash. My fingers closed around a heavy stick of wood, which I drove back behind me as hard as possible.

My blow caught the thug just below his belt buckle, and he doubled over as I twisted toward him. Swiveling the club around, I brought my right hand up, smashing the thug's jaw shut with a tooth-shattering crack. As the man flew up and back, his vibroblade dropped from nerveless fingers. Before the deadman-switch could shut it down, the weapon had burrowed to the hilt in the mist-slickened tarmac.

His two compatriots stared with shocked expressions at their fallen comrade. Pressing the advantage of surprise—in accordance with Duke Michael's admonition to "adapt and innovate"—I wielded my club savagely. Swatting the next nearest bandit across the head, I slammed him face-first into an alley wall.

Then I parried the whirling length of chain employed by the third ruffian, letting it whip itself around my club. Tugging back hard, I pulled my skinny, pimple-faced assailant forward. Utterly off balance, he squawked for help in a high-pitched voice, but never dreamed of releasing his deathgrip on the weapon. I chopped my chain-weighted club down on his wrist



sharply, breaking his grip. When he turned to run, clutching his wrist to his chest, I sent him sailing back to the street with a none-too-gentle kick to the seat of his pants.

Stars exploded in my eyes as the man I'd knocked into the alley wall caught me with a roundhouse right. I reeled across the pavement, slamming heavily into the far wall. My attacker drove at me like a prize-fighter, but I sidestepped his second punch, relishing the cracking sound as his fist smacked into the brick wall behind me. His scream of pain shifted tenor as I jerked my left knee up into his groin, then died abruptly as I brought my club straight down on his head.

I turned quickly enough to see the fat man slip on some fetid garbage in his haste to escape. Snaking the length of chain from the club, I shook my head. "Why is it that everyone thinks a MechWarrior is useless outside his 'Mech'?"

Without replying, the fat man scrambled to his feet. He shot me one porcine look of horror, then tried to run off. Arcing the club down at his legs, I managed to trip him into a pile of rotting garbage. He cried out, but the garbage so muffled his scream that it sounded as though he were drowning.

Crouching down, I activated the vibro-blade long enough to pull its 30 centimeters of blade from the ground. Shutting it all the way off, I tucked the blade through my belt. Then I slung the chain over my shoulder and sauntered down the alley to where the fat man wallowed in refuse.

I smiled at him. "Tea leaves add some nice color to your face." With one end of the chain in either hand, I looped it around his head. Pulling back gently, I helped him slide into something approximating a sitting position. "I have some questions you want to answer, *wakarimaska?*"

He nodded dejectedly. "*Hai, wakarimas.*"

I nodded to reassure him. "Good. Go ahead, flick that eggshell off your ear. It looks ridiculous. Now, I was told that if I were to find the Little Dragon anywhere, it would be here." I narrowed my eyes. "You're not little, and you certainly aren't a dragon...You'd not be the one I'm looking for, would you?"

He shook his head, then his eyes widened to reflect the new light source in the alley. I turned and saw a woman step through a doorway, then immediately back away from the harsh light passing through





**S**he nodded almost casually. She wore the uniform of a Davion aerjock, but I knew instantly that she was not a pilot...

...She moved with sensuality that learning to kill robs from most people.

it. Leaning back against the doorframe, she watched me warily.

I let the chain and the fat man fall. "You are the Little Dragon?"

She nodded almost casually. Though she wore the uniform of a Davion aerjock, I knew instantly that she was not a pilot. Not that she didn't fill out the uniform properly. The tall boots and leather jacket fit her perfectly. No, it was in her posture and in as simple a motion as her nod. Not even the Sternsnacht heavy pistol in her hip holster could taint it.

She moved with a sensuality that learning to kill robs from most people.

She gracefully waved me toward the doorway. "Colonel Kell, you will accompany me?" Though framed as a question in her throaty whisper, I took it as a command. Passing through the door and into the small room beyond it, I caught a whiff of jasmine.

She closed the door and moved toward the center of the barren, white-washed room. She'd filled her right hand with the Sternsnacht, giving me a prey's-eye view of the pistol's muzzle. "You, Colonel, have been blundering all over Hakkinshi like a green Lieutenant looking for a way to spend leave-time. Either you are foolishly brave, or terminally stupid." She jerked her head toward alley. "Those four wanted you for the reward the Draconis Combine's Internal Security Forces are offering for your hide. Ten thousand ComStar bills could easily buy one passage from Akumashima."

Averting my eyes from the gun barrel, I forced myself to chuckle. "Only ten thousand? Boy, the market's weak here on Murchison. On Mallory's World, I go for fifteen." I shook my head. Ten thousand ComStar bills was a small fortune. Even split four ways, it could finance relocation outside the slum known as Akumashima—Devil Island. "The price for mercenaries isn't what it used to be."

Her brown eyes showed contempt. "Did I say ten thousand? That's for your brother. You, Lieutenant-Colonel Patrick Kell, are only worth five thousand."

I raised my hands. "Well, I'm the one. You've got me."

Irritation flashed over her face like clouds before a storm. "Enough foolishness. You have 30 seconds to explain why you've returned to Murchison just 6 weeks after your Mech battalion got chased off by

the 27th Dieron Regulars." She raised the gun in line with my right eye. "No nonsense, or I'm 5,000 C-bills richer."

Looking down the Sternsnacht's long tunnel, I shuddered. "When we raided this world, we were under orders to stay until the Dragon delivered troops to kick us out. The Prince—the new one, Hanse Davion—wanted us to force Takashi Kurita to pull troops away from Mallory's World. We didn't expect to be here for three months, but that's what happened. One of my men, a kid really, named Kevin O'Dell shacked up with a girl from Akumashima. Her name is Hanako Aido."

I swallowed hard. "The day after Kevin bought it back on Mallory's World, ComStar delivered a message from her saying that she was pregnant. O'Dell's father, an industrialist on Hamilton, back in the Lyran Commonwealth, wants his grandchild and the child's mother with him."

She relaxed her arm, letting the gun's muzzle point up at the ceiling. "How much is he paying you?"

I stiffened, then brought up my head. "He's offering ten thousand a year to the girl's family, and seventy-five hundred to anyone who helps me out. Me? I'm doing this for Kevin."

She watched me like a cat stalking a mouse, then nodded. "O.K. That's what I've heard. I can find Hanako—the Aido clan is large for a *sawararena* family. I'll help you, Kell, but I have two rules." She tapped the squarish gold link in her nose. "First, no questions about this. And second, if you know what it is, don't get any ideas."

I nodded. I did know what the *renketsu* signified, in theory, but I found the stories hard to believe. As I had heard it, the men and women wearing *renketsu* were specially trained from their youth in the ways of love—much as a MechWarrior is trained to kill. Their education did not consist solely of skill in lovemaking, but included the study of many arts and sciences as well. The Kuritan way of life considered that an amorous companion should be more than just one who meets a partner's physical needs.

What was such an educated woman doing in the slums meant only for the untouchables, the *sawararena*?

I held up my right hand. "Fine. This is your town. We play by your rules. You can call me Patrick."





She hesitated, then nodded and holstered her pistol. "I am the Little Dragon."

I bowed to her in Kurita fashion. She returned the bow, then glanced at the door leading into the alley. "We better get you out of here. Those four you tangled with are scum of the scum, but when they jabber, more important people listen."

I frowned. "ISF?"

The Little Dragon shrugged. "Even them. No, you angered some *Yakuza* when your lance used one of their opium barges for a gunnery target."

I smiled. "Can't they take a joke?"

She regarded me closely, raising an eyebrow. "I hope those attempts at humor are merely attempts to hide your nervousness, Patrick Kell. If not, your delusions of adequacy will get us both killed." She turned and exited through a smaller doorway leading deeper into the building.

Her warning had set up a resonance with my own doubts. I followed in silence.


After a long chase through the winding streets and black byways of Akumashima, the Little Dragon brought me into an apartment building through the rear entrance. She slipped her *Sternsnacht* from its holster, holding it at the ready as we crept stealthily up the dark stairway.

Aside from being sprayed everywhere with graffiti, the first floor looked normal and might once have been considered a good place to live. The second floor, however, looked like it had been through a war. No doubt about it, the interior decorators had used flamethrowers and grenade launchers to remodel this level of the building.

Deep in the shadows, I saw heavily seamed faces by the red glow of cigarettes and pipes. The sickly sweet odor of opium and a half-dozen other drugs gave me a shiver. Seeming to notice neither the smoke nor the ruined condition of the whole level, the Little Dragon picked her way across the building's second story. I stared ahead at her booted feet, matching my footsteps to hers, trying not to look at the wretches scattered over the soiled *tatami*.

From there, the Little Dragon pushed open a door that led to another stairwell. I looked over at her, but she waved me on up the stairs without a word. Occasionally casting a glance behind me just in case someone decided to follow from the second level, I trailed her.





Two more flights up, on the building's top level, we left the stairs and walked down a fairly clean corridor. Most of the doors stood open, giving me a good look at the empty, stripped apartments. Anything of value had long since been stolen. Indeed, in a few places, the plaster had been peeled back so that the wooden slats could be removed and used for fire fuel.

Finally, the Little Dragon stopped before a heavy, steel-sheathed door. She flipped open a small box set into the wall, and punched out a series of electronic notes, the code to unlock her door. She opened it, then waved me inside.

After my tour through the building's lower reaches, I expected to see some cold, dismal room with little more than a nest of filthy rags in the corner for bedding. Instead, a beautiful oasis seemed to appear before my eyes, and I knew it was easily the match of a luxury suite in any of the Hakkinshi's tallest towers.

Standing at the doorway and looking down into the sunken living room, I had no doubt that she had designed and furnished the apartment herself. Hand-woven rugs of intricate design—obviously created on the Muslim-dominated worlds of the Azami—covered almost all of the polished wooden floors. Delicate ricepaper paintings graced the walls, the best of which hung over the low dining table in the far left corner. A futon couch and an assortment of large cushions held the center of the room.

Two windows and a glass door opened out onto a covered balcony that offered a glimpse of the sluggish Chiisai river. A darkened doorway in the far right corner led deeper into the building. The kitchen, or what passed for it, occupied the corner nearest the door and was separated from the living room by a translucent panel lacquered with bright yellow and blue flowers.

I turned back to the Little Dragon as she shut the door. "It's beautiful."

She whirled, a snarl peeling her lips back from even white teeth as though I'd insulted her. Fire flashed in her dark eyes and I tried to guess what could have made her so angry. Then she hesitated and bowed her head. "Forgive me, Colonel." Surveying the room, she pressed her left hand to her mouth as though seeing something horrible and malignant where I saw only beauty. "I have made a mistake. I should never have

brought you here."

I felt her anger and pain, but I dared not enfold her in my arms. Ours was, after all, a business relationship that did not allow such familiarity. She was the key to my whole mission, and as attracted as I might be to her, I could not let that jeopardize the operation. I opened my hands in a gesture of frustration, then let them fall limply to my sides. "I'm sorry. If you wish, I'll leave."

She shook her head distractedly, then rubbed her forehead with one hand. "No. This is the only safe place in Akumashima."

I raised an eyebrow. "Safe? What about that opium den down there?"

The Little Dragon moved down the steps to a small door on the side of the front door landing. "Those people are protective of me. I got them opium, gratis, after your Kell Hounds blew that barge apart. Anyone comes through that area to get me and they'll raise an alarm."

She knelt and worked at a combination lock with long, slender fingers. "I think you'll be safe here. No one comes unless I bring them. Even so..." She pulled a gun and holster from the storage area below the steps. "You'll need this."

I accepted the blocky, blackened-polymer weapon from her and strapped it on. I tied the weighty pistol's holster to my right thigh, but turned the pistol around so the grip pointed forward. Reaching across my body, I drew the gun with my left hand. With a grunt of satisfaction, I slid the weapon home again.

The Little Dragon straightened up. "Be careful with that, Kell. It's a..."

"A Mauser and Gray M-27 needle pistol." I drew it smoothly and my right hand snapped the charging lever back with a sharp, metallic click. "It shoots a cloud of plastic flechettes shaved from a block of high-grade ballistic polymer. Practical rate of fire is 200 shots per minute, with an average of 15 needles per shot." I smiled. "Why does everyone think a MechWarrior is useless outside his 'Mech?"

She bowed her head. "*Sumimasen*, Kell-san. I believed you were witless to embark on this fool's mission in the first place." She turned, opening her hands to encompass the whole apartment. "This is my home. Please, be my guest."

I heard a trace of reluctance in her voice as she spoke. "Why is it that you are so



uneasy about having me here?"

She stiffened, then slowly began to explain. "You found me because you were searching for the Little Dragon. Out there," she said, pointing toward the windows, "that is what I am. Because I know certain things and certain people, I can get things done. The *Yakuza* and I have a truce because I care for the people of Akumashima, and they are part of this hellhole. They will not form an alliance with me because I am a woman, but as the Little Dragon, I have earned their respect."

She moved to the cushions on the floor, but pointed me to the couch. "That is what I am out there. But that stops outside the door. In here, I can be myself." She glanced over at the painting of a snow-capped mountain seen through a gap in a pine forest. "I can indulge myself by painting or writing haiku or reading. I can do anything here, or nothing, yet none of the worries of the Little Dragon concern me. Here I am Takara, and here that is enough."

With a nod to show my interest, I seated myself on the floor, resting my back against the couch. My position, though somewhat uncomfortable, left me with my head lower than hers, allowing her the respect due in her own home. "This is your sanctuary, Takara." She frowned when I spoke her name aloud, but I liked the sound of it.

She considered my comment for a moment, then nodded slowly. "It is." Abruptly, she grimaced as though tasting something bitter and an edge came into her voice. "Or, it was my sanctuary. Now the Little Dragon has brought you here. It could all be ruined."

The anger in her tone stung me. "Hey, I didn't hold a gun to your head. You didn't have to agree to help me locate Hanako."

She fixed me with a stare so fierce that I felt it might sear right through me. "Didn't I? You come to me with the story of saving an Untouchable's child and you expect me not to help you?" She poked a thumb against her chest. "I know what happens to *sawararena* babies when their father is a foreign devil mercenary. Hold a gun to my head? Dammit, Kell, you might as well have clipped a chain to my *renketsu* and bound me to you. I could not refuse your request."

She stood angrily and pointed toward the hallway off in the corner. "That leads to the bathroom, first door on your right. My

bedroom is at the end of the hallway, but don't go any further than the bathroom. I won't have you despoil everything."

She marched to the door, then turned back to address me like an Admiral on a ship's bridge giving orders to her crew. "I'm going out to find Hanako Aido. Don't stir from this place, and don't open the door." Again I heard the electric notes as she punched a code into the number pad beside the door. "If it's opened without the proper code being entered, a pressure-sensitive switch will set off an explosive underneath the landing and splash whoever is standing here all over the ceiling."

I raised an eyebrow. "If there's a fire?"

The angry expression on her face did not lighten at all. "You die."

A week's flight in-system on the DropShip *Newport News* and a day of skulking through Akumashima had really taken it out of me. When Takara closed the door behind her, I sank into the cushions. They smelled of jasmine and felt very soft. Having learned a long time ago the MechWarrior's trick of catching sleep when and where available, I dropped off immediately.

I normally recall nothing of my dreams, but the one I had in Takara's sanctuary had a surreality to it that would do credit to those new holovids that are so popular with kids these days. A madman dressed in a surgeon's smock stood over me, his right eye magnified by a huge lens. The blood vessels in his eye pulsed like scarlet lightning. He said something like, "Well, Colonel, we must root those secrets out somehow. We will start with your toes." Then he flicked on a vibroblade and moved down toward the foot of the table to which I'd been strapped.

His assistant grabbed my head in both hands to ensure that I could not see what the madman was doing. I looked up at his aide and stared directly into the Little Dragon's eyes. They were cold and joyless, yet her face lit with delight as the vibroblade's hum increased in intensity. She leaned forward to kiss me, then opened her mouth to reveal row upon row of shark's teeth...

I sat up with a start, wide awake and in a cold sweat that had soaked my clothes. I shook my head to clear it, but the vibroblade's hum still rang in my ears. I dropped a hand to the blade in my belt, my foggy mind slowly realizing that I'd already know if it had accidentally been turned on.

Suddenly, I located the source of the sound and looked up toward the door as someone finished using the vibroblade to saw through the bolt-plate.

I dropped back flat against the pillows, opening my mouth and cupping my hands over my ears as the door swung inward. The first man to step onto the landing evaporated amid a cloud of bloody fire and black smoke. A column of flame blasted a jagged hole up through the ceiling, and the explosion's shockwave shattered the windows and all the glass over Takara's paintings. Debris shot like fiery meteorites all over the apartment and stung me on the hands and face.

The second man fell through the landing and down into whatever the Little Dragon had waiting in the apartment below her own. A third man, his face blackened from the blast, leaped into the room, but slipped on broken shards of glass and dropped awkwardly to one knee.

I drew the M & G M-27, flipped the safety off, and snapped two shots at him. One cloud of plastic needles blew through his shoulder, reducing it to torn flesh and bone fragments. The impact twisted him enough that my second shot destroyed his face.

Two more individuals appeared in the doorway, shoving the snouts of ugly sub-machineguns through the ruined portal. They fired blindly, but because of the sunken nature of the living room, the shots passed over my head. The bullets tore staggered lines across the apartment's walls as the spent cartridges flowed in a brass river down what was left of the stairs.

I triggered four shots at the people in the doorway. Both my targets screamed, keeping out of sight. Their continued screaming told me I'd not killed them, and that made me angry. For half a second, I wanted to swing around, shoot out into the hallway and, if necessary, hunt them down. *They have violated this place. They must die!*

Sanity reasserted itself and brought with it the vision of the Little Dragon from my dream. *She must have set you up, Patrick. Don't avenge your betrayer.* Firing two more shots into the doorway, I bolted for the balcony and leaped through one of the empty-paned windows.

The balcony was awash in blood. The raiders had stationed two men there to cut off all retreat from the frontal assault. When



the windows blew out, they had fragmented into a typhoon of razored glass. Most of one raider had been blown back over the balcony, and what was once the second raider lay leaking in the far corner.

Standing on the balcony rail, I cautiously peeked up over the lip of the building's roof. Aside from the hole ripped in it by the explosion, it looked quiet and safe. The small yellow flames of tar burning around the hole's edge cast enough light to make me certain no one lay waiting in ambush.

As quietly as possible, I clambered up onto the roof. Crossing to the far edge, I leaped across to the neighboring building. Constantly watching my backtrail, and using all the evasion skills drilled into me at the Nagelring, I moved into Akumashima and lost myself among the Untouchables.

The soot from the explosion and the grime I'd picked up scrambling over roofs and through alleys completed the disguise I'd originally tried to create with my mustache. Shoving my hands into the pockets of my fatigue pants, I set my face in the hard sort of look that I hoped said, "Mess with me and regret it." Moving through the milling crowd of *sawararenai*, I glared at people who got in my way, and snarled at those who actually bumped into me.

Shuffling along, occasionally looking back over my shoulder, I fit right in with the rest of the outlaws and outcasts that made up the dregs of Hakkinshi. As I watched those around me, I realized, perhaps for the first time, how different was my life as a MechWarrior from that of most of the other people within the Successor States.

Even taking into account the cultural differences between the Lyran Commonwealth and the Draconis Combine, the quality of life on Murchison was much different from what I saw as normal. Arc-Royal, the world where I'd grown up, was a beautiful blue-green ball. Forests and fields covered it and the soil was incredibly fertile. The introduction of xenobiological and senobiological projects had been strictly controlled so that our people could make a living producing grains and animal products for export without destroying the natural ecology.

My family was nobility on Arc-Royal. My grandfather was the world's Duke and my father, as a Count, governed a large island continent. Even so, the relaxed pace of life on Arc-Royal and the Kell family's tradition

of hard work meant that my brother and I both pulled our own weight. Working side by side with the people on our farms, I learned that we Humans are alike, no matter what our station.

But I'd wanted to be a MechWarrior for as long as I could remember, a desire that increased when my brother vanished for a year just after graduation from the Nagelring. Then the Nagelring accepted me and I worked hard to graduate with honors. I wanted the MechWarrior's life of excitement and danger because I truly felt there was no better way to live.

A MechWarrior's existence is a strange one. Someone once called it sheer boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror, but I think that may be a bit harsh. It's true, but there are other times when you earn the respect of an enemy. And there are times when you have to mourn a fallen friend.

As the singsong voices of merchants beckoned and cajoled the passersby, I realized that a MechWarrior misses out on huge chunks of life. All the people around me had worries that I would consider mundane. They had to work for their meals and clothes and homes, things I took for granted because the Regiment provided them for me. They had to wake up each morning and decide what they would do during the day, and what the consequences of their action would be. Me, I had orders and if I didn't follow them, I'd be thrown into jail. Though my life as a MechWarrior might be more constraining, it also served as a safety net to keep me from failing.

The people down here, and in every village or town or city throughout the Successor States, didn't care about who ruled what. The grand galactic game of war and politics only touched them when it stole a child or caused the government to change the faces printed on their money.

In that instant, I also realized what someone like the Little Dragon meant to the people of Akumashima. She was *their* safety net, making sure that whoever controlled the world of Murchison did not disrupt the life in Akumashima. When we blew the opium barge apart, she made certain those who needed the drug got it, whatever the cost to her.

My mind drifted to her gold *renketsu*, and I shivered. *What a way to live*, I thought, then felt angry at myself. *Who are you to*



*judge her? She follows orders just like you do, but her orders come from her sense of right and wrong, not from the mouth of whoever pays the bills.*

"I know," I mumbled to myself, "but someone with that much heart deserves more and better." The moment those words came to me, I realized that something about Takara had gotten under my skin. Yes, I found her physically attractive, but that wasn't really it. I sensed something else that could bind us together, then realized my weariness and the mission's pressure had undoubtedly warped my perceptions to a dangerous degree.

Uneasy about spending too much time on the street, I slipped into a ramshackle restaurant offering *biiru to baka*. I chose a dark booth in the corner far from the door. When a serving girl inquired, I ordered the house special. The beer arrived warm and the noodles cold.

The beer, which tasted like something between swamp water and 'Mech coolant, cut the dust and soot from my throat. I leaned back in the booth and shut my eyes. *O.K., Duke Michael, how do I innovate my way out of this one? We knew the Little Dragon would turn on me, but we didn't expect such an explosive betrayal.*

I felt a breeze and heard the creak of the bench on the opposite side of my table, but the click of the Sternsnacht's hammer being thumbed back is what snapped me out of my ruminations. I felt the muzzle press against the inside of my knee as I opened my eyes. "Hello," I said, smiling weakly.

The Little Dragon smiled back, but it was pure mockery, and did nothing to mask the fury in her eyes. "I did not betray you," she said grimly.

I nodded slowly. "I know. I just figured that out. If you meant for someone to take me, you would have given them the combination to the door. Besides, you would probably have turned me over to the ISF because they're the ones offering money for my head."

"How bad was it?"

I shook my head. "I'm sorry."

Takara slammed her balled left fist into the table. I reached out, took her fist in my hand and squeezed gently until she let the tension drain from it. She tried to pull her hand back, but I held on.

I looked into her eyes. "I cannot say I will

make it up to you, because you lost far more than money or time could ever replace. I will do my best to make it right."

She jabbed the Sternsnacht's muzzle into the inside of my thigh, prompting me to slowly release her hand. "The only thing you can do to make it right is to get off this world and never come back." She met my gaze, and in one electric moment, I thought she would open up to me. Then a shudder rippled through her and the wall went back up between us.

I sighed heavily. "O.K., Little Dragon, if that's what you want. Let's find the girl and I'm gone."

I felt the Sternsnacht withdraw and heard it slide home in the holster. The Little Dragon's expression eased toward neutral. "Let's go, Kell. While you were destroying my world, I found Hanako Aido." She glanced at her chronometer. "We're to meet her in an hour."

The Little Dragon led the way out of the eatery. I saw her stiffen immediately, and despite my fatigue, I identified the source of her discomfort. The street had emptied. Doors were shut and windows shuttered. Even the stray curs slunk around with tails between their legs.

I turned to reenter the restaurant, but the door slammed loudly in my face. The sound of automatic rifles being cocked filled the street. Raising my hands, I came slowly about to find Takara also making the universal sign of submission.

One of a dozen black-clad ISF ninjas stepped forward. He bowed, and the sun glanced sharply off the mirrored faceplate of his circlevision headgear. "I am Talon Sergeant Ittetsue Kimura. I am pleased now, *Chu-sa* Keirru, to accept the surrender of you and your confederate." He glanced at the other ISF agents with rifles pointed at us. "Resistance would be, ah, unpleasant."

With the efficiency of some nobleman's valet, Sergeant Kimura stripped me of all weapons and other harmful objects. He also took my belt and boots, clucking happily when he noticed the polymer blade in the bottom of one boot. He even smiled when I asked if I would get a receipt for the things he was taking.

I felt something like a prize bass as he led me through the 'Mech hangar toward the holding cells. The company from the 27th Dieron Regulars that Kurita had left to gar-

ison Murchison had appropriated the facilities the Kell Hounds had left behind during our hasty retreat. When some of the Techs realized who I was, they called out thanks for the store of spare parts we'd left.

I grumbled and Sergeant Kimura beamed. He brought me to the first holding cell and opened the door. He shoved me in and I sprawled at Takara's feet. "Our *Tai-sa* will be back in two hours and will speak with you then." With a sinister laugh, he closed the door.

Takara glared at me. "My home is destroyed, the *Yakuza* are out for my blood because I didn't turn you over to them, and now the ISF have us!" She pounded her fist against the gray wall of the cell. "Aside from that tiny vent and the locked door, there's no way in or out."

Hauling myself up onto the lone bunk, I shrugged. "Sorry, we build cells to last."

Takara snarled with frustration and paced diagonally across the cell. "I should have known! You're nothing but a disaster for me. The opium barge...this whole thing...this cell..."

I shook my head. "Look, Little Dragon. I don't want to argue with you." I nodded at the door. "You heard what he said. We've got two hours before the ISF Colonel gets back. We'd best get started."

She spun about, with fire in her eyes and her hands curled into claws as I unzipped my fatigues. "What are you doing?" She backed to the wall and snarled, "This *renketsu* does not give you the right!"

I frowned while fumbling with the knot in the drawstring waistband of my shorts. "Do you want to get out of here or not?"

The Little Dragon laughed sarcastically. "How will sleeping with you get me out of here? Aren't you going to tell me that we'll probably be dead in a couple of hours, so we might as well make the best of it now?" She stared at me coldly, then her hands drifted to the fastenings of her jacket. "Two hours, huh? After you're done, we ought to have an hour and fifty minutes to kill."

I shot her a nasty glance. "Do you mind?" I reached down and teased up the corner of the plastic pseudo-flesh bandage on my lower abdomen. Foolishly, I ripped it free fast, hoping it wouldn't hurt. "Ouch!"

"What are you doing?" she said.

I peeled the flesh-colored plastic off an Allen wrench. "I'm getting us out of here. It's



taken me two days to get captured by the ISF and put in here. Now it's time to follow the plan out to its conclusion." I tossed her the Allen wrench and zipped up my pants. "Hid that just below the belt because no one thinks to frisk you there."

I slid the bunk over to the corner, then stood on it. Takara tossed back the octagonal piece of metal and I slipped it into the bolt that held a ceiling plate in place. "We figured the ISF would not do a magscan right off, but even if they did, I have a polymer wrench elsewhere on my person. I prefer metal because it doesn't break as easily."

Arms folded, Takara narrowed her eyes and watched me. "Now it begins to make sense. The only reason you would have bumbled around in Akumashima the way you did was because you wanted to get caught. Why come to me?"

I shrugged as I tipped the ceiling plate and slid it up into the darkness above the cell. "Davion Intelligence suggested you'd be likely to turn me over to the ISF for the reward. I had to have the ISF capture me, or have someone else turn me in—they would be suspicious if I just surrendered. We knew they'd bring me to this facility, both to rub it in that I'd been captured and because the offworld ISF contingent would be stationed here. Those guys will do anything to get off the planet, and capturing me should be enough to earn them a transfer."

I grabbed the edges of the hole and pulled myself up into the darkness. I kept my head down, remembering earlier, painful lessons about the chamber's low clearance. Kneeling at the edge of the hole, I peered down into the room. "Just move the bunk away from the corner and take my hand."

Takara reluctantly followed my instructions and joined me in the darkness between the cell's ceiling and the floor above it. I lowered the ceiling plate back into place and fastened it down, then turned on the low lights we'd installed in the secret room.

Takara lowered her voice. "What is going on? Was Hanako Aido a blind?"

I shook my head. "No, she's real and is carrying O'Dell's child. And his father does want her to join them. The only lie was that Kevin is dead. The battle reports say he is, but he's not. We would have taken her offworld when we evacuated, except that the whole thing was a sham. Our DropShip picked up our 'Mechs over by the Suigin

Mine complex, right in the middle of a patrol. There was no reason for Hanako to be out there, so we had to leave her here or jeopardize our whole operation."

"Operation?" The Little Dragon looked very cross.

I smiled to reassure her. "About six months ago, the Federated Suns and the Draconis Combine fought a monster battle on Halstead Station. What they fought over turned out to be a huge cache of Star League-vintage books. Davion forces came away with most of them, but they burned everything else."

"All that knowledge lost..."

I nodded. "We thought it was lost, but it turns out that books don't burn that well. The ones on the surface of the pile were destroyed, but those deeper in were only singed. It was an ISF Colonel who discovered it. He packed the surviving books into several crates and had them shipped to his new station."

Takara grinned. "Murchison. The Colonel was our own Harrison Ukita. So your raid four months ago was to get the books."

I nodded enthusiastically. "Yup, but Colonel Ukita had plenty of lead time to hide the books as we came in-system. We searched, but we couldn't find them. We knew Kurita would send a unit to drive us off this world, so we hatched this plot and fixed up these cells. We knew that if we retreated without a battle and left plenty of booty behind, the forces here wouldn't go out looking for trouble. In fact, as we evacuated the planet, the 27th Dieron Regulars sent everything but one *Union Class DropShip* back to their JumpShip and left the system for the fight on Mallory's World."

"And in the six weeks you've been gone, the ISF Colonel Ukita has finally recovered the books." She narrowed her eyes. "You know this for a fact?"

"Yes. He's put them in crates marked up like weapons and is storing them down in the 'Mech bay. Davion Intelligence has pictures. He'll load them on the DropShip *Fukushu* soon and send them offworld. He'll turn them over to the Dragon, or sell them to the highest bidder. The Kell Hounds are going to put in another appearance on Murchison to ensure that doesn't happen."

Takara brushed her dark hair back from her shoulders. "How do you know he won't just hide them again? It takes a week to get



from the jump point to this world."

I shook my head. "That's if your ship comes in from the standard jump point over the solar pole. Janos Vandermeer, the Captain of the Kell Hounds JumpShip, knows everything there is to know about non-standard points."

Takara concentrated. "You mean 'pirate points,' right?"

I smiled. "Yeah. Now that he's been here once before, Janos says that if he pops into the system at a point on the planetary plane, keeps the larger moon between Murchison and the DropShip, and lets the world's own orbit bring the planet to him, the Kell Hounds should arrive within two days of a signal going out."

As I explained how the cavalry would arrive, I unbuckled the straps on an equipment container. I pulled out a packet of clothing and tossed it to her. "Put these on," I said, then hesitated. "That is, put them on if you want to help me."

She ripped open the clear plastic in silence. Pulling the black garment to her chest, she stared at me incredulously. "ISF ninja uniforms? Are you mad?"

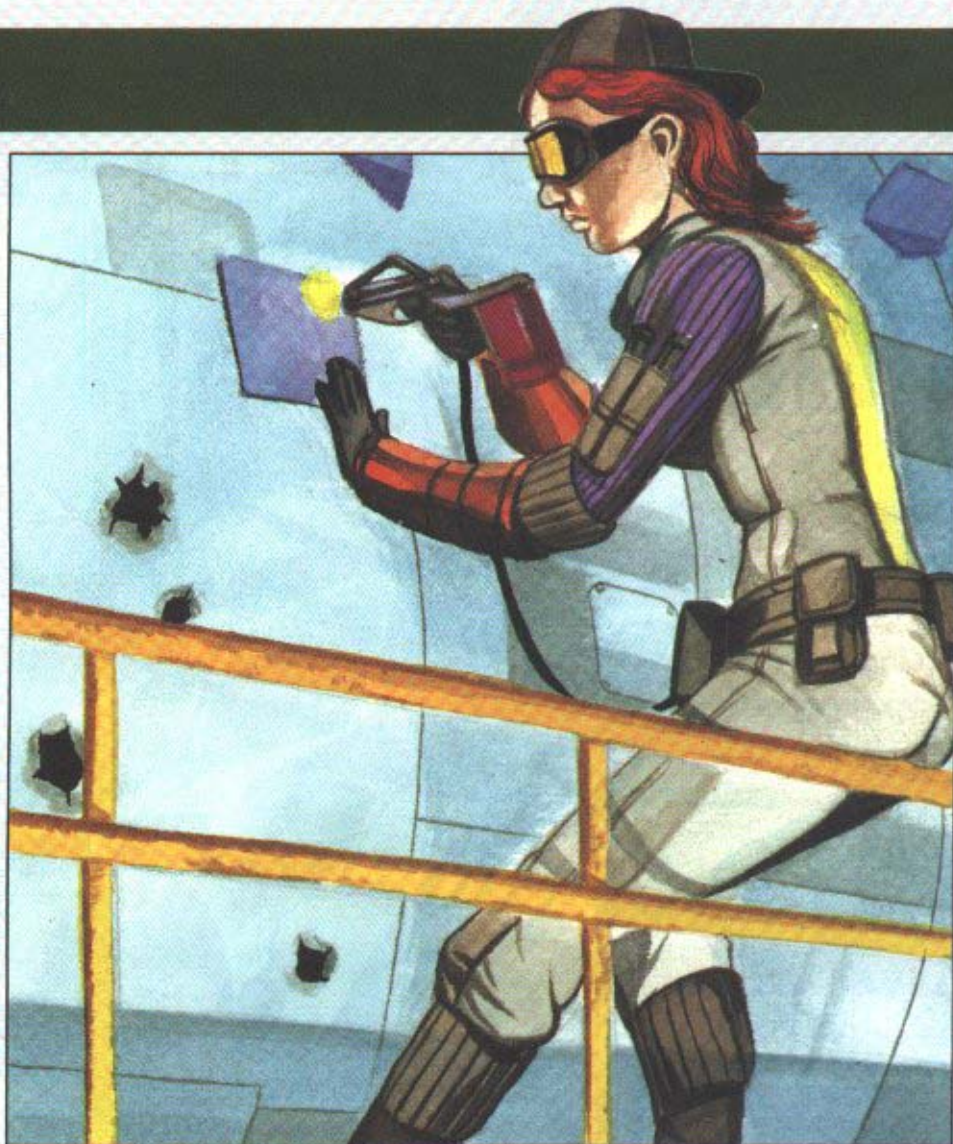
I shook my head. "Not only are they effective for climbing around in the darkness, but none of the Techs or MechWarriors of the 27th are going to watch us too closely. In fact, they'll do their best to avoid seeing what we're doing."

"And what will we be doing?"

I pulled a pouch from the container and unzipped it. I held it open so she could see the small cubes of plastique and the detonators attached to them. "We plant these where they will cause the most trouble. The detonators will set off the explosions when I punch a button on the remote control."

I pulled the remote control device from the bag and showed it to her. No longer or thicker than my thumb, and about twice as wide, it had a switch on the side. When I flipped it on, the flat square button on the control's surface glowed a dull red. "One touch and all the explosives will go off."

She nodded. I turned away and quickly changed into the other ISF uniform in the container. I smiled because in discussing the plan, Duke Michael's people had insisted that the file they'd assembled on the Little Dragon indicated that she would betray me to the ISF. For that reason, they only wanted to put enough equipment in the storage area



for me, but I insisted they provide two of everything. Though they had protested, I insisted that my native charm would win her over to our side. I didn't actually believe it, but pressed my demand just to irritate Duke Michael's men. Takara's decision to help made me very glad I'd stuck to my guns.

I handed her the sidearms also packed in the container and she laughed gently. She slid the Mauser & Gray M-27 needle pistol from the holster and charged it. "I think I have discovered your secret, Patrick." She hesitated before she said my name, and I felt my heart pounding faster. I was glad the dim light and hood hid my face.

"I hereby swear you to secrecy," I said, reaching into the bag of explosives and giving her a double handful. "Eight for you. Eight for me. The detonators are simple. The signal from the remote arms them, then sets them off. This plastique is great. You can mold it to direct the blast."

She nodded. "I know."

The vision of her apartment flashed in

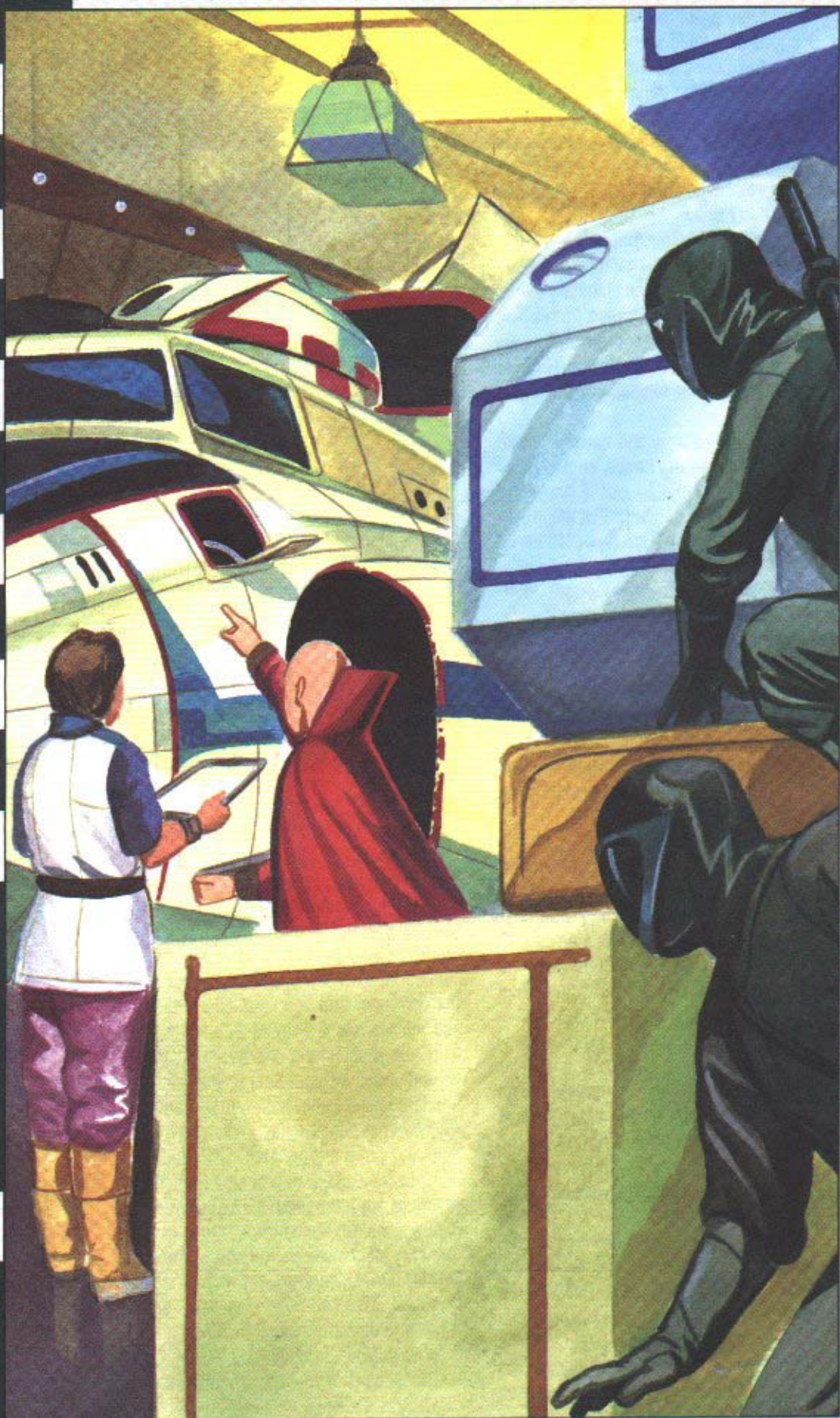
my mind. "Yeah, right." I started filling the little pockets in my uniform with explosives, then slipped the detonator into my waistband. I handed her the ISF agent's ubiquitous *katana*, then I slung one across my back. Lastly, I handed her one of the ISF's circlevision facemasks.

I flicked mine on after I'd settled it over my face, adjusted the straps to center the faceplate, then tightened them down. The image I saw was split top and bottom, with front and rear views, respectively. Reaching the control dials on the upper edge of the mask, I adjusted the view.

As a MechWarrior, I'm used to a full 360 degrees of vision because the 'Mech provides a complete battlefield view for the pilot. The image is truncated into an arc of 160 degrees, with "forward" always centered as you move. Everything is easy to see, and after a very short time, the system becomes quite simple to use.

In contrast, I found the split-image system of the circlevision equipment annoying.







I adjusted the mask so that it squashed the rear view to a three-centimeter tall band running across the top of the image area. That gave me a normal view of everything going on in front of me, yet provided enough of a picture that I could guard my back.

I smiled, though the mask's mirrored surface prevented Takara from seeing my expression. "O.K. We plant the explosives, then get in touch with the ComStar rep in Hakkinshi. We tell him to release the message the Kell Hounds left with him and, poof, we start things rolling."

Unused air ducting allowed us to climb up to the 'Mech bay's ceiling. The open girder lattice supporting the arched roof gave us a clear, if precarious, pathway. We moved through the high darkness as Techs and astechs labored below to maintain the 27th Dieron Regulars's stable of 'Mechs. I counted twelve of the massive war machines, which was right for company strength, but two of them were being worked on and one of those had its fusion reactor hanging from a power winch.

Takara and I split up to sow our little bombs. Whenever she'd selected a likely target, she'd wait for me to signal approval, then set the explosives. The only time I waved her off a site was when she wanted to blow up a winch track right above the crates full of books. I hoped the books would be out of the way when we set off the explosives, but I didn't want to take any chances.

We joined up again and descended to the hangar floor itself. Sliding into the multitude of shadows cast by the 'Mechs, we passed virtually unseen around and through the riot of activity in the 'Mech bay. I know a couple of astechs caught a glimpse of me because I saw them shiver, but they raised no alarm. They had no more love for the ISF than I did.

We planted more explosives on the ground floor during our trek. Huddled together in an area full of storage crates, I signaled to Takara that I had no more explosives, then I pointed at her and shrugged my shoulders. She patted the pocket at her left hip, then held up one finger. I gave her a thumbs-up.

Suddenly, a warning siren sounded and people started to run wildly through the hangar. I flicked on the circlevision mask's magnification function and killed my impulse to laugh. The door to our cell stood open and Sergeant Kimura was bowing

profusely to a bald man who had to be *Tai-sa Harrison Ukita*.

"Let's move, Takara. With all this confusion, maybe we can slip out unnoticed."

I stiffened as I felt the muzzle of her M-27 press against my back. She slipped my pistol into her left hand, then holstered her own gun. She pulled off her mask and spoke loudly enough for Ukita to hear her. "Here he is, *Tai-sa*."

It was as though someone had reached a cold hand into my chest and given my heart a squeeze. I sank forward slowly, hugging my arms around my aching stomach. A hoarse whisper was all I could muster as the ISF Colonel approached us. "Why, Takara?"

She laughed haughtily. "No one plays the Little Dragon for a fool, Kell. You should have listened to Davion Intelligence because they know me far better than you ever will. Helping you helps only Hanako Aido, but helping Ukita can save all Akumashima."

*Tai-sa Harrison Ukita* leaned forward on the oaken desk I'd left behind in my office when we evacuated the planet. He smiled broadly at me, then turned to include the Little Dragon in his welcome. Because she had surrendered her weapons voluntarily, as opposed to having them stripped from her as I had, the ISF had not bound her hands or hobbled her legs. "Well, this is an honor. I have a noted mercenary leader and a member of the *renketsu* in my office." He winked

at me. "Apologies, *Chu-sa*, and I compliment you on your choice of furnishings." He patted the polished surface of my desk lovingly.

I shrugged as best I could with my arms bound tightly forearm-to-forearm. "If you wish, I can go to Arc-Royal and get you a complete office set. A man of your importance shouldn't have to settle for a mercenary's cast-offs." I squirmed slightly in my chair because, in their search for





weapons, they'd missed the remote control for the explosives. Try as I might, however, there was no way I could activate the device, much less punch the button.

Ukita arched an eyebrow, then looked toward the Little Dragon. "And is she a mercenary's cast-off?"

I looked over at Takara, whose expression was impassive, then shook my head.

Ukita rose from my leather chair and came around to where the Little Dragon sat. "Takara-*renketsu*." He cupped her chin in his right hand, but she did not protest. Glancing at me, he smiled. "I suppose that name would not mean anything special to you, *Chu-sa*. This woman belonged to Marquis Jiro Somo before he died. Do you recognize *that* name?"

I thought for a moment. "Tanadi Computers? He died four years ago."

"Bravo, Patrick!" Ukita clapped his hands once, then stroked Takara's cheek. "Do you mind if I call you Patrick?"

I nodded. "If it would not be considered rude, I save my Christian name for my friends." I shot the Little Dragon a harsh stare, but her eyes were closed as she rubbed her cheek against Ukita's hand. "As hospitable as you have been, *Tai-sa*, I don't think we're friends."

Ukita nodded. "I understand. I think you will appreciate the irony I find in this situation. I came here to recover something you forced me to lose, and I captured you. I also discovered Takara-*renketsu* and will be able to return her to her rightful owner."

He tipped her face up and tightened his hand on her jaw, shocking her into opening her eyes. "You realize, don't you, that the writ of manumission Jiro signed for you was invalidated after his death. His heir wants you back, and it is only by chance that he mentioned his desire for you to me."

Takara replied in a low, inviting voice. "I believe, *Tai-sa*, that I can convince you that Marquis Gonsai Somo should not be my new owner." She shifted her head, let her tongue flicker against Ukita's palm, then glanced through the open doorway into what had been my private quarters.

I saw the ISF man swallow hard and stare at her. I leaned forward in my chair and cleared my throat loudly. "If you don't mind, *Tai-sa*, I'm feeling sick. Isn't there some formal processing you want to put me through?" I looked over at Takara and shud-

dered. "I'd be thankful for some delousing."

Ukita punched a button on the intercom, summoning two ISF guards. They jerked me to my feet, but before they dragged me out, the Little Dragon commanded them to wait. She left her chair when Ukita nodded his consent and crossed to where I stood. Pressing her warm body against mine, she ran her hands over my torso, then kissed me.

She stepped away from me and pulled Ukita's arm around her waist. Cold sparks flashed in her eyes as she answered Ukita's unvoiced question. "Why did I do that?" She threw back her head and laughed harshly. "So that he'll remember and dream about what he can never have."

**M**y lips burned with her kiss, and I could still feel her caress as the ISF agents led me down a series of passageways I should have recognized. Moving through those cold gray corridors, all I could think about was Takara lying in Ukita's arms. She'd kept me at arm's-length, afraid of surrendering her hard-won independence, then she'd turned and threw herself at Ukita.

*You're upset because she betrayed the image of her that you tried to respect. She demanded that you treat her like a normal person. You did, all the while imagining that she shared her name and her home with you out of some mutual feeling. Then you up and tell her you've used her and that you expected her to betray you all along. The wonder's not that she turned you over to the ISF, you idiot. It's that she didn't shoot you when she had the chance!*

The guards cut the clothes from me before proceeding with a complete body search. They easily discovered the strip of pseudo-flesh on the right side of my chest and gleefully ripped it off despite my entreaties to be careful. They strapped me down on an examination table and forced my mouth open so that some crazed fool could poke and probe my teeth for poison capsules or a false tooth full of microdots.

After that, they forced me through a bath in which two toothless matrons attacked my flesh with harsh bristle brushes. They scrubbed me head-to-toe as though sandblasting two months of dried mud from a Mech's armor. Then my guards pushed me into a cold shower, a stinging encounter with a delouser and his spray can, and a



second shower that just barely dulled the delousing agent's pungent stink.

Finally, they dressed me again in the clothes they'd cut off me earlier. Without restraining my legs this time, they led me back up to *Tai-sa* Ukita's office. Through a window, I noticed how closely the sun hovered to the horizon. I'd lost all track of the time, especially during the stay with the Draconian dentist, but now I knew that at least three hours had slipped by. With that realization, thoughts of Takara and Ukita invaded my mind again.

The ISF guards forced me back into a chair so that I could listen to the soft sounds coming from the partially open door into the room beyond my office. *She didn't want me to despoil her bedroom when I stayed in her apartment, but she desecrates mine.* After they finally grew quiet, Ukita, swathed in a black silk robe, slid open the door and dismissed the guards.

Dropping into my chair, he smiled. "It really is a pity, *Chu-sa*, you never..."

I shrugged. "Perhaps you'll grant a dying man his last request." *Leave me alone with her so I can strangle her...*

As though reading my thoughts, he smiled. "No, Colonel Kell, I'm afraid that would not be possible. It is too bad because she is quite, ah, incredible."

Takara appeared in the doorway and leaned against the door jamb. Her white kimono was trimmed in dark green and gapped open at the center. Casually, she pulled it tight, then fastened the green sash. She drifted over to the chair she'd occupied before, but only had eyes for Ukita.

Again the ISF Colonel smiled at me. "Did you know Takara means 'treasure'? It is true, and she lives up to that name." His hand disappeared into one of his robe's pockets and returned holding the remote control for the explosives. "Did you feel her take it from you when she kissed you?"

I fought to keep my reaction from showing on my face and to keep my voice even. "Why don't you flip that little switch and hit the button?"

Ukita laughed. "You would like that, wouldn't you? Well, Colonel, I'm afraid my little treasure has rendered your efforts, valiant though they may have been, all for naught." He glanced out the window to where the egg-shaped DropShip *Fukushu* waited. "She told me everything. During the

first break in our...activities, I authorized ComStar to deliver your message summoning the Kell Hounds. As soon as my men are finished secreting the books on my ship, I will order the crew to reboard and make ready to depart. You see, I'll take you with me so the Coordinator can hold you ransom against the Kell Hounds' neutrality and withdrawal from Mallory's World."

My mouth tasted like sour vinegar. "And the explosives?"

Ukita looked at Takara. "Was it during our second moment of respite that you came out here and compiled the list of bombed sites for me?" She nodded obediently, and Ukita turned back to me with a proud smile. "Yes, she gave me a list of the places where you had planted the explosives and my people have disarmed all 15 of them." Ukita flicked the remote control's arming switch with his thumb. "So I will accept your challenge..."

Takara's dive knocked me into a sprawl as Ukita's thumb stabbed the red button. I saw the momentary look of horror on his face as he realized what she'd done to him, then his body vanished in a flash of argent fire. The heavy oaken desk he'd admired earlier tipped forward, absorbing most of the blast directed into room, then rocked back down onto its feet.

The explosion rang sharply in my ears, deafening me. Blood was running from my nose and I started to cough as the smoke from the chair's burning leather choked the room. I felt Takara clawing at the plastic strips binding my arms, releasing me from their grasp. I turned over and saw her hands, bleeding with cuts from the sharp glass she'd used to free me.

Her lips moved, but I couldn't hear anything she said. Her tears cut tracks through the blast grime on her face, paralleling the twin lines of blood streaming from her nostrils. I tore what was left of my shirt and wrapped it around her lacerated hands, then rolled to my feet and approached the door in a crouch.

The two ISF agents sent to investigate the blast came in standing upright, which put their heads in the layer of smoke hovering in the room. I kicked the leader in the knees, sending him careening sideways into the agent right behind him. They both crashed into the wall, then fell to the floor.

I smashed the first agent in the faceplate

with my elbow. Pain seared along my arm as the vision device fragmented and sparks sizzled into the bloody ruin of his face. Before I could hit him again, however, his partner grabbed me and wrestled me onto my back. As I wrapped both my hands around his throat, he reciprocated.

Blood pounded explosively through my temples as his fingers dug into my neck. He applied pressure to my carotid artery, cutting off the blood flow to my brain. Shimmering light balls danced in my vision like fireflies as I whipped my head back and forth trying vainly to break his grip while I tightened mine.

Suddenly, I felt him convulse violently, then his grip slackened. Weak as a baby, it was all I could do to roll his body off mine. Then I noticed he didn't lie flat. The hilt of the *katana*—his own *katana*—protruded from his ribs just beneath his armpit.

Takara knelt beside him and drew his gun. Seeing it was her favorite Sternsnacht, she appropriated it for herself. When she crossed to the other agent, who still lay writhing in pain, she pressed the muzzle to his chest and stroked the trigger once.

He also wore a Sternsnacht, so Takara jacked a round into the chamber and handed the gun to me. I thought I'd heard the sound of the one gunshot and of the second pistol being armed, but an insistent noise still ringing in my ears made me unsure.

I looked up into her brown eyes. "Thank you for saving my life."

She shook her head. "Save your thanks. We're armed with Sternsnachts and they're mobilizing their 'Mechs.'"

It was then that I finally recognized the sound pulsing through my head. "That's a warning siren for a 'Mech raid!' I grabbed her arm and dragged her to the blown-out office windows. I squinted and pointed at the large red semicircle formed by the dying sun. "There, coming in from the west to screw up this base's infrared scanners."

She shielded her eyes with her left hand. "Something is moving. What is it?"

I swept her up into a hug. "That's my 'Mech battalion!'"

The Migawari company of the 27th Dieron Regulars fought gamely to defend their post while everyone else evacuated it. Despite the best efforts of the 27th, the numerical advantage enjoyed by the Kell Hound



battalion quickly turned the battle against the defenders. Had the DropShip *Fukushu* been crewed, its guns might have made a difference, but the empty ship played no part in the battle. Instead, as the Draconian MechWarriors fled, surrendered, or died, the *Fukushu* became just another piece of war loot.

Most of the DropShip's crew agreed to join the Kell Hounds and even permitted me to re-christen the *Union Class* DropShip the *Nuada Argetlan* after the legendary Irish hero. We filled this new DropShip with all the things we'd left behind in our earlier hasty departure, except for my desk and my bed, then added the best of the 27th's captured BattleMechs. As Janos had promised, our other DropShip reached Murchison within two days of jumping into the system, and a day after that, we were ready to leave.

I'd gotten Takara treated by the *Nuada's* doctor and even managed to convince her to stay on the ship. She was reluctant, but the doctor wanted to make sure her cuts did not get infected and I gently reminded her that the *Yakuza* were still angry with her. She acquiesced, but the memory of her destroyed home made her aloof and unhappy.

Even though she was living on my ship, in a cabin just down the passageway from my own, I did not see Takara again until it came time to leave. Moving everything out of our old base and keeping track of the reports that had piled up in the month and a half my battalion had spent living in the Suigin mines left me with little time. I also had the distinct impression that Takara was avoiding me.

On the last day on Murchison, an hour before our scheduled departure, I found her pacing around in what had been my office. All the furnishings had been removed, but the burn mark on the wall and the bloodstains on the carpet were reminder enough of what had happened there.

I cleared my throat, startling her from deep thought. She looked up at me, then smiled. "You've shaved off your mustache."

I nodded. I wanted to ask if she liked it, or if she preferred it gone, but I knew how juvenile the questions would sound compared to what I really wanted to say to her. I chewed on my lower lip for a second, then spoke. "I want you to come with me. There's nothing here for you."

She shook her head. "Akumashima

needs the Little Dragon."

"What does Takara need?"

Takara breathed deeply, choosing her words carefully before answering me. "It doesn't matter, Colonel. Takara lived in the fantasy world of her sanctuary. She couldn't exist outside it. She died when it died."

I held out my hand to her. "I'll be your sanctuary. I'll do my best to give you everything you want and need."

She looked at me and I sensed that part of her wanted to take my hand, but another part resisted. She folded her hands across her chest. "It could never be. A relationship like that has to be built upon trust, but you never trusted me. I brought you into my secret place, but you didn't trust me."

The pain in her voice nearly strangled my spirit, but I fought back. "That's not true."

Her head came up and defiant fire flashed in her brown eyes. "You didn't tell me the Kell Hounds were still on Murchison, hidden in the Suigin mines. When ComStar sent their message out, your people were only three hours away."

I shook my head. "You didn't need to know that. I didn't give you that information because I had to protect my battalion. Not against you, but against what the ISF might have made you tell them."

Her dark eyes slitted. "That may be so, but I heard the anger and hatred in your voice before and after I slept with Ukita. You loathed me then, and that will plant the seed of mistrust in your mind. Any relationship of ours would be doomed."

Again I shook my head. "Yes, you heard anger and hatred in my voice, but it was really myself that I hated because, deep down, I knew you were doing something against your will for me. I was angry with myself because I couldn't do anything about it and for having brought you into this thing in the first place."

She opened her mouth to reply, but I cut her off. "You say we can't have a relationship because I never trusted you. But I did. I trusted you more than I've ever trusted anyone, or ever hope to in the future."

She frowned. "I don't understand."

"It's simple, Takara. Very simple. When you pulled your gun and captured me for the ISF, I doubled over. I held my hand to my stomach and activated the remote control for the explosives. One touch and I would have killed you."



She looked at me distantly. "You would have died in the same blast. You wouldn't do that to yourself."

I sighed. "You were turning me over to the ISF. Die quickly by an explosion, or slowly by torture. What's the difference, in the end?" I hesitated. "Maybe, with your sanctuary gone, you wanted me to kill you. I don't know."

Takara stiffened, letting the Little Dragon fortify her. "If that's what you believe, Colonel Kell, any future we'd have would be hell."

I shrugged. "Maybe it would and maybe it wouldn't, but the fact is I trust you enough to be willing to chance it. I can't and won't promise smooth sailing all the time because I'm Human. I think you trusted me enough, at one point, to jeopardize yourself for me, and I think now you are second-guessing that judgement. You have to trust someone, and I think you should start with yourself."

I pointed out toward the *Nuada*. "I'm walking out of here right now, and I want you to come with me. If not now, then join me later...whenever. I know you'll make the choice that's right for you, Takara."

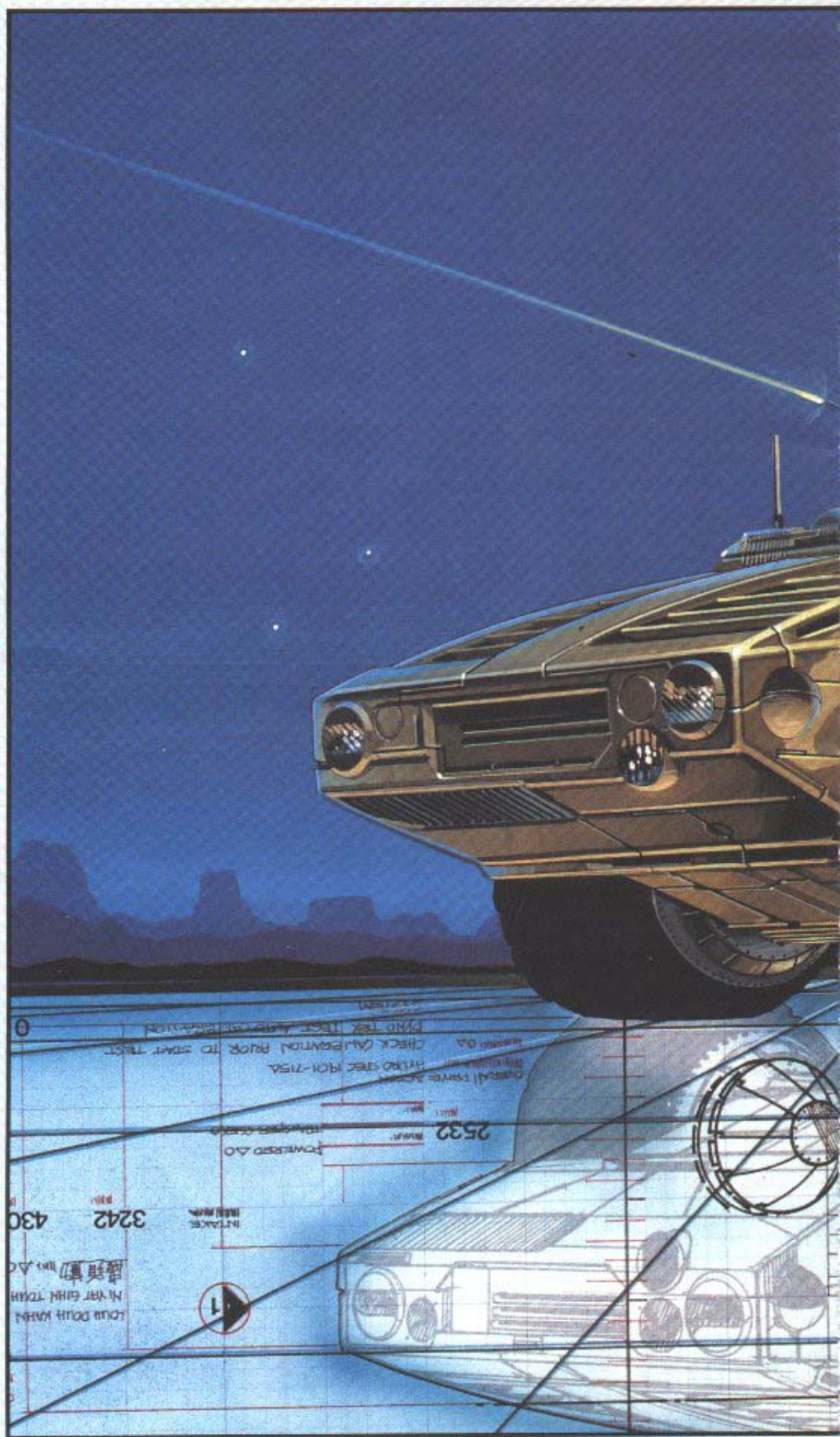
Turning from her and walking down the stairs was more difficult than anything I've ever done. I felt as though my guts had been clawed out. That aching hollowness seemed to suck all my vitality into it, with the life I'd known before I met Takara shrunk to only two colorless dimensions. A mocking voice that sounded frighteningly like the Little Dragon's echoed from my soul. "The regiment may be where you live, Patrick Kell, but never again will it be home."

I strained my ears to catch any hint that she was following me, but I refused to look back. I knew that, much as I wanted to, I could not drag her with me. That would destroy us both. The decision was one she would have to make by herself.

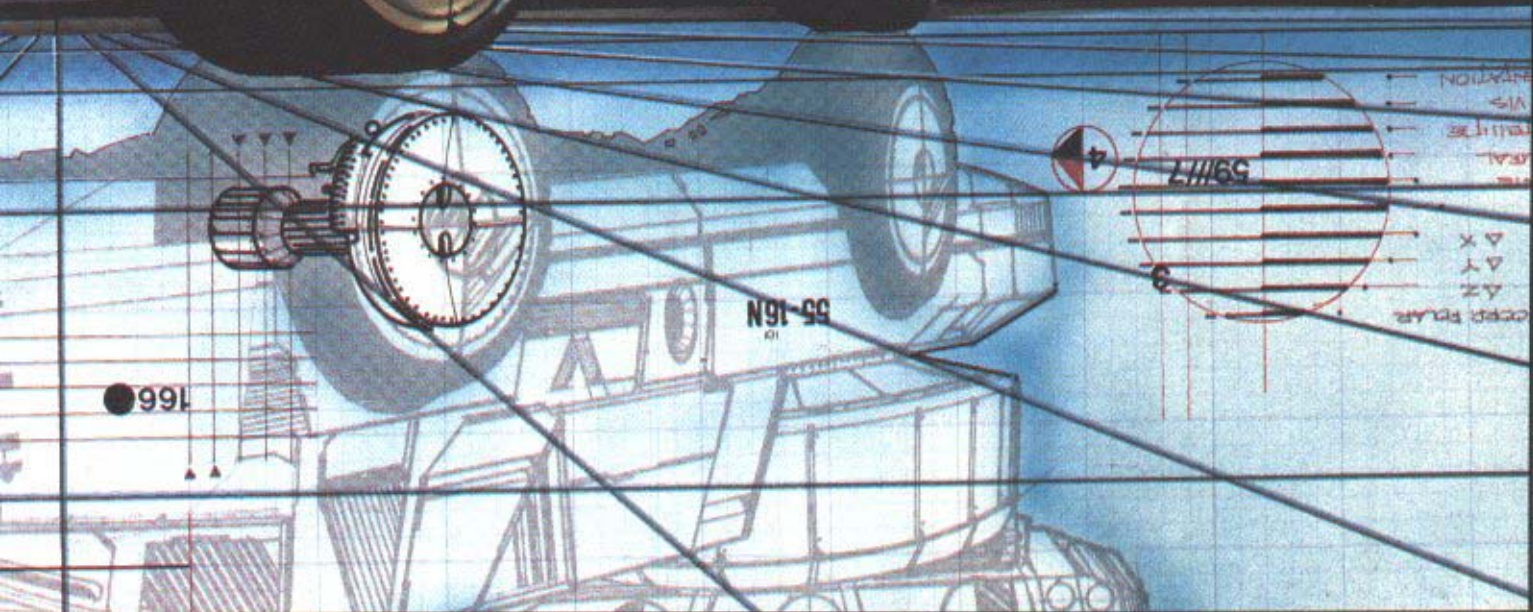
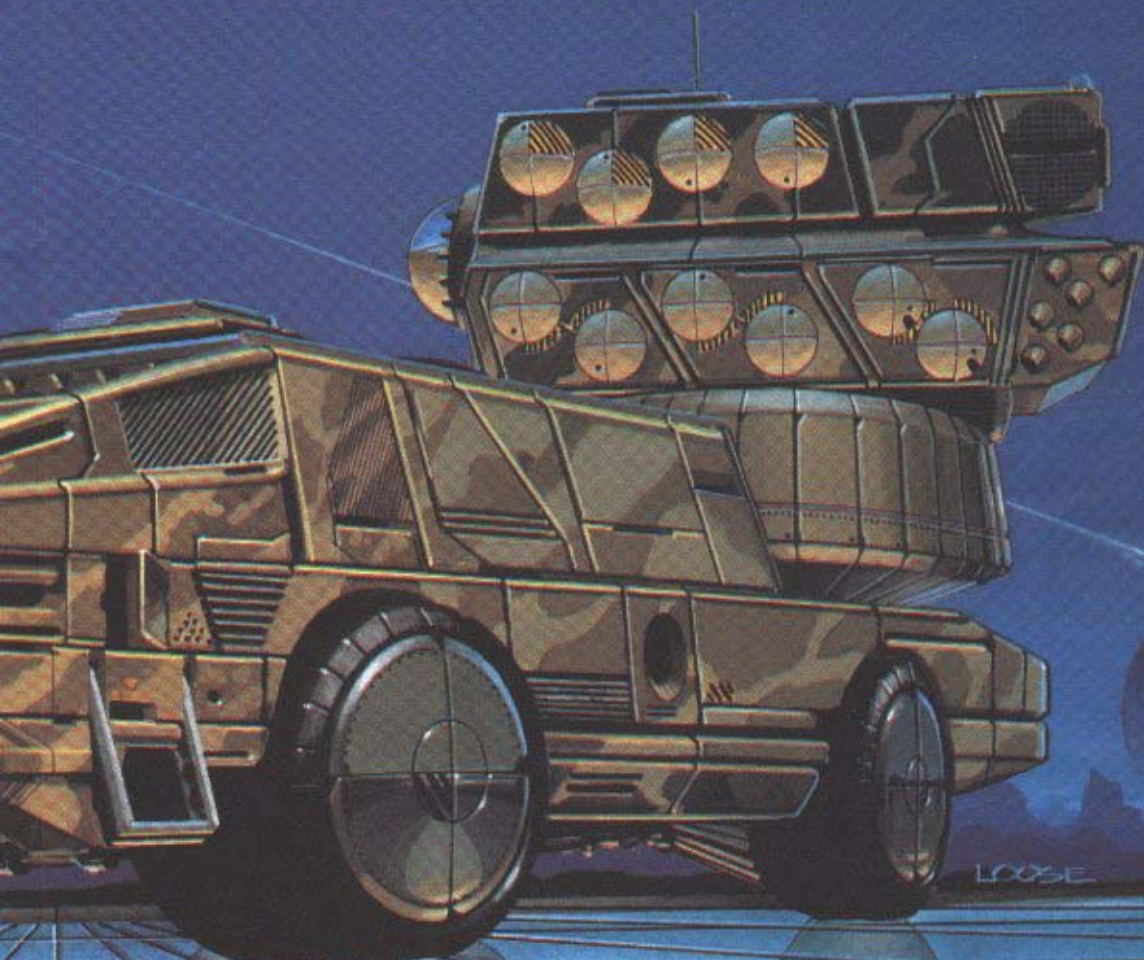




# GALLERY









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