

SHRAPNEL

ISSUE #2

THE OFFICIAL BATTLETECH MAGAZINE

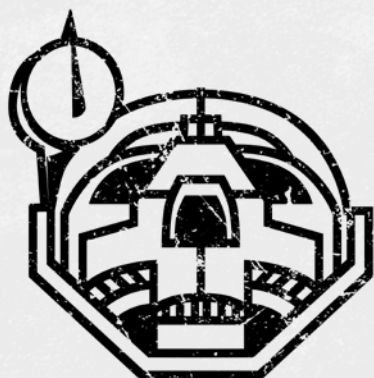


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THE OFFICIAL BATTLETECH MAGAZINE

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COMMANDER'S CALL

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Front and center, MechWarriors! I see you all survived boot camp and have come back to serve a tour of duty, so it's time to get down to business! If you thought our first issue was packed with explosive content, then just wait until you hear what we've loaded up for you in this issue.

On the fiction side of things, we've got a few familiar names and some new faces. First and foremost is the much-awaited continuation of Michael A. Stackpole's four-part Kell Hounds serial, and let me tell you, the action really heats up! In "Devil Take the Hindmost" by Michael J. Ciaravella, author of the recently released Northwind Highlanders novel *Grey Watch Protocol*, you'll learn about the MechWarrior known as the Phantom of the Coliseum, but is he real, or just a ghost story? The novella *Daybreak on Shining Mountain*, penned by Travis Heermann, author of the Scribe Award-nominated short story "Swords of Light and Darkness" from the *Legacy* anthology, literally had me on the edge of my seat, and I'm sure it will put you there as well. Rounding out our veteran storytellers, longtime BattleCorps author Alan Brundage delves into the annals of Clan history in "Scavenger's Blood," and Jason Schmetzer brings us another tale from the Cracked Canopy in "Giving Up." And last but most certainly not least, we've added James Simakas and John-David Karnitz to the battalion's roster, with their excellent short stories "Flash'd His Sabre Bare" and "The Road Ahead," respectively. (I especially want to give James a shoutout for his interminable patience while we got *Shrapnel* off the ground, so thank you, James!) I can't speak for the rest of you, but I'm really looking forward to more stories from these two!

This issue also features articles about a deadly assassin; an in-depth look at everyone's favorite "golden BB," the Gauss rifle (which features Dr. Kiran Suzuki, named by *Clan Invasion* Kickstarter backer Jonathan Lung); and a deep investigation on what really happened with the phenotype designed for piloting Clan ProtoMechs. We also have a technical readout for the CN-1B *Centurion*, the 50-ton *Centurion's* heavier, 55-ton sibling (complete with record sheets available for download at bg.battletech.com/downloads/); a planet digest for Minette, the gateway into the Davion Outback; a *Chaos Campaign* scenario for the Jade Falcon invasion of Skye, complete with Aleksandr Hazen's *Gyrfalcon 5* (with a record sheet also available at the URL above); and a three-part role-playing adventure that ties into the *BattleTech* Worldwide Event for 2020, the search for the 295th BattleMech Division.

Activate that fusion engine and double-check your neurohelmet connection, because it's time to go to war!

Philip A. Lee, Managing Editor



SCAVENGER'S BLOOD

ALAN BRUNDAGE

DELTA GALAXY COMMAND BUNKER

SMOKE JAGUAR ENCLAVE

SHADES MILL, GATEKEEPER

KERENSKY CLUSTER

24 JANUARY 2986

Entering the bunker with a swagger, Ayelet Kotare embraced the sense of power and superiority being a warrior gave her. She growled low in her throat, causing the technicians no end of fright. Her coal-black gaze scrutinized them as they sought to cower, scurry, and hide. As well they should. She was a warrior and she had a mission.

Sickly green light illuminated the claustrophobic cavern that served as Delta Galaxy's command post. The green light left the embittered Star Captain on supervisory duty looking pallid and washed out. Izar had been considered a *ristar* before his upward path ran afoul of the Galaxy Commander's *coregn*, Ran Weaver. Izar's hatred of the Weavers put him firmly in both Ayelet's camp and Cluster, which was why she could gain access to the Galaxy Commander this day.

Izar gave her a firm nod, addressing her in a low voice as she passed. "They are in there together."

Brimming with confidence, she entered the Galaxy Commander's office, a low-ceilinged ferrocrete affair, lacking windows or decoration of any kind, the sole exception being a framed schematic of a *Mad Dog* OmniMech, the model of 'Mech the Galaxy Commander preferred. A desk that was virtually an island dominated the room, and behind that island sat her commander and sometimes nemesis, Loretz Weaver.

Though he was built solidly like all of the Weaver line, the resemblance ended there. Loretz was nearly as pale and blond as she, no doubt a quirk of the Dimitrov blood mixed into his *sibko*. He

had been a formidable warrior in his day, but that day was long past. He simply did not realize it yet.

Reclining beside him was Ran Weaver, Star Colonel of the Third Jaguar Cavaliers, *ristar*, and Ayelet's chief rival in Delta Galaxy. Ran had the Weaver look, dark hair and skin, with pale, piercing eyes. He embodied the Weaver ideal of the warrior as well—traditional and unwilling to bend. A fool's belief, for that way lay stagnation and death. That was why Ayelet had come up with her plan.

Irritation flashing across his broad face, Loretz barked, "What is the meaning of this intrusion?"

Ayelet defiantly raised her chin. "I mean to bring battle to our enemies and strengthen our Clan."

There was little chance the Galaxy Commander could find fault with that, and he knew it. "We are always eager for battle. Speak."

Leaning against the desk, Ayelet glared across its vast expanse at Loretz. "The blood of the Jaguar favors boldness, *quiaff?*"

"You know that it does, Star Colonel."

She rose and crossed her arms. "Then I know of a bold strike that will gain us bold blood, and further humble a rival."

"I am intrigued."

"As you should be. Last year, Liam Howell of the Snow Ravens engineered perhaps the most audacious strike in Clan history...by setting out to destroy a Clan totem. He nearly succeeded. As a result, Clan Sea Fox is no more, and Clan Diamond Shark rises in its place. For this success, his own Clan challenged, refused, and killed him. His genes lie fallow while calls to Reave his Bloodright and legacy resonate throughout Clan space."

"I do not need a history lesson, Star Colonel. Come to your point."

"In the ongoing feud between the Diamond Sharks and Snow Ravens, many other Howells have been specifically targeted. Eleven Bloodrights now lie vacant, but none of the unblooded have been permitted to compete for them. They languish unused but not Reaved."

Ran interjected himself into the conversation. "And you would have us claim this unwanted scavenger?"

Zeal gave her face a glow. "Aff! We seize Liam Howell's legacy and meld it to the strongest of our own. In a warrior's generation we could usurp control of an entire Bloodhouse from the wretched carrion crows."

"And we would assume the burden of that legacy." Ran turned on his superior, the man who had sponsored him for his own Bloodname. "You are considering this, *quineg?*"

The Galaxy Commander was silent for a long time. Ayelet knew she had him now. A long-ago trial from his youth had instilled in Loretz an irrational hatred of the Snow Ravens. "Aff. I see the benefits to our Clan from this action. Go, Star Colonel Kotare, and remind the Snow Raven why they should fear the Smoke Jaguar."



Crammed into an even darker and more claustrophobic corner of the control bunker was a secondary holotank. It was compact and therefore less efficient but afforded her the privacy Ayelet desired. Virtual screens orbited about each other, displaying data on recent Snow Raven activity, battlefield losses, and even the location of several prominent Howells and their units.

A low rumble of satisfaction escaped Izar. "This one has potential." He used a swipe of his hand to send a file over to her screen.

Reading it over, she let a predatory grin stretch across her face. A high-ranking Howell had just transferred to Lum. By attacking there, she would drive a double stake into the Snow Ravens, both by striking at such an important world and stealing away the legacy of Liam Howell. *Aff*, she would make quite a name for herself. "It is perfect. Well done, Izar."

PLANETARY DEFENSE COMMAND
SNOW RAVEN ENCLAVE
RUMIKO CITY, LUM
KERENSKY CLUSTER
20 FEBRUARY 2986

The room thrummed with the activity and purpose of a well-oiled machine, just the way Sebastian Peleshenko liked it. The somewhat portly warrior had squeaked into the office of saKhan while the more prestigious Bloodhouses bickered among themselves. Now, having settled comfortably into his post, he was charged with the defense of Lum while Khan Sukhanov was away taking battle to the Ice Hellions on Priori.

He continued his circuit of the command-and-control center, nodding to the techs whose names he had taken the time to memorize, unlike most of his warrior brethren. Everything was clear and orderly, again, just as he liked it.

An alert suddenly flashed, drawing the attention of Technician Imogen. The young woman double checked her instruments before announcing the result. "Signal relay from the nadir jump point station. Smoke Jaguar force in bound."

"Transmission incoming," called out Michael, another one of the techs.

"Route it to the main table. I will take it there." Peleshenko covered the distance to the holotable with long strides. The icy figure of Galaxy Commander Alicia Crow, nominally in charge of the Galaxy stationed

on Lum, was already there waiting for him, her face impassive. They exchanged a brief nod before turning their attention back to the table.

The holotable crackled to life, displaying the angular features of a woman. The left side of her head was shaved, leaving a blond wave cascading down the right. A livid scar pulled the left side of her mouth down into a permanent sneer. Her dark, predatory eyes stared forth contemptuously.

"Cowardly carrion eaters of Lum, tremble in your roosts. I am Star Colonel Ayelet Kotare of Clan Smoke Jaguar, commander of the Nineteenth Striker Cluster, the Razor's Edge. I come to lay claim to the spawn and legacy of Liam Howell. With what paltry forces do you offer defense?" Her image turned to the side. "My force composition is being transmitted now. As I have no aerospace assets, I request that you grant me *safcon*."

Thoughts racing, Peleshenko took a moment to review the attached document with the Smoke Jaguar bid. Frowning slightly, he straightened his blue duty jacket and puffed out his chest. Still considering his options, he leaned in toward the video pickup.

"Star Colonel Kotare, this is saKhan Sebastian Peleshenko. You are as bold as you are foolish. The legacy of Liam Howell is considered *dezgra*, but we of the Unkindness are loath to part with it. We will defend it with no more than a full Cluster. Once my unit commanders have bid among themselves, I will transmit their composition to you."

Peleshenko gave a magnanimous wave of his hand. "Your request for *safcon* is granted." His mind raced, searching for a suitable site for the Trial of Possession. "We will meet you on the beaches of Nivkh Island, where you will know defeat."

Peleshenko's thumb hammered down to end the transmission, then he turned to Alicia Crow.

"Summon your Star Colonels for the bidding. Let us teach this Jaguar what it means to face the Unkindness."



A storm howled across the city, the wind and rain lashing against Zillah Howell as she approached the command center. The tall woman was swathed in a heavy trench coat to shield her from the elements. Nodding to the Elemental guards, she entered quickly and sealed the hatch behind her. She stripped off the coat and tossed it aside, revealing a lean frame, topped by an unruly tangle of black curls. She brushed a stray lock out of her dark-blue eyes and marched into the base proper.

She moved through the well-worn corridors of the base with long-legged strides, staying to the right to avoid the streaming mass of technicians that kept the base functional. The bustle of purposeful military activity was more satisfying to be around than the halls of Strana Mechty, her last posting, where politics ruled the day.

Arriving at the briefing theater in record time, she was just congratulating herself when she spied an aerospace Star Colonel, distinguishable by both his uniform patches and build. Casually filing his nails, he spared her a glance, openly assessing her for a moment before returning to his grooming. A snort escaped her. Aerojocks were all the same, constantly striving to exude just the right amount of aloofness.

Other warriors were beginning to arrive; another Star Colonel and his attendant Star Captains entering and easily finding seats in the spacious theater. Of the lot she recognized only two: Juris, the Star Captain who commanded her Cluster's *Overlord-C* DropShip, the *Bloody Feather*, and the base commander, the "Stone Crow" herself, Galaxy Commander Alicia Crow. The last person to enter was an older man, stout of build, who walked with an almost imperceptible limp. His uniform bore the patch of both a MechWarrior and the single star of a Khan. This then was Sebastian Peleshenko, saKhan of the Clan, and behind his back something of a joke. His rise was considered a fluke that would be corrected after the fallout from the diamond shark incident finally settled.

Once everyone had settled into their seats, the saKhan stepped up to the podium and leaned casually against it. "With the gracious permission of Galaxy Commander Crow, I will be directing this briefing," he began in a cultured voice.

"An hour ago we received a *batchall* from a Smoke Jaguar force. The fools have come to battle us for the legacy of Liam Howell." All eyes shifted ever so slightly towards Zillah. "Though tainted, we will not surrender any legacy without a fight. I have granted the Smoke Jaguars *saftcon*, as their bid did not include any aerospace forces. As the on-planet commanders, I open the bidding to you to oppose them.

"Let the record show that the bidding is between Star Colonel Khorda Dabir of the Ninth Raven Wing Cluster, Star Colonel Loric Siegel of the Eleventh Battle Cluster, and Star Colonel Zillah Howell of the Sixth Raven Stoop Cluster."

The aerospace Star Colonel blew out an exasperated sigh.

The saKhan turned to him. "You have something you wish to say, Star Colonel Dabir?"

Dabir inclined his head. "Indeed I do. As you have already granted *saftcon* to the Smoke Jaguars, there is nothing I or my Cluster can accomplish in this trial." He gave the saKhan a hard stare. "I therefore withdraw the Ninth Raven Wing Cluster from the bidding. I wish my fellow Star Colonels better luck than I." The diminutive man settled back into his chair, clearly annoyed.

Light gleamed off Siegel's stark-white hair, a genetic quirk of the Siegel line, as he leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. "What was the Jaguar bid?"

"Two trinaries of 'Mechs, a command Star, and a Binary of Elementals, amounting to roughly two-thirds of their Cluster."

Siegel nodded thoughtfully, steeping his fingers. He cast a speculative glance in Zillah's direction, a smile slowly spreading across his face. "Though I have no doubt that my Eleventh Battle Cluster could easily defeat these Jaguars, I too withdraw from bidding. It seems to me a perfect confluence of events that we have a Howell present to defend a Howell legacy. How could I rob her of such an opportunity?" He bowed mockingly to her.

Zillah blanched. *He has me trapped now*, she thought. She stood, facing them all, letting none of her fear and uncertainty show on her face.

"I graciously accept my colleagues' faith in my abilities. I will take two Binaries of 'Mechs, one Binary of Elementals, and one Star of fighters. Let us give this presumptuous Jaguar a fighting chance."

Peleshenko clapped his hands together. "Then the bidding is concluded. Congratulations, Star Colonel Howell. Please meet me in my office. I have another matter I would discuss with you."

"As you wish, my Khan."



As the meeting broke up, Zillah ran to catch up with Juris. "Sounds like a straightforward enough mission, *quiaff?*" he said by way of greeting. Unusually for a Raven, Juris rarely wasted time on pleasantries.

Zillah cast a contemplative look toward the departed Peleshenko. "I am not so sure. When has anything good ever come from the Khan's direct involvement?"

"You worry too much, Zillah," Juris chuckled.

"And you do not worry enough," she said, her traditional refrain to their long-standing disagreement.

"Someday you will see things my way. But enough, let us prepare ourselves. Anything resembling combat is better than sitting around here, even if all I do is ferry you to Nivkh."

"*Seyla*," she said with a grin.



Leaving Juris to his own preparations, Zillah made her way to the saKhan's office. In a surprising move he had not ousted Galaxy Commander Crow from her own office, instead making do with a simple room tucked into an unobtrusive corner. Not for him, the trappings of power.

A single unarmored Elemental stood guard, arms akimbo. Zillah nodded by way of greeting and rapped on the door. When she heard a barked "Enter!" she pushed the door open and made her way in.

The saKhan rose from behind a simple metal desk, gesturing to the only other chair in the room. "Please sit, Star Colonel Howell. We have much to discuss."

"So I gathered." Zillah sat and stared at Peleshenko as he resumed his own seat. She let the silence draw out to just short of uncomfortable before confronting him. "What was the point of that farcical bidding? You orchestrated my victory from the beginning, *quiaff?*"

"Aff." He at least had the good grace to admit it.

"Why?"

"Because your presence presents the Clan with a unique opportunity."

"And what opportunity is that?" she asked, intrigued despite herself.

"To place sources within the Smoke Jaguars. They are certainly the most aggressive and violent of our siblings, but at times that outlook pushes them into startling degrees of innovation. Sharing blood with them places us in a position to learn of and profit from these innovations before others such as the Diamond Sharks can."

Zillah rolled the idea around, considering. "An interesting plan, though one that would take generations to prove its worth."

"Granted, but we take the long view, *quiaff?*"

"Aff. And your reasoning for using the Howells for this?" She already suspected the answer but wanted to hear it directly from him.

"Opportunity and means. I know you yourself have argued for the Reaving of Liam Howell's legacy. A justified fate to be sure. But would it not be better to use this as a way to benefit the Clan, and redeem a member of your own Bloodhouse? To wash from your Family the stench of disgrace and failure?"

She nodded slowly. "There is truth in what you say. And with a Howell defending this legacy, none of the Jaguars will expect duplicity. A tidy package. Bargained well and done. I agree to this."

Peleshenko smiled benevolently. "As I knew you would."

"Hmph. If there is nothing further, I must prepare my warriors for battle."

"Good hunting, Star Colonel."

TRIAL ZONE
NIVKH ISLAND, LUM
KERENSKY CLUSTER
25 FEBRUARY 2986

Scans revealed the island was well suited to the Trial of Possession. There were no settlements aside from a small science outpost that was currently vacant.

Izar stood before the holotank, already dressed for battle. "The Ravens have taken up position here," he said, gesturing to a beach on the northeast part of the island. "The position is shielded by a

small forest on approach. Despite the foul weather, these trees burn easily and could pose a risk if we go through them. I suggest taking up position on the opposite side of these woods. The terrain is barren sand and stone, better suited to combat. We should be able to entice the Ravens into combat on ground of our choosing."

Ayelet cracked her knuckles. "Excellent. What of their aerospace assets?"

He pulled up another screen with sensor telemetry. "Two Points continue to shadow us, the rest are outside our sensor range at present, but are so far honoring *safcon*."

Ayelet stroked her chin. "That will change, probably as soon as we exit the DropShip. The Ravens are an underhanded foe, so we must be prepared for anything. Are there any questions, *quineg*?" Her Star Commanders all responded in the negative as expected. "Very well. Our goal is to defeat and humiliate the Snow Ravens. Let us do so. To your 'Mechs."

The MechWarriors of the Razor's Edge, eager for battle, ran for their 'Mechs. Ayelet proceeded in a more leisurely fashion. The battle would be joined soon enough, and with it her place in Clan history secured.



The rocky beaches of Nivkh Island were barren of everything but Ravens. The island was set aside for such purposes, containing nothing of value but space. Right now the remnants of a storm were sweeping the island, pelting it with heavy sheets of rain. The steady drone was a white noise threatening to lull Zillah to sleep.

Her comms crackled to life. "I have a gift for you, Star Colonel," came Juris's voice.

She snapped out of her fugue. "I have no patience for games, Juris. Spit it out."

"Your opponents have arrived. The Smoke Jaguars landed on the far side of the island. They appear to be forming a very convenient line of advance and coming for you."

"That is the first good news of the day. Well done, Juris."

"I live but to serve."

A quick flick of her wrist opened the channel to her fighters. "Star Commander Lawrence, the Smoke Jaguars have landed. They are yours to play with until my ground forces make contact. Good hunting." She changed channels, not bothering to wait for Lawrence's reply. "Sixth Stoop, our opponents have arrived. Let us show them our mettle."

Throttling her *Stormcrow* into a leisurely walk, Zillah led her Cluster from the fore. Her 'Mech Binaries were strung out in two lines abreast, heavily laden with Elementals. She knew the Smoke Jaguar force had a slight tonnage advantage, but that was the purpose of her fighters' strafing runs. And if her opponents wanted to embark on a long march that left them subject to repeated airstrikes, who was she to complain?

The rain began to clear just as her Cluster left the woods they had traversed, the Sixth Stoop emerging within sight of the Smoke Jaguar position.

The Smoke Jaguar Cluster had weathered the aerial attacks well, the mottled gray-on-gray hulls of their 'Mechs showing scarcely any damage at all. That would soon change.

"Lawrence, one more pass, then break clear. Lash Stars, choose your targets wisely. Whip Stars, forward. Elementals, drop once you are in range of the enemy. Engage!"

Missile, PPC, and laser fire speared out from the *Woodsman*, *Kingfisher*, and *Summoners* comprising her two Lash Stars. Most of the targeted Smoke Jaguar 'Mechs suffered damage, one *Hellbringer* succumbing to catastrophic leg damage and tumbling to the ground, where it lay smoking and inert.

The Smoke Jaguars, roused by the arrival of the main force of their opponents in this trial, responded in typical Smoke Jaguar fashion—by attacking. The return fire was intense but disciplined, honoring the rules of *zellbrigen*. Many Snow Raven machines suffered hits, but luckily none were felled.

Zillah raced in and pummeled an unengaged *Viper*, likely *isorla* from the Fire Mandrills, with her extended-range medium lasers. The lighter 'Mech absorbed the hits and returned fire, its small and medium lasers melting furrows in her armor. Twisting her torso and slowing her speed, Zillah ripped a burst from her Ultra-class autocannon at the Smoke Jaguar 'Mech, the high-explosive shells cratering and blasting open the *Viper's* armor. She quickly followed up with her medium lasers and was rewarded with a burst of green coolant and a dark stream of smoke. That meant heat sink and internal damage.

The Smoke Jaguar warrior refused to back down, reversing throttle and hitting Zillah with a full weapon spread. The damage failed to penetrate her armor, and she quickly finished the *Viper* off with several well-placed shots into its inner workings. The *Viper's* reactor spiked and shut down, removing it from the trial.

Returning her focus to the rest of the trial, she saw that things could be going better. Her Elementals had managed to down a *Summoner* before being drawn off into their own separate battle with the Smoke Jaguar Elementals. She spied one of her *Kingfishers* locked in a deadly duel with a newer *Gargoyle*.

A *Mist Lynx* jetted into range, soaring over her to land firing in her rear arc. The mix of short-range missiles and medium lasers savaged her armor and managed a lucky breach that gave her reactor a glancing blow. Despite the surge in waste heat, she spun and loosed a stream from her autocannon and half her lasers. The lighter Smoke Jaguar machine crumpled beneath her assault, both legs blown clear of its body.



Battle was a living thing and it was Ayelet's chosen environment. She waded her *Timber Wolf* into battle at half throttle, twisting her torso from side to side in search of targets. A lightweight *Kit Fox* caught her eye. It too was unengaged and in search of a foe. She obliged by ripping into it with her PPCs. The high-energy beams struck true, blasting great gobbets of melted armor to the ground where they lay smoking. The Snow Raven warrior was good, as they kept their machine upright and managed a return shot with their Gauss rifle, missing low. It plodded forward and scoured away at her with its medium lasers before firing a second Gauss round to greater effect than the first. The round smashed into her left leg, fracturing armor plate and stalling her forward movement. She wrenched on her controls, keeping her wounded *Timber Wolf* on its feet. She targeted her PPCs again, and the beams sliced into her opponent, liquefying armor and knocking the *Kit Fox* to the ground. It struggled to rise, but Ayelet would not allow that. She closed in and launched her SRM rack. The missiles destroyed what armor remained on the torso before wreaking havoc on the 'Mech's delicate inner structure. The *Kit Fox* slumped powerless to the ground. Satisfied, Ayelet moved on.

She passed by several duels before spying a *Woodsmen* OmniMech. The machine was outdated, her own *Timber Wolf* its intended replacement, yet it remained a worthy foe. Judging by its blackened armor, the *Woodsmen* had already faced one of her Jaguars, which was good, as it placed them on equal footing. The *Woodsmen* pilot noticed her attention and locked on. Luckily her *Timber Wolf* was still nimble enough to dodge the twinned PPCs, returning fire in kind. They danced around each other, sniping back and forth at each other. The *Woodsmen* pilot finally managed to land a shot with their large laser, burning a glowing gash into her torso armor.

Squeezing her joysticks, Ayelet brought her *Timber Wolf* into close range, bringing the rest of her weapons into play. She unleashed her SRMs and medium pulse lasers, cratering and wounding the Snow Raven machine. The *Woodsmen* staggered, and Ayelet advanced, hitting with her PPCs again, eager to finish it off.



Scanning the battlefield, Zillah knew her forces could win. It would be costly, but they could do it. Unfortunately that was not the plan. The key was to wait for the right moment and then to lose in a believable fashion. That moment emerged with the destruction of MechWarrior Sebile's *Woodsmen*. The aging 'Mech exploded violently as its reactor went critical, damaging several other nearby 'Mechs, mostly Snow Raven machines. The 'Mech responsible for that destruction was a *Timber Wolf*, surely with Star Colonel Kotare at its controls.

Opening a comm channel, Zillah addressed her opposite number. "Enough of this waste. Star Colonel Kotare, I challenge you to single combat. Let the victor of our duel settle this matter for all time."

Across the field, weapons fell silent as the warriors of both Clans awaited a response.

"Bargained well and done. Let none interfere."

"*Seyla.*"

The remaining 'Mechs of both Clusters fell back, forming a rough Circle of Equals around the combatants. Zillah entered the circle, still confident despite her damage. All she had to do was put on a good show.

Kotare's *Timber Wolf* entered from the opposite side of the circle. The two bird-legged 'Mechs stood facing each other. Zillah offered a passable bow then kicked her *Stormcrow* up to full throttle. She skirted the edge of the circle and angled her torso to keep Kotare in her forward arc. Twin PPCs lashed out from the *Timber Wolf*, but only one connected. Still, that was enough to virtually strip the armor from Zillah's left arm. She would have to be cautious or lose her autocannon.

Closing the distance, she countered with a volley from her laser array. All six medium lasers struck the Smoke Jaguar, slicing deep wounds into the *Timber Wolf's* armor. She was lining up her autocannon when an SRM salvo battered her. The missiles severed her left arm and took the autocannon with it. She wobbled while adjusting to the weight loss, keeping her 'Mech on its feet. She dodged and jettisoned her unused ammunition, hoping to give her heat levels a chance to lower before firing again.

A flurry of darts from the *Timber Wolf's* medium pulse lasers robbed her of that option. She brought her right arm up and triggered a full volley at the *Timber Wolf's* cockpit. A last minute move by Kotare saw the shots miss and instead hit the SRM rack. A violent sequence of explosions threw the *Timber Wolf* to the ground, but Kotare quickly levered it back to its feet, and Zillah let her.

The mangled *Timber Wolf* hunched forward, and Zillah sensed the other warrior's fury. It would be over soon.

Ignoring her computer's warning, Zillah fired her lasers again. Her heat spiked, but she managed a glancing blow to the cockpit with one laser while several others exploited the already-damaged right torso. Smoke spewed from the damaged innards, and yet the *Timber Wolf* remained upright and functional. Kotare was proving her reputation as a skilled pilot.

A glow at the tip of each arm prefaced the firing of her twin PPCs. The paired blast ripped into Zillah's lighter 'Mech, melting myomer bundles and destroying internal structures. Her *Stormcrow* sagged, but she kept it upright with a supreme effort until Kotare finished her off with another hail of pulse laser shots.

System panels exploded around Zillah as her *Stormcrow* lost power and slammed dead to the ground. Her command couch broke free of its mounting and pitched forward, crushing her legs.

Reaching up, she pulled her neurohelmet from her head. Sweat-soaked hair spilled into her eyes, but she did not care. Sparks showered down around her, but she had one last duty. Her comm system was still on backup power, so she signaled acknowledgment of her loss before allowing the pain in her legs to drag her under.



Ayelet's screens sparked and flickered, doing little to disguise the damage Zillah Howell had managed to inflict on her. She looked down at the shattered remains of her opponent's *Stormcrow*, impressed by her warrior spirit. Yes, the Howell line would be a fine addition to the Smoke Jaguar gene pool.

A light on her comm panel signaled the Raven's capitulation. Ayelet opened her own channel. "This trial is over. Star Colonel Zillah Howell has lost. As is my right as victor, I claim her as a bondsman. We will also claim as *isorla* any 'Mech that cannot leave the field of combat. You have all fought valiantly for a Bloodheritage not your own, and we honor you as foes."

She switched channels. "Star Captain Izar, do you live?"

"Aff, Star Colonel."

"Detail a Star to supervise our technicians. I will return to the DropShip with my bondsman."

"As you command."

DROPSHIP SWEEPING PAW

OUTBOUND TRAJECTORY

LUM

KERENSKY CLUSTER

26 FEBRUARY 2986

Now that the DropShip was underway, Ayelet finally had a chance to visit the medbay. Her own surviving warriors had sustained only minor injuries and been quickly discharged. Not so her bondswoman. Securely strapped into a hospital bed, Zillah Howell lay unconscious and swathed in bandages. Her legs were encased in devices to promote their rapid healing.

Ayelet turned to the medtech. "How is she?"

The young man quickly glanced at his terminal. "She will make a perfect recovery, Star Colonel. And she will suffer no complications from the fractures in her legs."

“Very good. Wake her.”

The technician’s eyes widened. “I...very well, Star Colonel.” He bent over a tray, prepared an injection, and inserted it into her IV drip. He then fussed with the casings on her legs.

The device monitoring Zillah’s vitals began beeping more rapidly, and her eyes fluttered before shooting open, though she appeared dazed and unfocused.

The former Snow Raven looked confused. “Why are we under thrust?”

Ayelet indulged in a smug smile as she leaned closer and tugged her uniform taut, making sure her Clan patches were readily visible. “Because we are departing Lum.”

A degree of clarity entered Zillah’s eyes as she stared at Ayelet. “Ah. You are taller than your holimage led me to believe.”

Ayelet’s smile faltered but quickly returned. “I am glad to see you still possess a sense of humor, bondswoman.” The confusion on the other woman’s face was most satisfying. “*Aff*, I have claimed you as *isorla*, Zillah Howell. You fought well, though you were defeated, far more directly than I expected for one of your former Clan. It impressed me, as has the audacity of your Bloodhouse. It is why I embarked on this trial, after all.”

Zillah’s eyes darted back and forth. “I...see.”

“I hope that you do. Adapt quickly, bondswoman, and I will see you restored to warrior status. For now, rest and heal. We will speak again on Gatekeeper.” Ayelet felt the exchange had gone well, but as Zillah slumped back, she had the tiniest of smiles on her face.



Zillah lay back, knowing there was a smile on her face. She could not believe her luck. Though she was now a Smoke Jaguar, this outcome actually advanced saKhan Peleshenko’s plan by several decades at least. The Unkindness would benefit from this as much as the Smoke Jaguars. Still, would she be able to endure life in a new Clan? Could she keep her honor intact in such a situation? Only time would tell. For now her only focus would be on healing.

HOWELL BLOOD CHAPEL
SVOBODA ZEMYLYA, STRANA MECHTY
KERENSKY CLUSTER
21 MARCH 2986

Despite having been Blooded nearly eight years ago, this was only Zillah’s second time inside the Blood Chapel. The lighting was almost

nonexistent. Small pockets of light illuminated highly detailed murals depicting heroic exploits of various Howell warriors, or passages from *The Remembrance* pertaining to the Family. Leading the procession was a scarred and age-ravaged man. He was entirely bald and held one arm stiffly against his chest. He wore the Snow Raven ceremonial uniform of white trousers and jacket, covered by an intricate cape of white raven feathers. This was Joseph McKenna, the octogenarian Loremaster of Clan Snow Raven. He strode easily through the darkness, which some would say was his natural environment.

Walking beside him was the fair-haired Loremaster of the Smoke Jaguars, George Ismiril. He was younger than McKenna by several decades and had only recently ousted his predecessor from the post. Ismiril took in everything about the Blood Chapel with a warrior's eyes, shortsighted eyes. Ismiril was one of those who failed to realize a Loremaster must be more than a warrior. Like McKenna, he was clad in the ceremonial garb of his Clan, in his case overlapping shades of dark gray shrouded in the mottled pelt of his totem. They advanced together, and Zillah found herself reminded of the ancient yin-yang symbol.

Ayelet Kotare, as victor of the trial, accompanied the Loremaster as both escort and guard. It was she who had decided to bring Zillah along as a calculated insult to the members of her former Clan. Ayelet was dressed for ceremony as well, but Zillah was forced to wear a simple laborer's jumpsuit as a sign of her status, the bondcord her only decoration.

A door slid open and blinding light spilled out into the passageway. Both Zillah and McKenna had been prepared for it, but Kotare and Ismiril had been caught off guard and blinked rapidly to adjust their vision.

Tottering out from the light was a decrepit old woman who made McKenna seem young. She was clad in white robes, the cut of which displayed faint hints of feathers. Her voice grated out, raspy and difficult to hear. "Who comes to this sacred place?"

McKenna bowed his head and spread his arms wide, speaking to the crone's feet. "Honored Keeper, I am Joseph McKenna, Loremaster of our Clan. I bring several not of the Unkindness with me. They are George Ismiril, the Loremaster of the Smoke Jaguars, Star Colonel Ayelet Kotare, and Bondswoman Zillah Howell of your own Family."

Despite knowing exactly what was happening, the old woman, a scientist by training, widened her eyes in surprise. "What is the purpose of this intrusion?"

McKenna continued reciting the script he had been given. "We come for the legacy of Liam Howell, he who was once a Khan of our Clan. Warriors of the Smoke Jaguars have successfully fought for possession of his legacy. As laid down in the laws of the Founder, George Ismiril comes on the behalf of his Clan to lay claim to it."

The crone nodded and produced from within her robes an intricately carved box of banded Circean stone and held it out toward Ismiril, who examined it with hungry eyes.

"Do you bear the legacy of Liam Howell?" Ismiril barked the question at her.

She nodded and gave the ritual response. "This box contains the legacy of Liam Howell."

Ismiril stepped closer to her, eyes on the box. "I am empowered by my Clan to accept the legacy of Liam Howell, conscious of the honor it confers upon me." He reached out and took the stone box and, in a breach of protocol, lifted the lid for all to clearly see the small genetic sample and the machinery maintaining it. Ismiril closed it with more reverence than he had opened it.

The old woman snorted contemptuously. "The legacy you seek is contained within. Take it with our blessings, and leave this place."

Gesturing back the way they had come, McKenna said "You are satisfied, *quiaff*? Shall we depart?"

"Aff, I am uncomfortable here."

For Zillah, the walk back seemed shorter than the walk in. Emerging into the midmorning light of Strana Mechty's primary, she cast a longing look back the way she had come. McKenna caught her eye and gave her a sympathetic shrug. There was nothing to be done about her status.

"Make wise use of that legacy," McKenna said by way of farewell.

Ismiril turned back. "We shall. His line shall be merged with the very best in our Clan. In the days to come, the Howell line will do momentous things in the name of the Jaguar."

An honor guard of Elementals formed up around the trio of Smoke Jaguars. As fit her bondsman status, Zillah shuffled along behind Ayelet. Her bondholder was in deep conversation with the Loremaster, ignoring her charge.

As they approached the grand pyramid of the Smoke Jaguar genetics facility, Ayelet turned to her. "Only scientists and warriors of the Clan may enter the premises. You will await my return here."

"As you wish," Zillah said with head bowed.

She watched the procession depart, making their way through the massive doors and disappearing from sight. The triple loop of the bondcord chafed at her wrist, but she knew it would not be for long. While she was unlikely to attain her former rank, she would do whatever it took to regain her warrior status. Once she accomplished that, she would be free to funnel information to other members of the Family. The Family would benefit.

And the Family was all.





ASSASSINATION PROTOCOL: KAFKA

DANIEL ISBERNER

—**Gladiator Gazette, June 3144**

Welcome back to “Assassination Protocol.” Last month we covered Brian Fargol, the “Sniper Killer.” This month, we have someone very special to talk about.

In 3084, when information from the newly formed Republic of the Sphere’s central criminal database was leaked, a few of the names in those documents stood out. While all of those criminals have either been taken into custody or are dead by now, there is one exception: “Kafka.” Sixty years have passed, but no one has apprehended the man, woman, or—as is the most recent theory—group.

Kafka has been active for over a century now. While we can assume pretty much all public information about him, her, or them is mere speculation, one thing is certain: Kafka is no longer the person who first wore that name. While not biologically impossible, Kafka’s kill count is too high for cryogenics to explain their longevity.

Kafka’s career started in the early 3050s, and while the exact date is unknown, the earliest mention of the name was on New Avalon in 3052. Two civilian aircraft producers were fighting over a merger when one of those companies’ CEOs died in a car crash. Files released decades later, showed that the car got not in a simple crash, but was blown to pieces by an armored vehicle. The vehicle was completely destroyed, but the person driving it escaped, leaving no traces of DNA or anything else. The sole piece of evidence: a first-edition copy of Franz Kafka’s *Betrachtung*, most likely forgotten in a hurried escape. One of the investigators scribbled the name “Kafka” in as a possible suspect, and the name stuck. The incident was covered up, but the company merger went through, far quicker than anyone had expected, netting billions to stock holders.

For the next couple of years, Kafka went on to make a name for himself; not in the criminal sector of the Inner Sphere, but in very different circles. If you were rich and needed someone gone, you hired Kafka. (Information uncovered during research for this article points to this still being true today.)

The existence of Kafka became known to the general public in August 3059. Pat Thine, a bookie who managed a large gambling syndicate on Solaris VII, got arrested for hiring someone to kill the Solaris Police Department investigator in charge of a criminal investigation against him. During questioning, Thine admitted hiring an assassin who called himself Kafka.

His lawyers tried to have the confession thrown out of court, due to the police allegedly torturing him during questioning. Whether they would have succeeded was never resolved; Thine died in police custody the same day, his mouth sewn shut and his bank accounts completely cleaned out, with the exception of thirteen C-bills. How Kafka managed to infiltrate SPD custody and kill a suspect remains unresolved.

In January 3060, when the death of Morgan Hasek-Davion hit the news, Kafka was still very present in the minds of Inner Sphere citizens, and many tabloid rumors claimed Kafka was the duke's killer. The rumors quickly died down when Alexa Mat, chief financial officer of Yori 'Mech Works, was assassinated in February 3060. As a change from the usual Franz Kafka reprints left at the scene, another first-edition copy of *Das Schloss* was found next to the Minolta 9000 Advanced Sniper System used to assassinate her. To this day, no one knows who hired Kafka to kill Mat.

When the Republic's Most Wanted files were leaked in December 3084, Kafka had already succeeded in killing dozens of lawyers during a company outing in Prefecture IV, all of them belonging to a single law firm: Grame, Pale and Schmidt. It is unclear whether the real target was a single lawyer and the others a mere distraction or if someone wanted to cripple Grame, Pale and Schmidt to prevent them from pursuing cases. Initial suspicion for hiring Kafka fell on James Grame, the sole surviving senior partner of the law firm, but his tendency to spout his own name again and again during conversations led to investigators discounting him, due to mental incompetency.

While the killing of lawyers may seem rather boring, what made this assassination stand out was Kafka's escape. Warned Kafka was in the prefecture, local military forces were on high alert and sent out two aerospace fighters to intercept Kafka's VTOL once it appeared on radar. They came too late, however, as Kafka's work was already done.

Kafka dodged the fighters' first pass, brought their VTOL around, and shot its rotary autocannon directly into the cockpit of the leading fighter. The fighter spun out of control, colliding with its wingman. To this day, that shot is the source of much debate. BattleROMs show what happened—there is no doubt about that—but whether the resulting

midair crash was mere coincidence or Kafka actually aimed and timed their shot with such precision is unknown.

For the next five decades, discussion of Kafka died off somewhat. Some assassinations were attributed to him, but nothing really made the news until 3136. Max Brod, a star reporter for *Bild Von Tharkad*, was killed in a gas explosion the day before a long article series he had written about Kafka was to be published. While the police originally saw no foul play, the paper's editor in chief was certain Brod had been killed by Kafka to stop the publication of the articles.

Erik Schmidt's investigation into Brod's death led to a very different conclusion, though. Not only did it uncover that Max Brod had not died in the explosion—DNA evidence was clear on that—it also uncovered information demonstrating that Brod was a completely made-up person.

The man known as a rising star in press circles did not exist until the day he showed up at the *Bild von Tharkad* offices. This revelation led Schmidt to one conclusion in his investigation: Max Brod was not *killed* by Kafka, he *was* Kafka! This also sparked the theory that Kafka is a group rather than an individual, because while working as Max Brod, Kafka was also somehow fulfilling contracts in other parts of the Inner Sphere.

See you all next month, when we cover none other than Kathrine Steiner-Davion.





FLASH'D HIS SABRE BARE

JAMES SIMAKAS

JUMBO-CLASS DROPSHIP *BULL MARKET*

TRADER'S LANDING, CALDARIUM

THE PERIPHERY

25 OCTOBER 3036

It was the silence that made Mark look up.

DropShips were never silent. Even landed, the steady tread of exoskeleton-clad stevedores could be felt through a DropShip's decks—the faint rhythm of life. The tense murmur of conversation on *Bull Market's* mess deck was her last vestige of animation, and it had just died abruptly. Mark set his noteputer aside warily as the crowd focused on the man stepping into the room—the skipper himself. He sagged under their gaze for a moment, and spoke:

"Does anybody here know how to fly an aerospace fighter?"

The room took a single shuddering breath as they drew the statement in.

Then all hell broke loose.

Mark pressed his back against the bulkhead as the crowd bellowed as one, cries and demands colliding into one discordant torrent of noise. They pressed forward, pale faces and wild eyes betraying their panic before the crisp *kerchak!* of an action cycling chilled the atmosphere. The would-be mob froze, paralyzed by the Rugan SMG the executive officer was leveling at them. Passengers and crew exchanged silent stares as the ejected round rolled sedately across the deck.

"Does *anybody* here," the captain repeated, "know how to fly an aerospace fighter?"

Mark sank onto his stool again as someone safely in the back of the room demanded to know why, prompting a murmuring echo

through the crowd. The captain did his best to meet their eyes. "The jets didn't make it through."

"...what?" one man wondered plaintively, tugging nervously on his crisp tie. "What?!"

"What the hell do you mean?" demanded a woman in miner's coveralls, fists clenching at her side. "What the hell do you mean they didn't make it through?"

Intercepted, Mark thought in the heartbeat's hesitation before the skipper spoke: "Shot down. They were shot down."

The crowd sickened as the news sank in; reeling against benches and bulkheads and each other. Mark glanced at his noteputer, a half-finished letter home still glowing on the screen.

"What about the tanks?" the businessman asked, twisting his tie in both hands now. "You still have the tanks, right?"

"They'll never make it through the pass," the coverall-clad woman spat as she sank onto a bench, leaning back against the table.

"Those are Bulldogs," someone objected with a faint air of knowledge. "Those rubes can't possibly—"

"Those 'rubes' have our entire remaining stock of explosives," the woman spat back. "And the drills to set them. And the locals we trained to do it. I've got a feeling a few thousand tons of granite will take out a few tanks just fine." She fetched her battered suitcase a mean kick, frustration plain on her face.

"Aren't there other paths?" the businessman almost pleaded. "They are tanks..."

"They're watching everywhere," another miner said. "We ran into a roadblock on our way here. They had a cannon or something set up. Don't think they knew dump trucks can drive in reverse just as fast as they do in forward, or they might've lit us up the second they saw us. We backtracked to a side road we leveled out last year when we were dropping boreholes on the east ridgeline, then hiked the last few clicks here."

"Then let's just leave!" the businessman almost wailed. "Just turn on the engines and get the hell out of here!"

"Or maybe you can just pay them off before they get trigger happy and blow us all sky high!" the angry woman opined as she sprang to her feet again. "You money-grubbing bastards are why they're so pissed off to begin with!"

"We've traded here ten years running without issue, and the second you corporate clowns show up it all goes to hell!" the XO snarled, hefting his weapon. "Wonder why that is?"

A mutter moved through them as the air soured. The XO's finger slipped inside the trigger guard as people a few rows back dipped into coverall pockets for wrenches. The skipper was just reaching for the intercom button near the hatch when Mark finally raised his voice.

"I can."

The crowd twisted around to stare, suddenly off-balance. Mark felt the weight of their gaze settling on his shoulders. Heart sinking, he avoided meeting their anxious eyes to focus on the solemn skipper who was studying him in turn. The man's salt-and-pepper stubble and sunken eyes betrayed his weariness—but he was no longer sagging.

Mark turned his noteputer face-down on the mess table and stood up slowly, squaring his broad shoulders to the room.

"I can fly," he repeated firmly. "Howick planetary militia. Nine years."

The captain studied him for a moment more before sparing the crowd a sidelong glance. Then he nodded. "Outside."

The crowd parted as Mark strode through, following the captain into the passageway outside. He scanned the crew pressed quietly against the bulkheads, padding-wrapped wrenches and pillowcases filled with bolts clenched tight in their hands. The captain strode past without a glance, leading Mark into the personnel lift. He stabbed the button for the main cargo deck, watching the lights tick downward on the age-stained control console.

"So," he said to the wall. "What did you fly?"

"Steinadlers, for the first year. Logged a little time in *Lightnings*. But mostly *Sabres*. Eighteen hundred hours, all told."

The captain gave no reaction. "Any combat experience?"

"One-point-one-two-five kills."

"...an *eighth*?"

"Got the drop on a pirate *Leopard* just after they hit atmo. I bagged one of the escorts, and we all got credit for the DropShip." Mark shrugged. "Not much of a fight, but it plays well at parties."

The captain nodded slightly. "Hmm."

The lift rattled to a halt. They stood still and silent, the broad man's eyes boring into the captain's back.

"Why'd you quit?" the captain wondered.

"Got married. Needed something safer."

The captain turned around, a wad of C-bills appearing from his jacket pocket. "Four thousand. That's everything in the ship's safe—and about half what those crazy bastards are demanding."

Mark's gaze bored into the captain without sparing the cash a glance. "What downed your jets?"

The captain's mouth tightened. "They've got a merc. Aerospace fighter."

Mark nodded. "Type?"

"A light one. That's all I heard before my boys ejected."

Mark's eyes darkened, thinking.

He looked at the cash.

"Well, let's see it."

The captain led him through the cavernous cargo bay, the huge grain bins left empty, discarded tools and exoskeletons left lying

by the half-completed conveyor system that should've been filling them by now. They strode down the wide ramp of the cargo door and into the vast shadow of the *Bull Market's* towering hull. The barren little spaceport's weather-faded tarmac was strewn with abandoned equipment: tractors hitched to trailers groaning with grain, cherry pickers perched next to exposed maintenance panels on the ship, and two large cargo trucks that'd been caught by the crisis only half loaded with off-world consumer goods destined for distant cities. The latter had been arranged in a vee formation yawning towards the ship, shielding something beneath a big tarp.

Towards this they strode, still silence underlined by the brooding growl of idling engines; the two Bulldogs flanking the DropShip patiently panned their huge lasers back and forth, keeping a watchful eye on the road leading toward the mountain pass. Both men glanced back, their napes itching nervously, but the towering mountain range was concealed behind *Bull Market's* vast bulk.

The captain reached the tarp first. Scaling a stepladder, he flung the tarp back, revealing the pointed nose of a *Sabre*.

"It's scheduled for delivery to a planetary garrison two jumps on," he explained. "Well used, but in good shape." He leaned onto the armored hull to push the tarp back a bit more.

Studying it carefully, Mark frowned as his eyes found every dent, ding and discoloration on the fighter's worn hide. "You have any techs rated for this kind of thing?"

"Three," the captain replied as he hopped off the ladder. "Including me. Most of my boys are decent astechs, too. Have to be, with this bitch." He jerked his thumb at the hulking DropShip. "We've gone over it with a fine-toothed comb. She'll fly."

Mark stepped past him and up the ladder. The canopy opened at his touch with a quiet hiss of hydraulics, welcoming him into the dark cocoon of the cockpit. He leaned over, studying the worn and well-patched seat, the solemn, dark multifunction displays, the sweat-discolored joystick. The captain studied him, knowing he was weighing nine years of flying fighters against a decade piloting desks.

Mark looked up at the *Bull Market*, its titanic bulk backlit by the sinking sun. "They built those *Jumbos* tough. Only reason they're still around." He glanced around at the stillborn loading operation, then down at the captain. "You're *sure* we can't make a break for it?"

The skipper shook his head. "We took half the reactors offline for maintenance—we do it every chance we get with this old bitch. They're watching us from the mountains, probably with thermals—they threatened to spread us all over the 'port if they see her heating up." He sighed, glancing up at the ancient mass of his livelihood. "Even if we could, she *is* old. We take a shell to the wrong spot before we clear the pad..." He shook his head, describing little twirly somersaults with his fingertip.

Opening his mouth, Mark made to reply—but paused.

“The JumpShip won’t wait for us,” the captain stressed. “They’ve got a schedule to keep. Next jump on has an HPG, but unless your company’s willing to hire mercs to bail us out...?”

The ex-pilot frowned, hand still resting on the *Sabre’s* canopy.

“Even if they did, it’d be expensive as hell,” the captain stressed. “Might wipe out all the profits of a little operation like yours.”

Mark’s frown deepened.

“There’s only two reasons men take roughneck backwater jobs like this—and you don’t sound like someone that came for the fresh air.” The C-bills came out again, smacking against the captain’s palm crisply. “We’ve got some ordnance for our Defenders—HE and cluster. You don’t have to tackle the merc—just dive-bomb their damned artillery and we can get off this godforsaken rock.” The cash cracked against his palm again. “Four. Thousand.”

Mark stood silently by the cockpit, eyes caressing the switches and toggles. In the deepening shadow beneath *Bull Market* he seemed to be merging with the old fighter; quiet and statue-still.

Then he stirred, slipping into the cockpit with the fluidity of long practice, hands already reaching for the preflight checklist tucked by the seat.

“Load me up.”



The fighter hummed quietly as it came to life.

It started with the faint thrill of static along his nape as the magnetic fields surged and steadied. Capacitors discharged with high-pitched whines, pumping lasers that flash-ignited hydrogen to tens of millions of degrees in the engine’s core. System readouts leaped and danced as the ship creaked, the tungsten-carbide engine shield expanding slightly as it heated up. Cooling systems came online as power surged into them, imparting their quiet hum to the airframe as the Nissan 225 power plant warmed up. The pilot went through the post-start checklist; flicking the stick about to watch the control surfaces flex; working the throttle’s thumb stick and listening for the ventral exhaust ports to snap open and closed. The old bird was stretching, working the stiffness out of her myomers and metal.

The captain’s head appeared over the side, wiping sweat from his brow. “They’re all shackled up good and proper. She check out okay?”

“That she does,” the pilot replied.

“...never got your name,” the captain observed.

“Mark. Mark Adler.”

“Peter Duchamps,” the captain returned. He reached into the cockpit and they shared a brief, firm handshake. “Watch your ass out there, Mark. We’re counting on you.”

"And I'm counting on you," Mark said with a tight smirk. "All the way to four thousand."

The captain nodded somberly, holding his gaze for a moment, then leaped clear of the ladder, shouting to the crew to clear out. Men bolted across the wide tarmac for the shelter of *Bull Market's* thick, armored hide as Mark eased the throttle forward, the hum of the engine rising into a steady roar. The *Sabre* rose slowly; balancing precariously on a plume of superheated plasma. Mark managed the throttle gingerly; escaping the ground backwash swiftly as possible without overshooting the DropShip's concealing bulk. The VTOL ducts only had a few degrees of gimbal, so he nudged the nose down, letting the fighter drift forward. Mark let the nose drift upward as he eased the thrust from ducts back to main thruster slowly, the DropShip's vast bulk growing before him. Once he'd scraped up as much forward speed—and lift—as the space allowed, he laid on power cautiously, mindful of his bombload. The *Sabre* thundered over *Bull Market's* rounded nose with scant meters to spare, darting from its growing shadow like a conjured dove. Mark laid on the throttle, pointing his nose at the cleft in the mountains where the sun was settling, brilliant and blood red.

If the locals' nerve broke and they opened fire, every second between him and his bomb run was going to count.

Mark kept the *Sabre* glued to the deck, racing toward the first waypoint of the simple search plan he'd programmed earlier. Craning his neck back, he scanned the sky above intently. He flew with peripheral vision, quick twitches of the stick sliding the *Sabre* around hillocks and over ridgelines in unconscious reaction to the picture-in-picture feed his helmet's visor fed him. The mountain range Mark had come light-years to mine was volcanically formed, a crazy patchwork of broken slopes and narrow valleys lousy with all manner of rare-metal ores. The metal drove the magscan wild, crags scattered and disrupted radar returns, and the uneven warming the jagged terrain received over the day rendered a nightmarish kaleidoscope on passive thermals. Sweat soaked into the thick padding of Mark's musty old helmet as he dodged mountain peaks from the corner of his eye while scouring the skies for his foe, knowing the merc would be doing the same.

A wink of light; long slanting sunbeams glinting from armored cockpit glass high above.

"There you are," Mark breathed, watching the long, thin contrail fade away as the diving fighter hit the warmer, denser air of lower altitudes. Mark settled back into his seat, watching the incoming bandit on the compressed 360-degree scan. With their target glued to the deck, the pilot was opting for a level bounce, plummeting earthward on idle throttles to pick up speed without tripping Mark's IR scanners, then leveling out behind before running him down, guns blazing. Mark waited, nerves singing as he judged angles, distance, and velocity by intuition—then he thumbed the bomb release.

The iron bombs peeled off the rack in orderly fashion, air-braking fins popping out to let their delivery craft escape their blast radius. The first one plowed into ragged granite only a half kilometer ahead of the incoming bandit. Mark felt a moment of satisfaction as the narrow fighter jinked up sharply as the rest of his stick popped off, hurling shrapnel and gravel high into the air. He slammed stick and rudder the instant the last bomb fell free, twisting his *Sabre* into a tight, violent barrel roll, a single swift spiral through the air. The bandit's fusion drive rattled his canopy as it roared past, not even bothering with a snapshot on the impossible target. His timing perfect, Mark leveled out heartbeats after his attacker overshot, flooring the throttle on his unburdened *Sabre* as he drew a bead on the fleeting bandit. Emerald beams lanced through the evening sky, but the range was already long, such was the mercenaries speed; clean misses. He laid on the throttle, extending out of range as Mark pursued. The *Sabre's* stick thrummed in his hand like an unruly thoroughbred as it pushed past safe acceleration limits, yanking and twisting at the bit. His battle computer chirped brightly as the bandit turned sharply to reengage, giving the sensors a good look at its planform.

Centurion, CNT-1D.

This was going to be *close*.

Both pilots eased off the throttle as they hurtled towards each other at high Mach, their sonic booms echoing fell and terrible through the mountain canyons below. Mark opted for another tight barrel roll as his foe leaned on the rudders for a modest sideslip, both of them tracking for a snapshot as they tried to avoid the return fire. Emerald beams slashed wide of the mark as they screamed through the merge, the *Centurion* already rolling right.

Mark snapped left and pulled towards the merc's nose, his *Sabre's* frame creaking and groaning through the maximum-G turn. Legs and belly burned as he squeezed with all his strength, fighting against seven gravities of force sucking blood from his brain. He dropped flaps and dipped the nose for the gravity assist, granite crags clawing for him as scant altitude evaporated. His *Sabre* shuddered against the ragged edge of stalling, tucking inside the *Centurion's* turn. Fighter and pilot trembled at the precipice of peak performance, clawing for the narrow margin of a front-quarter shot—

But the *Centurion* flashed across the nose at a right angle, vapor trailing from its wingtips. With narrow wings it turned wide, but *fast*. Mark rolled through inverted to reverse his turn, the *Centurion* already tucking into its own switchback. Eyes locked on each other through their canopy tops, both pilots pulled toward each other again. Mark's tighter first turn had put him a little behind the *Centurion*, but the merc was good and the angles steep; slicing their ship across Mark's gunsight like a wraith. The pair rolled, reversed and turned in again, weaving past one another's tails. The compact *Centurion* rolled swifter than

Mark's *Sabre*; he'd soon slip ahead of the merc's guns. Mark might match the merc's sinuous tacking via tighter turning—if he dropped flaps and popped his spoilers. Stall-fighting wingtip to wingtip, clawing for slender snapshots was no way to win the Scissors maneuver, not against something with twice his *Sabre's* armor.

As Mark rolled into his next turn he pulled up as well as sideways, tracing a broad corkscrew through the sky. The *Centurion* followed suit, pitching up into its own barrel roll. The two fighters traced a double helix through the twilight sky as they spiraled around one another. Mark's eyes burned as he watched the *Centurion* suspended motionless above him, the pilot's downturned visor returning his gaze. Earth and sky revolved around them for eternal heartbeats, their machines seeming to glide as they worked their sticks like scalpels. The old *Centurion* had less power, but down and dirty in atmo, its sleek lines induced less drag. It was all down to skill now.

And Mark was a decade out of practice.

The merc was *good*, not squandering a joule of thrust or a gram of lift—and they were gaining. The *Centurion* hung at the top of every spiral a heartbeat longer; slid around the bottom a touch cleaner. Mark's body was already beginning to stiffen, the knife-edge vigilance sapping his strength swiftly. The scant space he'd won with his first sharp turn was almost gone now. He was slipping ahead by centimeters—and there was no escape. The merc was watching, waiting to pounce when Mark made a break for it—not even a *Sabre* could outrun laser light. And this close to the deck, there was nowhere to dive. Mark's mind spun madly as he sought a way out, a way to survive, a way to fight his way past the faceless merc and back to the *Bull Market*, back to a third of a year's pay, back to his family in settled space. The granite mountains he'd mapped for months were flashing past in moments, the *Centurion* hovering fixed and inevitable overhead as they wheeled through the rolling Scissors.

And then he saw it.

As Mark rolled over the top, floating above the *Centurion*, he yanked the stick into the back corner violently and slammed the throttle past the emergency stops. The Nissan 255 bellowed as the *Sabre* punched into emergency acceleration, screaming out of the sky toward cold granite below. The merc had slid their tinted visor up in the darkening twilight, affording a glimpse of their wide-eyed glance as Mark flashed past, rolling as he dove. The *Sabre* shuddered and groaned as Mark pulled out, diverting thrust to VTOL ducts to get the nose up a little faster. Jagged granite walls flashed past on each side as the *Sabre* vanished into the darkness. Mark spared no glance for the bottom camera feed nor the radar altimeter—he was watching the broken jags of the granite peaks, dark silhouettes rising to swallow the fading twilight.

Then they were gone, vanishing far below as his *Sabre* screamed into a zoom-climb. Mark flashed past the *Centurion* as it rolled over the top of its latest barrel roll, lofting high above the merc. He yanked the stick back hard as he crested his own roll, his spiral growing sharply elliptical as gravity helped pull his nose earthward. The *Centurion's* engine glowed in the lower right quarter of Mark's canopy as he scanned the earth swiftly. Long shadows from the rocky ridgelines crosshatched the terrain with light and shadow, forcing him to rip through his memories in a few heartbeats before picking one to trust. The canyons loomed up and swallowed his *Sabre*—then he was battling his fighter with every control and instinct he knew, pulling her out and twisting her nose for a gap in the rough ridgeline he felt rather than saw. Jagged rock claws reached upwards—and then vanished beneath and behind as Mark thundered up into his second steep yo-yo maneuver.

Above-right the *Centurion* loomed, barely a quarter-turn ahead now. Mark's gloved hand creaked on the throttle wheel as the *Centurion* reached the top of its next roll. Aerospace fighters could stand on their tail and scream into space if they wanted; if the merc got cute, they could just keep climbing straight up instead of rolling on their back for another spiral, ready to nip Mark's tail when his faster *Sabre* charged out ahead and above. Mark saw the *Centurion's* angle of attack slacken and thumbed the trigger, laser light flashing over the merc's belly. Thinking better of it the merc pulled into their loop again, away from Mark's gunsight. The *Sabre* rattled as Mark gave her free rein—a hammering heart and shaking arms told him he needed to end this, *now*. The battered old fighter seemed to float in air, backlit by the burnished bronze sky—and then it tucked into the final barrel roll, g-forces seeming to squeeze the must out of the worn g-suit as Mark pulled up hard, the wounded *Centurion* finally drifting downward toward his reticule. Mark's world narrowed into the gunsight and the small diamond marking his locked target, body and mind wire-taut, ready to twitch the gun pipper onto any last-ditch dodge the bandit might try. Mark's finger tightened on the trigger as the green marks merged—and then the *Centurion* lit up like a Christmas tree, every nav light aglow. Mark stayed tense on the trigger as he slowed and saddled up on the merc, wary for tricks. When the undercarriage opened up and the landing gear dropped, his finger relaxed—the universal surrender sign, older than spaceflight.

Mark caught his breath, shaking sense back into his head as sweat chilled on his skin. At last, he thumbed the radio switch.

"Okay, junior. Let's give your buddies a little airshow."



"Feel free to count it," Captain Duchamps offered as the wad of cash hit the table. "God knows you earned it. Four grand."

Mark sipped at his coffee, fanning the bills with his thumb thoughtfully. "Three," he decided.

"Three?" the XO wondered with raised brow. He was leaning against the counter on the far side of *Bull Market's* little galley, tapping the side of his slung SMG idly. "Sure you don't want to count it slower?"

Mark smiled. "Three kills. The capture counts as one. Homemade howitzers barely count, but they *do* count. Say, point-one-two-five kills. If I claim seven, so that puts me at three kills, even."

The captain's brow hiked higher as he took a seat across from Mark. "Why not claim all twelve?"

Mark gave him a tired smile. "Because I'm tired of explaining one-eighth of a kill at every social event."

"What about our pilots?" the XO interjected. "Are they coughing them up?"

"Already on their way," Duchamps confirmed. "It helps that hotshot here ran off the locals without killing anyone. I was sure they'd lynch them out of spite, if nothing else."

"Took some real guts," the XO allowed as he lifted the carafe from the coffee maker. "That low pass. Weren't you worried they had AA guns or something?"

Mark held out his mug for a refill. "Figured with their own merc flying lead they'd hold their fire till I'd spotted them. And if they didn't—" He shrugged. "Well, he was in the lead. Once I'd eyeballed the gun pits and made sure the crews had legged it, the rest was target practice." He sampled his coffee and grimaced approvingly—spacer brew was an acquired taste. "Speaking of, had any more trouble with them?"

"Not a peep," Captain Duchamps gloated. "We've still got the Bulldogs plus the *Sabre*, which means we rule this rock. We can take our time now."

"So you'll break even?" Mark inquired.

"Better. Your boss negotiated to evac your whole operation, your whole refined stockpile and all the equipment. I'm taking the two truckloads of goods still on the tarmac, and that still leaves us room for almost all the grain."

"We lost the attack planes," the XO pointed out.

"But we've got the *Centurion*."

"We can auction it," the XO allowed. "But what're we gonna do with the jackass in the brig? Space 'im?"

"I was thinking of hiring him," Duchamps replied.

Mark and the XO stared incredulously, then tried to object at once. Duchamps silenced them with a curt shake of his head. "I lost my attack jets, and I just had an object lesson in what a single aerospace fighter can do."

The XO shook his head. "Why not hire *him*?" he said, pointing at Mark. "He *won*."

Mark chuckled, shaking his head. "Nah. Just got lucky. Dogfighting's a young man's game. I don't have the stamina or the eyesight for it anymore."

Duchamps slid a sly glance over the middle-aged man sitting across from him. "Looked like your eyesight was fine during that canyon dive."

"That's because I've been flying a VTOL through 'em for six months for the company, and that clown hadn't," Mark countered. "I think I see those ridgelines in my damned sleep. If not for that, he'd have won."

"But you *did* win," Duchamps observed. "Watched your mission recording." Standing with a sigh, he ran a hand through his graying, close-cropped hair and sighed. "But, you've got a family, and you've got your pay." He beckoned to the XO. "Let's go see our guest. I talk, you pat your gun all thoughtful like, see if we can't get a good rate." He paused at the hatch to the galley to give Mark one last nod. "Don't spend it all in one place, now."

Mark fanned the wad of C-bills again as his coffee cooled, forgotten. Four thousand dead precentors—over half a year's pay—for three minutes of combat.

Age and eyesight aside, Mark had to admit it was a pretty good hourly rate.



CN10-B CENTURION

Mass: 55 tons

Chassis: Corean Model KL77-M Endo Steel

Power Plant: DAV 220

Cruising Speed: 43 kph

Maximum Speed: 64 kph

Jump Jets: None

Jump Capacity: None

Armor: StarGuard III with CASE

Armament:

1 Mydron Excel LB 10-X Autocannon

1 Luxor 3R LRM 10

1 Photech 806c Medium Laser

1 Sutel Precision Line Medium Pulse Laser

Manufacturer: Corean Enterprises

Primary Factory: New Avalon

Communications System: Corean Transband-J9

Targeting and Tracking System: Corean B-Tech with Artemis IV

A workhorse of the Federated Commonwealth, the *Centurion* is a multirole trooper 'Mech. Alongside heavier versions of the *Hollander* and *JagerMech*, the CN10-B was quickly developed to create a more resilient 'Mech in the fight against the Clans.

Capabilities

In essence the *Centurion* CN10-B is a slower but better-armed and armored version of the CN9-D. Massing five tons heavier than the CN9, the CN10 is mostly constructed from its sibling's surplus parts; even the endo steel frame is just a modified version of its progenitor's. Using known parts enabled the 'Mech to be built in record time and also kept costs down. Finally, by creating a virtually identical-looking 'Mech, that even Clan sensors would be hard pressed to detect the difference, the engineers hoped the resulting confusion would lead to tactical advantages.

A rear-facing medium pulse laser is all that separates the armament of the CN10-B and CN9-D, with the main difference between the two models being the 10-B's extra resilience. Lacking a fragile extra-light engine and mounting over 20 percent more armor, the 10-B is often known simply as the "armor variant."

Deployment

The CN10's trial by fire came in May 3059 during Operations Bird Dog and Bulldog. An ad hoc company of the First FedSuns Armored Cavalry landed on Virentofta as part of the Bird Dog attacks, masquerading as the unknown McDaniel's Group. The Cavalry fought

a guerrilla campaign against the Smoke Jaguars' 151st Garrison Cluster, and their CN10s proved to be key factor in their survival. They tested the Jaguars' defenses to provide intelligence for the main assault force, and also raided Jaguar stockpiles, causing Clan commanders to spread their forces across a wide front. This proved to be somewhat of a double-edged sword though, as the scattered Omega Galaxy warriors fought to the death when the relief troops landed, marking a costly end to the battle.

On Port Arthur, the CN10s likewise performed admirably in the face of overwhelming odds. Having expected light resistance, the first battalion of the First Davion Guards were shocked to find the Jaguars' entire 168th Garrison Cluster on-world, particularly after having a DropShip downed during landing. Fortunately, a well-orchestrated campaign allowed Yankee and Zulu Companies to systematically cut the Jaguars' supply and communication lines while liberating work camps and aiding resistance cells as they went. The fight culminated with Zulu Company successfully holding the starport long enough to allow reinforcements to land and shatter the 168th utterly. The CN10's sheer versatility enabled the Guards to persevere, with the battle itself being hailed as a textbook action.

Following the Great Refusal and the reduction of the Clan threat, interest in the CN10 waned. Corean Enterprises continues to produce the 'Mech sporadically, usually when left with a glut of shared parts.

Variants

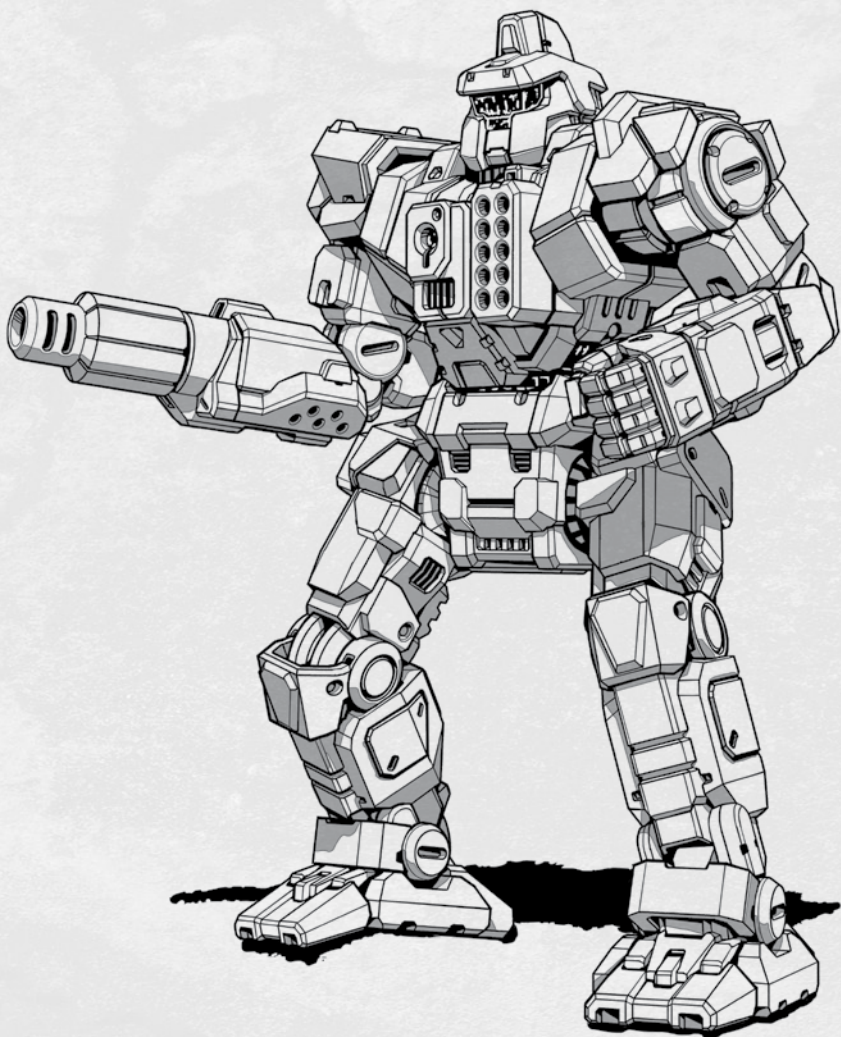
Two other variants of the CN10 were created. The -J, or jumping variant, produced alongside the original -B version, simply drops armor in favor of jump jets. A further variant known as the -W, or weapons variant, was produced two years later, using surplus DAV 220 XL engines from the *Fireball*. The weight savings from the extra-light engine allowed a PPC to be mounted at the expense of the short-ranged weaponry. Although the 10-W was intended as a test bed for possible deployment on Task Force Serpent, Corean's engineers ran into problems swapping out the *Fireball*'s single heat sinks, so they merely mounted more instead. Although deadly at medium range, this variant was quite vulnerable at short range. Combined with the added cost of the XL engine, the 10-W was phased out in favor of the more maneuverable CN9-D.

Notable 'Mechs and MechWarriors

Captain Anson McDaniel: Commanding an all jump-capable company, Captain McDaniel led the Smoke Jaguars on a merry chase across Virentofta, incensing the warriors of the 151st Garrison Cluster with his many hit-and-fade attacks. With support from locals and raided

supplies, his forces survived intact for over a month, long enough to be relieved during the second wave of Operation Bulldog.

MechWarrior Serena “Viper” Woodrow: Woodrow and her lance-mates shot to fame after the release of a hit holovid series in 3060, which followed the progress of the Davion Guards during the battles on Port Arthur. Using an innovative mixture of live-action scenes, complete with actual battleROM footage, this series led a large upturn in recruitment for the AFFS. Not a fan of the media spotlight, Woodrow herself was content to let the commander of Ricochet Lance—Lieutenant Edwin “Panther” Lenox—take the credit for downing a *Jaguar Mad Cat* in his *Raven*, despite the entire lance tearing into the 'Mech.



Type: Centurion CN10-B

Technology Base: Inner Sphere

Tonnage: 55

Role: Brawler

Battle Value: 1,243

Equipment**Mass**

Internal Structure:	Endo Steel	3
Engine:	220	10
Walking MP:	4	
Running MP:	6	
Jumping MP:	0	
Heat Sinks:	10	0
Gyro:		3
Cockpit:		3
Armor Factor:	184	11.5
	<i>Internal Structure</i>	<i>Armor Value</i>
Head	3	9
Center Torso	18	28
Center Torso (rear)		7
R/L Torso	13	20
R/L Torso (rear)		6
R/L Arm	9	18
R/L Leg	13	26

Weapons**and Ammo****Location Critical Tonnage**

LB 10-X AC	RA	6	11
Ammo (LB-X) 20	RT	2	2
Ammo (LRM) 24	RT	2	2
CASE	RT	1	.5
Medium Laser	CT	1	1
Medium Pulse Laser	CT (R)	1	2
LRM 10	LT	2	5
Artemis IV FCS	LT	1	1

Notes: Features the following Design Quirks: Improved Targeting (Short).

**Download the free
record sheet for this 'Mech at:**

bg.battletech.com/shrapnel/



Type: **Centurion CN10-J**

Technology Base: Inner Sphere

Tonnage: 55

Role: Brawler

Battle Value: 1,258

Equipment

		Mass
Internal Structure:	Endo Steel	3
Engine:	220	10
Walking MP:	4	
Running MP:	6	
Jumping MP:	4	
Heat Sinks:	10	0
Gyro:		3
Cockpit:		3
Armor Factor:	152	9.5
	<i>Internal Structure</i>	<i>Armor Value</i>
Head	3	9
Center Torso	18	22
Center Torso (rear)		7
R/L Torso	13	17
R/L Torso (rear)		6
R/L Arm	9	16
R/L Leg	13	18

Weapons

and Ammo	Location	Critical	Tonnage
LB 10-X AC	RA	6	11
Ammo (LB-X) 20	RT	2	2
Ammo (LRM) 24	RT	2	2
CASE	RT	1	.5
Medium Laser	CT	1	1
Medium Pulse Laser	CT (R)	1	2
LRM 10	LT	2	5
Artemis IV FCS	LT	1	1
2 Jump Jets	RL	2	1
2 Jump Jets	LL	2	1

Notes: Features the following Design Quirks: Improved Targeting (Short).

Download the free
record sheet for this 'Mech at:
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Type: **Centurion CN10-W**

Technology Base: Inner Sphere

Tonnage: 55

Role: Sniper

Battle Value: 1,112

Equipment

Mass

Internal Structure:	Endo Steel	3
Engine:	220 XL	5
Walking MP:	4	
Running MP:	6	
Jumping MP:	0	
Heat Sinks:	13	3
Gyro:		3
Cockpit:		3
Armor Factor:	152	9.5
	<i>Internal Structure</i>	<i>Armor Value</i>
Head	3	9
Center Torso	18	22
Center Torso (rear)		7
R/L Torso	13	17
R/L Torso (rear)		6
R/L Arm	9	16
R/L Leg	13	18

Weapons

and Ammo

	Location	Critical	Tonnage
LB 10-X AC	RA	6	11
Ammo (LB-X) 20	RT	2	2
Ammo (LRM) 24	RT	2	2
CASE	RT	1	.5
LRM 10	LT	2	5
Artemis IV FCS	LT	1	1
PPC	LA	3	7

Notes: Features the following Design Quirks: Improved Targeting (Short).

Download the free
record sheet for this 'Mech at:

bg.battletech.com/shrapnel/





DEVIL TAKE THE HINDMOST

MICHAEL J. CIARAVELLA

K, I followed up on the lead like you asked, but it didn't quite pan out the way I was hoping. The guy I was looking for left the planet awhile back, but I did get the chance to speak to his son, and he put this together from his father's journals. I don't know if this is what you were hoping for, but I knew you'd want to see it.

-T.

THE COLISEUM

SILESIA, SOLARIS CITY

SOLARIS VII, FEDERATED COMMONWEALTH

27 JANUARY 3051

The Phantom of the Coliseum really existed. He was not, as was long believed, a creature from the imagination of the artists, the superstition of the managers, or a product of the absurd and impressionable brains of the young MechBunnies of the fight circuit, their mothers, the box-keepers, the cloakroom attendants, or the concierge.

He was *real*.

It was the evening on which Mr. Foucault, the manager of the Coliseum, was throwing a massive soiree to mark his impending retirement. Nobles and members of all of the Great Houses were present, as well as members of all of the major stables, eager to make themselves seen. To celebrate the change, no fights had been assigned for the entire weekend, and all eyes were on the spectacle underway in the main hall.

It was the perfect moment to strike.

Daniel Ardrin slipped quietly through the technicians' entrance through the security cordon, his access key allowing him to pass through security with barely a glance. The guards all knew him, and

as soon as it was clear he had no interest in heading into the great hall, they let him go on his way. He had tested the key earlier to make sure it still worked, but it was a relief that his access had not been revoked during the event. Moving quickly down the hallway past the elevators, he headed directly for the stairwell, taking the steps two at time as soon as he left the view of the security cameras on the landing.

Reaching the secured doorway at the bottom, he once again slowed his approach, and used his keycard to slip inside, bringing him into the cavernous realm at the heart of the stadium: The Coliseum 'Mech bay.

As always, the main bay was bathed in the perpetual light of massive overheads, but at this time of night the cradles themselves remained dark, the immense, shadowed forms within barely recognizable as the immense war machines that had defined centuries of warfare in the Inner Sphere.

Slowly, Daniel walked down the row of BattleMechs, sparing them barely a glance, his focus locked on the bay farthest from the main entrance, the one that, as far as he knew, had never opened in his presence.

Reaching the end of the row, Daniel looked upward, transfixed by the immense number 5 emblazoned in red on the massive doors. For the briefest of moments, he found himself frozen, as captivated by the sight as he was by the knowledge of what lay inside.

For as long as the immense war machines had existed, there had been tales of 'Mechs and MechWarriors who defied explanation. Like everyone who aspired to jump into a command couch, he had heard of the famed warriors who could not be targeted by normal means or those who could do handstands with their BattleMechs and make them soar through the air.

Such stories had always impressed him, but his main focus remained on the BattleMechs themselves which somehow defined explanation. He had always loved hearing their stories. The *Black Marauder*, the invisible *Exterminator*, the deadly Red *UrbanMech* of Dieron—they were all the stuff of legend. Yet he had truly come to the Coliseum for one reason: the Phantom.

The Phantom of the Coliseum was considered a myth, much of which was based on a series of incidents that occurred fifteen years earlier at the Lyran arena.

It all started shortly after preparatory renovations to the Coliseum were completed in 3048, the first phase of a grand plan to upgrade the arena with *lostech* recovered from the Helm Memory Core, much as the Federated Suns had with the Boreal Reach arena. Jonah Foucault, a senior member of the board of directors for Nashan Diversified, had convinced several prominent Lyran nobles of the profitability of a more modern Class Six arena and with their help had been preparing a major investment to the stadium.

Unfortunately, the current invasion by the mysterious Clans had put the major aspects of the upgrade on hold, to the point where many doubted they would ever occur.

Foucault was undeterred, however, and moved forward with his plans, focusing on the initial renovations that helped focus eyes on the Steiner stadium. The gamble paid off handsomely, with people coming from around the Inner Sphere to see the early results, with the attendant celebrations being anticipated as some of the most impressive social events of the season.

On the day the investors and a group of MechWarriors came down to christen the newly upgraded 'Mech bay, however, they had found one of the bays, Bay Five, already occupied by an immense *Atlas* BattleMech. None of the MechWarriors knew whose 'Mech it was, and none of the technicians saw it in the bay the night before. The immense behemoth was painted completely black, a black so deep it seemed to suck the light right out of the room. Several of those assembled seem to feel great discomfort at its mere presence.

The technicians considered moving it, but Foucault stopped them. Of everyone present, he seemed the only one not surprised by its presence. He told them he had received an ornate, handwritten message from someone who had styled himself "the Angel of Battle," informing him that if he wanted to have great success in this endeavor, he would have to follow certain instructions to the letter. In the note, he was informed that both Box Five and Bay Five were to be held at all time for the Angel's personal use, and a small stipend was to be provided monthly for his largesse in allowing the matches to continue.

Many of the other shareholders scoffed at the letter, but as a classic showman of the old style, Foucault acquiesced to the mysterious author's demands. In fact, there was little to encourage him not to do so: neither Box Five nor Bay Five was desperately needed at the time, and like many on the Game World, Foucault often paid off those who could bring him the opportunity to great profit. Foucault himself clearly thought this might be one of those opportunities, and when he judiciously leaked the story to the media, attendance jumped up nearly 30 percent. The difference was especially noticeable for night battles, with many hoping to catch a glimpse at the one that the newsmen had named "the Phantom of the Coliseum" in his box or in the 'Mech bay.

Despite all of the benefits that came with the arrangement, however, a few shareholders did not feel beholden to the agreement as the new manager for the stadium. One night, when Foucault was away on a business trip, one of the shareholders allowed Box Five to be sold to a wealthy noble who had just arrived on Solaris earlier that week.

As the warriors for the night approached their starting positions, the turrets prepared as a special feature for the event all went off at once, damaging both competitors and forcing the fight to be postponed.

While there was no evidence that this was the work of the Angel of Battle, the fact that two of the long-range-missile turrets fired directly at Box Five during the “malfunction” seemed suspicious at best. While the detonator grid kept the box and its occupants from being damaged, the message was clear, and Box Five was never sold again.

Time, however, had its way of dulling memory, and things quickly returned to normal. Foucault continued to pay, and the arena continued to see great success. While the Phantom still provided a draw, the majority of new fans knew nothing of the pilot’s mysterious *Atlas*, and those who did were convinced it was a nothing more than an urban legend.

However, it was exactly this sort of rich history that inspired Daniel to want to fight at the arena in the first place. When he began his fighting career, one of his first choices had been Oonthrax Stables, knowing how often they were based out of the Steiner stadium due to their proximity to Silesia. It wound up working out especially well for him, giving him the opportunity to fight several times in the illustrious venue, mere meters from the locations he had heard about.

On the night Daniel wandered down to Bay Five by himself, his mind was so focused on his thoughts that he never heard the footsteps behind him.

“Something I can do for you?”

He whirled around, recognizing the voice in an instant, his hands coming up in a futile gesture of explanation.

“Danny?” The man standing before him was nearly his height, wearing a well-worn jumpsuit in Steiner blue, the standard uniform for the BattleMech technicians at the Coliseum, but his black vest and cap denoted him as the stadium’s senior tech, Roger Seifert. The man’s face split into a welcoming grin. “It’s good to see you, kid!”

Daniel smiled at Seifert sheepishly, running a nervous hand through his hair. He considered the elder man a friend, having earned the chief’s grudging respect as one of the few MechWarriors who humbled themselves to learn the intricacies of caring for their BattleMechs. Seeing the man here, tonight, made the uncomfortable feeling in his stomach even more vivid. “It’s good to see you too, Chief. Sorry if I startled you.”

“No worries,” Seifert replied casually. “I just wasn’t expecting to see anyone down here tonight. Shouldn’t you be up in the main hall?”

Daniel shook his head. “I wasn’t invited, unfortunately.”

Seifert looked at him with confusion, and then his eyes slid up the wall to the location number, and his voice lost some of its mirth. “Ah... why don’t we go down to my office and chat? I want to hear what you’ve been doing to keep busy.”

Realizing he had little choice, Daniel nodded, and they walked across the length of the bay to the second-floor, glass-enclosed office the senior tech had earned from years of service. From the centralized

space, Seifert could see the workings of the entire bay, allowing him to keep a careful eye on all that occurred on a daily basis.

Seifert gestured to the stiff chair in front of his desk, stepping around it to grab a soft drink from the small mini-fridge resting in one corner, and wordlessly offered one to the younger man. When Daniel declined, Seifert sat down in his far more comfortable chair, and appraised the younger man for a moment. "What brings you down here so late, kid?"

"I just wanted to take a last look around." For a long moment, Daniel hesitated and then he shrugged. "I...might not be back for a while."

Seifert leaned back in his chair, clearly not expecting that response. "What are you talking about? Don't you have a fight scheduled next week?"

"I did," Daniel replied, fiddling with his hands in his lap before turning his gaze back to the tech. "You heard about my match with James Marcoe?"

"I saw it!" Seifert said, smiling. "Gordon Mack over at Fitzhugh Stables is a friend, and he asked me to consult on that blown knee actuator. I couldn't believe you took that shot at a full run!"

Daniel blanched at the praise, unable to do much more than shrug. "Seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Well, whatever you did, the replacement is giving him fits. Tobias Nerrivik is one of the best techs in the business, and he is *still* trying to figure out how to repair it without replacing the entire leg assembly." Seifert looked at him carefully. "What does that have to do with anything, though?"

"I didn't know it at the time, but my *Guillotine* took a lot of damage in the fight. One more salvo and it probably would have been over for me."

Seifert nodded in understanding. "That's what it looked like. You're looking at a pull for the leg for sure, and you'll need a complete replacement on the arm. The armor repair isn't going to be too bad, but the control runs in the shoulder are going to be a massive pain..." Seifert's eyes narrowed as he saw Daniel turn his gaze away, and his voice turned grim. "Damn... Vito doesn't have the parts, does he?"

"No. We had some spares in stock, but Mr. Oonthrax had to sell them a couple months ago when things were getting tight. He ordered more last month, hoping they'd be here..."

"But the current situation with these Clanners put that to bed quickly," Seifert replied, shaking his head sadly.

With the appearance of the mysterious invaders known as the Clans, military equipment was at a premium, and many of the House-backed stables were encouraged to sell their extra stock of equipment and BattleMechs as a patriotic gesture. While few of the stable owners were so patriotic as to regularly entertain such an idea, the damage they were seeing to their bottom lines had encouraged several of them to take up the lucrative offer, including Vito Oonthrax. Oonthrax Stables

had been having financial difficulties for several years now, ever since Vito's father had passed along the company, and rumors abounded that Vito was seeking to offload the stable to whoever could meet his asking price.

Unfortunately, that meant fewer BattleMechs were available for use in the stables, which was especially hard on newcomers or lower-ranked warriors. While some cooperatives and even some of the larger stables attempted to share 'Mechs, the scarcity of replacement parts forced the stable owners to be more careful with their property.

Seifert nodded slowly, the pieces of the puzzle slipping together effortlessly. "So that's why you came to see Mr. Foucault today. You wanted to get a rental."

"Yes," Daniel answered simply, his gaze shifting to one of the windows to avoid having the chief tech see his discomfort.

Johan Foucault had been one of the first stadium owners to come up with a temporary solution to the problem of reduced war materiel, understanding that if the number of fights were reduced it would cut into everyone's profit margins. By reaching out to several wealthy nobles in the Black Hills, Foucault had gained funding to purchase several loaner 'Mechs for the United Federation Corporation, and stable owners could rent them at a discounted rate to ensure that more of their warriors had the opportunity to fight.

"Sounds like you're all set, then," Seifert replied cheerily. "What's wrong?"

"Unfortunately, the only BattleMechs they have available are eighty tons or better," Daniel responded sheepishly.

"Assault class," Seifert nodded slowly. "And you can't put up the bond for something that heavy?"

Daniel felt his face flush, and Seifert nodded to spare Daniel the embarrassment of answering. "Not you, then. Vito doesn't want to put up the money."

Daniel nodded. As part of the loaner program, both the warrior and the stablemaster traditionally went halves on putting up a deposit for the 'Mech, usually in the form of a bond, to guarantee the BattleMech could be returned to service in prime condition. Unfortunately, that was all predicated on having the money for such a bond and the stablemaster's wholehearted approval.

Seifert nodded slowly, clearly putting it together. "So, you are Dispossessed?"

Daniel nodded, his shame deepening. To be Dispossessed was a fate worth than death for a MechWarrior, often literally on the Game World. Hard to put food on the table or pay off loan sharks if you couldn't fight.

"Well, that explains what you're doing here today, but *not* what you were doing when I found you." Seifert drew back in surprise. "Unless..."

"I just couldn't think of any other option, Chief."

Seifert stood abruptly, moving over to the windows as he tried to keep his voice down. "Are you crazy? Kid, you know the history..."

"I know the story!" Daniel replied, cutting off the tech before he could berate him further. "I also know the Phantom has a standing challenge to any warrior brave enough to face him. If you face him and win, you can get whatever you want."

"An old wives' tale!" Seifert retorted, turning back to the younger man. "And you know what happened the last time someone tried to test it!" His voice raised sharply, but the note of true concern in it was still audible.

Daniel did understand, all too well. The story of the Phantom had been a background piece for several years, part of the grand history of the arena, when Kyle Borric came on the scene. The Capellan MechWarrior had made quite a name for himself in the lesser arenas, but was still relatively new to the Open Class. Surprising everyone, he had demanded that his first match be at the Coliseum, and that his backers be placed in Box Five, challenging the Phantom to fight him if he dared.

It seemed inexplicable, but it was apparently all part of his manager's grand plan to earn his fighter a big-ticket match. By challenging the Phantom, he hoped to leverage memories of former-champion Gray Noton and *Legend-Killer*, his famous *Rifleman*, whose heraldry was a BattleMech targeting a ghost.

It was a clever plan, and it had initially had the effect of gaining the young warrior a good amount of publicity. Whether it would have been enough to garner that big-ticket opportunity he sought, however, was a question that would never be answered.

On the night after the public announcement of his challenge, the MechWarrior disappeared shortly after leaving Thor's Shieldhall, the MechWarrior hangout for up-and-comers on the Game World, and never returned home.

Coliseum staff found Borric's body the next morning in the cockpit of his *Stalker* in the center of the arena, although the BattleMech was barely recognizable as such. The assault 'Mech had been shot up all over, with both side-mounted weapons pods destroyed, and the cockpit smashed in. Borric himself was found hanging from his restraining straps, his body crushed and misshapen, a look of abject terror from his last moments seared onto his face.

The official story was that Borric had come to the stadium to practice against the automated programs and that something had gone wrong with the programming. All warriors scheduled for fights that week were given access to the building to train in the simulators, which was how Daniel had gained access. It matched the brazen warrior's personality to have been willing to take the risk while also attempting to gain an advantage before his own impending fight. It was the simplest

answer, and it kept everyone happy, which was a distinct benefit to the arena. It seemed like an open-and-shut case.

Until someone decided to check on the 'Mech in Bay Five...and they found pieces of cockpit glass embedded in the *Atlas's* fist.

The Solaris Constabulary investigated, but the reality of the matter was that the door to Bay Five was never listed as having been opened, so it should have been impossible for the 'Mech to have left its cradle. Not to mention, the 'Mech was unblemished: if it had fought such an experienced fighter, it would have been impossible to have damaged the other 'Mech so severely without getting a single scratch in return. In the end, the constables believed someone in the staff had planted the cockpit glass there as a publicity stunt to enhance the myth of the Phantom and pull in greater purses.

The theory seemed confirmed when suspicion fell on Marcus Coordant, the security guard who was supposed to be on duty the night Borric was killed. Coordant hadn't shown up for work the next day, or any subsequent day, having apparently disappeared into the ether. The constabulary eventually closed its cases on both Borric's death and Coordant's disappearance, but no one really doubted that Coordant had fled after seeing the proof of the existence of the Phantom or had been the next victim.

While the official statements showed death by misadventure for the MechWarrior, from that day forward, no one doubted the existence of the Phantom. The crowds continued to swell, and the Coliseum continued to be known as one of the premier MechWarrior arenas on the Game World.

Nor was the Phantom forgotten this time. Several days after the Coordant case was closed, Foucault received another letter, identical to the first, requesting a larger portion of the profits, and offering a challenge to any other MechWarriors who wished to try their luck. The manager never even considered doing anything but complying, knowing it was the cost of doing business. For years, no one would hear from the Phantom except on the rare occasion that someone mocked his existence: those that did would usually learn, to their dismay, that certain things could go wrong in any stadium. Tools or equipment could fail, short circuits could occur in their 'Mech systems... In one case, a 'Mech was on top of a moving pylon, ready to give the final blow to their opponent, when that section of wall went crashing down into its cradle then immediately shot back up again to cause massive damage to the 'Mech. The investigative teams from the Gaming Commission listed each incident as a technical malfunction, but everyone knew the truth:

You do not cross the Phantom.

When Daniel spoke again, his voice was earnest. "You and I both know the story, Chief. The Phantom will take on any worthy challenger, and if you win, he will grant you what you desire. I'm eleven-and-

one, and rated one of the best in my class. If he is willing to take the challenge, I am willing to give it to him."

For a long moment, Seifert seemed like he was going to continue haranguing Daniel, then shook his head in frustration. "And what exactly is your plan? Surely you're not thinking of challenging the Phantom in hand-to-hand combat!"

Daniel leaned forward, his gaze intent. "One of my stablemates, Joe Calloway, is fighting here this week. His 'Mech just got in."

Seifert nodded. "The *Grasshopper* that came in three days ago. A good ride."

"Yes! Joe and I are old friends, we've known each other since our circuit days. We train together regularly, and I've used his *Grasshopper* many times. I am fully worked up on it, and I still have access through the security system. Joe offered to let me use it for my match, but there's no guarantee it will be in any condition to fight after his own match this week."

Seifert's lips thinned into a hard line at the dilemma. Calloway was scheduled to fight just a day before Daniel, and they would only have time to repair minor damage within twenty-four hours. If the *Grasshopper* was too damaged to fight, Daniel would be forced to forfeit and pay a hefty nonappearance fine.

Seeing that Seifert understood, Daniel breathed deeply, laying his hands flat on his thighs as he looked up at the senior tech. "Joe knows how much this means to me, and that this might be my last chance. I let him know what I was planning to do, and he gave me his blessing. I used the last of my money to purchase auxiliary coverage on the 'Hopper, so it's fully protected. If something happens to me, nothing will cause either Joe or Mr. Oonthrax any problems."

"Except you'll probably be arrested and most certainly banned to fight in the open arenas. Not to mention that you're considering fighting a catchweight against an opponent thirty tons heavier than you!"

"I'm willing to take the risk. We both know if I don't take this shot now I'm going to be on the secondary circuit anyway. I *need* this chance, Chief."

Seifert stared at him carefully. "What aren't you telling me, kid?"

Once again, the sheepish look was back. "My prize purse from the last fight is still tied up on trying to get my *Guillotine* back together. To get my funds for the loan I had to go...outside normal channels."

"A loan shark," Seifert replied, and shook his head sadly. On the Game World, a loan shark could only work with the blessing of a criminal syndicate, which meant that Daniel could be in deep with the wrong kind of people. "Oh, kid..."

"It was my only option!" Daniel replied, his voice strident. "I didn't know Mr. Oonthrax didn't have the money, and by the time I did..." He shook his head sadly. "Chief, if this doesn't work, I am done. Mr. Foucault was clear about my chances. Without the money to put up

for a bond, there's little chance I am ever going to get the opportunity to fight in the Open Class again."

There it was again, that thoughtful look in the senior tech's eyes. For a long moment, it looked like the chief was going to send him on his way, but then he shifted his gaze, as if he had seen something over Daniel's shoulder.

Daniel quickly turned to see what the tech was looking at, but there was nothing there.

Seifert stood abruptly. "Come on."

Daniel rushed to follow him, who moved spryly for a man of his advanced years. They descended back to the main service floor again, and Daniel was surprised to see they were returning to Bay Five. He watched in awe as Seifert took out his keycard and held it just far enough away from the reader in the access door to ensure it did not engage. "Are you sure you want to do this, kid?"

To his credit, Daniel did not hesitate. "More sure than I have ever been in my life."

Seifert sighed. "I was afraid you'd say that."

With a single deft motion, he opened the door, and they stepped inside.

Unlike the rest of the 'Mech bay, Bay Five remained dark, with only the spillage of light from the main bay and a single powerful bulb mounted at ground level, the famed "ghost light" of theaters and BattleMech repair areas. Supposedly, the ghost light was there to keep people from tripping and falling into a trapdoor or a maintenance hatch, but most technicians in both industries believed it was there to appease the spirits, eternally lit to remind them that they had not been forgotten and the humble mortals who worked there hoped for safe conduct.

Unfortunately, the ghost light did little but to give a dim view of the area, and even the immense legs of the *Atlas* before them were barely recognizable in the darkness.

"Why is it so dark?" Daniel asked, surprised to find his voice sounding level.

Seifert shrugged. "He likes it that way. The lights haven't been fully on in there since the opening. We tried to get them to work once, but the power source shorted out. It became cost-ineffective to keep fixing it, so we just let it be."

For a long moment, the two men just stood in the silence, and then Seifert looked at him. "All right, kid. You wanted your chance..."

Daniel just stood there, using all of his conscious effort to keep his hands from balling into fists of nervousness, and cleared his throat before speaking.

"Good evening, sir." He shook his head at the formality, straightening despite himself. "I am sorry to disturb you, but I have come here about your challenge."

For a long moment, there was silence in the bay, but he almost felt that someone...something was watching him.

He straightened, the knowledge imbuing him with a new level of confidence. "My name is Daniel Aldrin, and I am a warrior for Oonthrax Stables. I am scheduled to fight next week here in the Coliseum, but my BattleMech took significant damage during a previous battle. While I do not mean to disturb you, I find myself in need of your assistance to return to my place as a warrior.

"As such, I wish to make you a wager. I am willing to fight you, if you are willing to agree to my terms. If I win, you provide me with the funds I require to repair my BattleMech. If you win..." He hesitated a moment. "I will do anything you ask... And devil take the hindmost."

For a long moment, there was no response, and he thought he was just speaking to the empty air. He glanced over at Seifert, who gave him a slow nod. The elder man clearly did not approve, but Daniel caught a glimmer of respect in his expression. For a brief moment, he started to smile, feeling far more confident about his decision.

Which, of course, was when the ghost light went out.

For the span of five seconds, they were frozen in perfect darkness, and then the light flickered back on again.

The two men looked at each other for a moment, the message clear. They both nodded respectfully at the 'Mech before hustling back out the door, sealing the access tight behind them.

Daniel only found his voice when they reached Seifert's office.

"So that's that, then," the tech said, once again returning to his seat. He ignored the half-finished soft drink on his desk, pulled a bottle from the desk drawer, and poured them both a drink.

Daniel cradled the glass carefully, taking a sip before speaking. "Does anyone know who he is? Or was?"

Seifert glanced over at Daniel, giving an expressive shrug as he pulled a pipe and pouch from his vest pocket. After tapping the pipe carefully against his knee to clear the bowl, he filled it with pungent tobacco from the pouch before speaking. "Depends on who you ask. Some say he was a member of a Marik traveling circus, a performance MechWarrior. You know, the ones who claim they can have their BattleMechs do handstands and backflips? It's all just for show, of course. Oh, the 'Mechs can do it, but it takes a truly exceptional pilot to manage such things, and you rarely want to do it under battlefield conditions. It's nothing you would want to do during a match, believe you me!"

Seifert lit the pipe and looked out on the darkened bay. "There are others who say he was an unlicensed 'Mech tech who was obsessed with becoming a MechWarrior. There are more of those than you'd expect, especially during the bad old days. Some of the certifications wouldn't be looked at as closely as they should, some transfers from the Barrens arenas came with their partners, and others just sort of

started working. Even without being one of the paid members of the team, there are a lot of benefits: free food, the chance to be close to the action... There are those who think he used this as a way in to get closer to the 'Mechs. Apparently, he would work all day then spend much of the night going through the motions in the actual 'Mechs themselves and in the training pods."

"When did he sleep?"

Seifert smiled grimly. "A devoted tech can always find time. That's why some think he wears the mask, though: it's said he fell asleep while welding a port and burned his face on a scalding-hot piece of armor. Terrified that they would keep him from the 'Mechs, he fled into the catacombs beneath the arena, where he lives off the scraps of food left after each match."

Daniel looked thoughtful for a moment. In keeping with the Roman theme to the architecture of the Steiner Stadium, a series of catacombs ran under the Coliseum, ostensibly for repairs and access to the moving wall sections. The catacombs themselves had once been a potential fight venue in the past, but they were eventually eclipsed by the adjustable battlefields on the main level. "Could someone really live down there?"

"Easily, I would think," Seifert replied. "There's a lot of empty space down there, and if someone knew where all of the cameras were placed, it would be simple to avoid getting caught. It would also make sense in regards to the...other items."

"Other items?"

Seifert glanced over at Daniel. "You've been here long enough to have heard about the odd things that happen from time to time: turrets misfiring, vibrabombs going off by themselves, hatch doors sealing at the oddest of times... It's said that it's the Phantom, ensuring that the games continue to his liking. Along the way, some of the more... curious accidents have a way of benefitting the longshots...longshots the ownership has always been very careful to keep an eye out for."

Daniel nodded, quickly understanding what the tech was saying. With bets on the right longshots, someone could make very good money, and if one had an idea they were coming...

Seifert nodded. "Then, of course, there's the theory that the Phantom was Jerry Choluders."

"Jerry Choluders? I know that name..."

"He was a young up-and-comer like yourself. A good MechWarrior, working his way up the lists. He was doing well, made quite the name for himself in the arena, until one night..." Seifert trailed off, taking a long puff from his pipe.

"What happened?" Daniel asked, swept up in the tale.

Seifert considered the question for a moment, going very quiet. "I remember seeing him fight as a kid. It was a night match, a roaring fight against Kevin 'the Killer' Dawson. The fight was pretty even, at least

tonnage-wise, a *Wolverine* versus a *Griffin*. As you'd expect, Choluders was using his close-in weapons to telling effect, and was ripping the *Griffin* to shreds. Jerry had Dawson against one of the entryways to the catacombs, which kept him from being able to use his jump jets. At that point, it looked like it was all over but the counting." Seifert paused for another pull on his pipe. "Then, to everyone's surprise, Dawson blasted his PPC at the *Wolverine*. He must have disconnected his feedback circuit to do that, which should have been an automatic disqualification, but the games were different back then.

"Anyway, he sent the shot directly into the *Wolverine*'s cockpit. Unfortunately, the tech that had replaced the cockpit glass must've done a poor job of it, and it hadn't maintained the seal... So the PPC struck a glancing blow off the head, nearly ripping away half of the 'Mech's face."

Daniel recoiled in horror. "*Gott im Himmel!*"

Seifert nodded in agreement. "At that range, with no feedback protection and without the armored cockpit glass, even a low-power strike could be devastating. Choluders would have suffered extensive burns, at the very least."

Daniel heard the hesitation in the other man's voice. "Would have?"

Seifert nodded. "The *Wolverine* fell forward, right onto Dawson's *Griffin* in the entranceway, and they fell right out of view of the cameras. Rescue teams were immediately dispatched into the arena, but when they got there, Choluders was gone. I was part of the team that searched every centimeter of the arena, but we never found him. The Choluders fans all cried foul, of course. A lot of people were talking about a fix, or that Dawson killed him and hid the body, but nothing ever came of the investigation."

"What do you think happened to him?"

"I am hoping he got out, realized this life was not for him, and simply went on his way...but it remains just one of the arena's many mysteries."

Daniel nodded, considering what he would have done in the same situation, then turned to Seifert.

"You told me what others think...but what do you think?"

Seifert smiled, and something in the expression finally meant Daniel had asked the right question. "I think they could all be true, to a point...but I also think back to my own experiences here in the stadium. I started working here shortly after the renovation, and one of my first tasks was ensuring the ghost light stayed on every night. It's one of the scut-work jobs that really does itself, but I always thought it was important, and I took pride in my work. So, one night, I go to check the light before I take my break, and I accidentally leave my lunchbox right next to it. I come back twenty minutes later, and the box is there, but my lunch is gone."

"And you think the Phantom ate it?"

"I don't know. Still, it got me thinking. The next day, I made two meals and left one next to the light. I've been doing that every day since, something small at least, but I do try to spice it up for the holidays when I can."

"And you think that the Phantom eats it? Have you ever seen him?"

"No, I don't think anyone has...anyone living, that is. When I was younger, I thought about it, but there's always some up-and-comer who goes looking, and they usually come to bad ends. I merely trust in the fact that if he is there, he deserves the show as much as anyone else, and I leave it be."

For a long moment, the two men just sat silently, and then there was a beep on his console, making Seifert turn carefully, his eyes widening.

"What is it?" Daniel asked.

"The stadium prep clock just engaged...for twenty-four hours from now."

Daniel straightened, a cold feeling solidifying in his stomach. "There aren't any matches scheduled for tomorrow."

Seifert glanced up, their eyes locking in mutual understanding.

"There is now."



Daniel spent the next day trying not to focus on the fight before him. Realizing the effort was doomed to failure, he returned to the stadium, spending several hours attempting to fine-tune his reflexes in the final hours before his fight. He knew he should probably try to rest instead, trusting in his training, but he found himself unable to sleep.

He returned to the 'Mech bay shortly before the appointed time, unnerved that the building seemed completely deserted. Apparently, since Coordant's disappearance, the unwritten rule was no one except the challenger came in when the Phantom had a match.

Stepping up before Bay Five, Daniel stared upward, wondering if this were truly real.

He didn't have to wait long. With a snap, the lights at far end of the 'Mech bay flickered on, the traditional preparation signal before a match.

So the die is cast, he thought, and headed toward his own bay. Arriving quickly, he climbed the ladder to the cockpit of his borrowed BattleMech, conscious of how his hands trembled on every rung.

To his surprise, the 'Mech was already prepared. For a moment, he wondered whether the Phantom had done it, but a tiny sticky note sat on the main dash, and he reached over to pluck it off.

YOU ARE LOCKED AND LOADED, AND ALL GREEN. BEST OF LUCK.

The note was unsigned, but it was clearly Seifert's handwriting. Daniel smiled despite himself and went through the startup sequence.

Even though he knew the chief technician had gone through all of this for him already, he would always do it for himself, just to be sure.

Once the warm-up checklist was complete, he stepped his *Grasshopper* slowly into the arena, seeing it was already fully lit. The main screen, traditionally used to show highlights to the crowd, remained as dark as the stadium itself, lending an eerie, otherworldly feeling to the coming battle. He realized he had never seen the space this dark, and idly wondered if this was what the Phantom always saw on the nights of his battles.

To his complete lack of surprise, the coal-black *Atlas* was already waiting for him at the far end of the stadium. None of the modular partitions were up, nor any of the expensive holo-projectors, so it was just an open, barren field, a gladiator's arena, for now.

He stepped up to a matching position, just outside the ramp, and stopped, careful to bring his 'Mech to neutral. There was a kind of ritual to it, something special about the moment. Briefly, he wondered just how the Phantom must be feeling, fighting his first live opponent in who knew how long.

Reaching out with a trembling hand, Daniel flicked open the channel between the two BattleMechs. "Thank you."

He expected no response, and was not disappointed to hear nothing over the radio. However, as he watched, the *Atlas* seemed to bow its massive head slightly as if in acknowledgment, and that was when he saw the whole 'Mech, a bitter chill coursing up his spine.

Traditionally, the *Atlas* stayed in its darkened bay, only the legs visible. Daniel had assumed that was so the Phantom could come and go from his 'Mech at his leisure, but that made little sense to him: If the Phantom only worked on his BattleMech at night, when no one was around, why leave the bay dark during the day?

The truth was far more horrifying than Daniel had imagined. From this distance, he could finally make out the features on the *Atlas*'s head, painted in stark white against the night-black form of the rest of the BattleMech.

The right side of the 'Mech's head was missing...

Not missing...*shot away*.

It had to have been a PPC blast; the charred and torn edges of molten metal were a dead giveaway. He could only imagine the final moments of the battle, the charged particles eating away at armor and flesh... He barely suppressed a shiver at the horrifying thought, but nothing could keep back the rising bile and terror that came from the obvious corollary...

From his angle, it looked as though there was no one sitting in the cockpit.

The *Atlas* straightened, and Daniel desperately bit down on his lip, forcing himself to think about this rationally. He knew the 'Mech could have been adjusted by a talented technician, potentially with armored

one-way glass, to make it look like no one was there. While he knew this was not the same 'Mech Jerry Choluders had piloted, the one that had taken the PPC shot to the head, someone clearly had gone to great lengths to make it look like it. Daniel reminded himself that this was just another measure for his opponent to try winning the psychological battle that came before the actual conflict.

Yes, this was just a terribly dangerous piece of Star League-era tech. He had to be ready for anything.

He nodded to himself, more to bolster his own confidence than anything else, and then swept his *Grasshopper's* arms out in the traditional ready signal before a match.

The *Atlas* copied his move, and the space dimmed further as the stadium began to configure itself. Pylons quickly rose and fell to distract, and rising partitions mercifully cut off the vision of the scarred BattleMech, forcing him to prepare for what was to come.

Daniel did not wait to see what would come next; he had fought in the arena enough times to know the score. He had no doubt the other BattleMech was already in motion, but since the *Atlas* did not mount jump jets, it would have to close the distance to ensure he was not going to get the drop on his opponent.



Unfortunately, Daniel's weapons loadout was a lot lighter than the assault BattleMech's, and the *Atlas* mounted a heavy autocannon that could rip his *Grasshopper* apart in just a couple of shots.

Still, the Phantom would be forced to stay on the ground while Daniel was under no such restrictions. It was the same rules you always had when fighting someone bigger than you: don't let them force you in too close, don't let them control the momentum. The important thing for now was to maintain the range.

Moving with practiced skill, Daniel slid to his right, darting along the partition to a remembered spot. Every stadium had small tricks and telltales that would give a slight home-court advantage, and he had fought in the Coliseum enough times to know some of them. If this fight was going off of the standard automated program, a nearby partition would drop during the next adjustment, letting him slide him into a golden area with the best field of fire while giving him partial cover from the most natural direction for his opponent to try closing the range. Most new contenders demanded a fresh pattern each time for just this sort of reason, but he was counting on the sudden nature of his challenge to force the Phantom to choose one of the standard designs programmed for training purposes.

Bearing down on his controls, Daniel quickly moved his *Grasshopper* to the left, sliding around darkened shape of an inactive turret and coming to one side of the nearest partition. For a moment he worried that the quiescent turret might engage him, but he doubted the Phantom would tarnish this duel with such trickery.

He was correct. The turret did not fire, and the partitions shifted as he expected, allowing him to finally be able to see the *Atlas* again. The larger 'Mech had made up some serious ground, clearly not hesitant to run in the larger space, but it was still one row of partitions beyond him.

Far more disconcerting, however, was that it pointed in his direction, as if the pilot had already known where the *Grasshopper* would be.

Luckily, Daniel was ready for the eventuality. Steadying both arms, he fired off a quick shot from his torso-mounted large laser, which cut a line of lightning across the larger 'Mech's right torso. Bracing for the return fire of missiles and lasers, he prepared to run behind the nearby partition to break the lock, but he never made it.

To his surprise, there was a crash of thunder, and his entire BattleMech shuddered as if he had been struck by a cannon.

What the hell? There's no way his heavy autocannon could hit me at this range! But what else...

Daniel saw the gaping maw over the *Atlas*'s hip, and swore heavily as he recognized his mistake. The *Atlas* had been in Bay Five for so long that he assumed it was a classic AS7-D model, but this one had been clearly been modified like the new Draconis Combine AS7-K refits, mounting updated technology like the Gauss rifle that had just torn off a significant amount of armor.

Daniel did not have much time to think about it: missiles were on their way, and he slammed down on his jump jets to get clear before they could connect. Suddenly, all his complicated planning was proving for naught: the Phantom had outwitted him again. With such a powerful weapon at the *Atlas* pilot's disposal, there was no way Daniel could fight a ranged battle against such a monstrosity. He would have to be very good, and very lucky, while the Phantom only needed to be patient and slightly lucky to take down the slightly more nimble *Grasshopper*.

Daniel swore viciously, but he was only angry at himself. He'd known he was going to be outgunned, and he was fairly sure he was suffering a technological disadvantage, but nothing had prepared him for this. Every bone in his body screamed to follow his trainer's advice: *Know when you are beat, kid. Live to fight another day. There is no honor at stake...just the purse.*

But this time, the stakes were far too high. For the Phantom, this was about nothing but honor: if he could afford a beast like that, money was no object. No, this was about proving a point. After tonight, no one would ever again doubt the Phantom existed, or that he was a warrior who could be ignored. Not to mention, if Daniel did not follow through with his end of the bargain, how could he expect the Phantom to do the same?

No, he knew what he had to do.

Moving quickly, Daniel bolted down one of the newly made rows, his mental clock ticking down the seconds. The current formation of the space was already several minutes old, and he had to wait for the next change to take the best experience of the space. If the Phantom was as experienced as Daniel was, he would know the same: Fire when there was a change, close the range, wait for the stadium to do its work. If you didn't wait until between the heartbeats, the stadium would block your shots or expose your back at the wrong moment.

And the Phantom was clearly tapped in to the electronics side of the stadium. There was always the possibility that he was controlling the stadium changes manually...

No. Daniel shook his head. *Honor*. He had no doubt the Phantom could adjust the space on the fly if needed, but he also knew he would not do it. There was a code here, and the Phantom would not break it. If he truly wanted Daniel dead, he would not even have bothered with the partitions. Had this been an open battlefield, with no terrain, Daniel knew he would already be dead, as the *Atlas*'s long-range armament would've picked him apart before he could ever have gotten close.

He had to think like any other battle: What would he do if he were fighting a first-tier opponent?

Close the range. He had to focus on his own advantages, not worry about the ones his opponent had already shown him. He had jump jets and a bevy of close-range weaponry, allowing him to make the most of the range, if he remained nimble. If he remembered right, the

Gauss rifle suffered from a minimum range disadvantage, much like long-range missiles did, which made it difficult to accurately target the weapon at knife-fighting range. If he could get close enough, he could even the score, and might even outgun the Phantom's 'Mech if he was a good-enough shot.

Still, the *Atlas* was a big, angry brute, and it could afford to take a lot more punishment than he could.

Sliding around the corner, he waited, and then the space shifted.

He saw the partition go down, and there it was, nearly two rows away.

Once again, the *Atlas* was already facing his direction, but Daniel did not hesitate. This time, the instant he saw the scarred visage, he fired all of his weapons, a massive alpha strike that tore away at the larger BattleMech.

Two medium lasers scored on the torso, and the large laser swept over the left leg, leaving an angry scar above the hip. A single medium laser hit a glancing blow off of the cockpit dome, and Daniel cheered, already in motion. His 'Mech was going to be feeling the heat soon, and he wanted to get out of the way. Once again, the Gauss rifle boomed, but the slug shot past where he had just stood. Daniel felt the large laser singe his shoulder as he left line of sight, and took a careful breath as he switched into a new focus.

They traded another volley of fire, with armor melting and sliced away with reckless abandon, and then Daniel lunged his *Grasshopper* forward, lighting off his jump jets to leap over the *Atlas*.

It seemed this was just what the Phantom was waiting for. This time, the Angel of Battle fired everything in range, and Daniel felt more than saw the discharge from the Gauss rifle's capacitors. Lights in the cockpit went red as the slug plowed through the armor on his right torso, and angry red laser fire ripped into the center of his chest. Not all of the *Atlas*'s LRMs had gained a lock, but enough of the warheads peppered his armor, and he watched one strike his *Grasshopper*'s left arm, centimeters from his shattered torso.

He felt a light thrum as a pair of medium lasers tagged his legs, proving once again the Phantom's skill level. Whereas an inexperienced pilot would have tried to outturn the flying 'Mech, it was clear the MechWarrior realized that would just put him out of position for a real counterattack. This way he was able to damage the *Grasshopper*'s legs, hoping to hit something critical that might cause Daniel to blow the landing, and then used his rear-mounted lasers to strike the *Grasshopper* as it recovered.

However, Daniel was not moving to get into a position to strike at the other 'Mech's back: while traditionally an excellent one-on-one maneuver, the armor on the *Atlas*'s back was even heavier than the *Grasshopper*'s front armor at this point, so he merely strove to put some range between the two of them. The rear-mounted pulse lasers

chased after him, but one only managed a glancing blow on his arm while the other missed.

He dodged behind one of the partitions and took a quick moment to glance at his screen. The armor over the right side of his torso was nearly completely gone, and he had armor damage on both arms. Normally he would not be too worried about the torso hit, but it left his ammo storage wide open, and the last thing he wanted to do was suffer an ammo explosion. Running toward the wall, he prepared to dump his ammo, since the missiles would be of little assistance as they were.

Suddenly, he had an idea.

Backing up, Daniel glanced around his surroundings and spotted what he was looking for: One of the doorways that should lead to the catacombs. For this match it had been sealed off, little more than a hidden cul-de-sac in the wall, but it would be enough. He stepped up to it, evacuating his remaining long-range missiles from their storage bay as quickly as possible.

Daniel continued backing up toward the doorway, feeling more than hearing the approach of the *Atlas* as it came around the corner, preparing to fire...

And as he hoped, the barrier went down, and another went up, cutting off the *Atlas*'s escape.

Daniel fired.

His full complement of lasers lanced out at the piled munitions, and they went off in a flash. While dumped ammo was usually inert, the heat from the massed laser barrage set off the propellant in a chain reaction. While the blast did little real damage to the approaching 'Mech, the heat from the explosion and the burning combustibles were enough to overwhelm the other *Atlas*'s sensors.

Having toggled his weapons to chain fire, Daniel fired his medium lasers one at a time as he closed, shot after shot striking the Phantom's 'Mech, his heat climbing steadily. He struck the heat override with a quick prayer and continued firing. The larger BattleMech swayed under the onslaught but could not seem to get a lock with its weapons. With heat sensors blinded by the missiles and magscan no use at this range, the other 'Mech was at a disadvantage.

Daniel's large laser lanced out, spearing the *Atlas* over the hip, and it cut away the side of the Gauss rifle aperture, sending out a burst of energy as the capacitors that propelled the weapon's slugs discharged violently. The entire 'Mech swayed, and Daniel knew he nearly had it. He launched his single remaining flight of LRMs loaded in his launch tubes, hoping the meager damage they would cause might help bring down the swaying behemoth while the rest of his weapons cycled.

He kept firing, desperate to take down the flaming brute before it could respond. Watching in horror, Daniel saw the burning 'Mech swing its arm wide, clearing its firing lane, and felt more than saw the Gauss-rifle round that struck the *Grasshopper*'s chest, causing the

already-unbalanced 'Mech to tilt backward and rush toward the ground. With his controls locked up by the heat, there was nothing he could do to prevent the fall.

His last visual was the *Atlas* as it dropped to its knees, the flames wreathing it like a funeral pyre.

Then the heat overwhelmed him, and he fell into the blackness.



When Daniel finally awoke, he found himself in the emergency medical wing of the Coliseum. Despite the fact that paramedics and an emergency medical helicopter were present for every major battle, each major stadium was equipped with a full emergency wing to deal with urgent or unexpected trauma. While none of the doctors had been in when they had arrived, every technician and warrior was trained in emergency medical services.

Opening his eyes carefully against the too-bright light, he looked over to the chair at his bedside, where Joe Calloway watched him with a mixture of anger and relief.

"Ah, the conquering hero is awake."

"Good morning to you too." Daniel's voice felt gravelly and unfamiliar, and Joe shook his head.

"Don't talk yet. You took some burns to your face and hands. What the hell were you doing, running exercises at that time of night? You could have been killed!"

For a long moment, Daniel wondered if he'd hit his head, and looked at his friend in confusion.

"What?"

"Last night, the exercises! Chief Seifert found you in my *Grasshopper* this morning, and you were suffering from heat exhaustion. The docs say you're going to be laid up for a couple of days. I can't believe you overheated my 'Mech! You're lucky you got that extra insurance, or I would be beating the tar out of you right now."

Daniel shook his head, still confused. Heat damage...something about that sounded familiar.

Joe continued, not waiting for him to reply. "You're also damn lucky the chief decided to come in early today. If he hadn't, you could've been seriously injured." Joe looked down at Daniel, and for the briefest of moments his gaze softened. "If I were you, I would stay in here as long as possible. Mr. Foucault wants to have a long talk with you about whatever the hell you were doing last night. He's convinced you fought an illegal battle, and he does not like the thought of either losing either a competitor or a BattleMech."

Daniel nodded, and lowered his voice, turning his head so that only Joe could hear him. "What about the Phantom?"

Now it was Joe's turn to be confused. "What about him?"

"His *Atlas*. Did they recover it from the stadium?"

Joe stared at him carefully for a moment, as if wondering whether he'd suffered a head wound as well. "Yours was the only BattleMech they recovered from the stadium." Suddenly, his expression tightened. "I thought you got injured practicing..."

Daniel shook his head, fighting the instinctive wave of dizziness. "No! I beat him, Joe!"

"What?"

"I beat him... I took down his *Atlas* last night. That's how I got so banged up."

Joe looked down at him, his eyes wide, and spoke slowly. "That was my first thought when I heard what happened, but Dan...the 'Mech in Bay Five hasn't moved. I checked on it myself this morning."



Daniel rushed forward on unsteady legs, moving up toward the bay. Due to the heavy damage, the *Grasshopper* had been towed back into the bay in pieces, and the entire technical team had spent the day beginning the repairs. They had made excellent headway, but since no one anticipated the BattleMech getting that badly damaged on a non-fight day, they lacked a great deal of the parts they needed. They had to order some of the specialty parts themselves, and in at least two cases, they would be cutting the armor to a new mold.

However, with that focus on his BattleMech, they had no time to do anything else.

All of that meant there was no one who could've repaired the Phantom's BattleMech, certainly not in the time since the battle. It simply wasn't possible.

Which didn't change the fact that there it stood, in its regular cradle in Bay Five, looming like the coal-black menace it had always been. For a moment, he simply stared at its shadowed form, searching for some sort of sign that it had moved...yet he saw nothing. It was as if nothing had ever happened.

He stared down at his bandaged hands in disbelief. Had it really all been a dream? Had he taken his *Grasshopper* out into the stadium and just blazed away with his energy weapons until the BattleMech had overheated? No, it couldn't be.

He didn't know how long he was standing there, staring back up at the 'Mech, but he did notice when...

It moved.

Only the head, but it was noticeable, as the shadows usually encasing it fell away, and he saw the masked visage from the other night, now repaired. The only sign it had been in a battle was a single black smudge along the pristine white shield that covered the ruined portion of the canopy where his medium laser had grazed in the first exchange, giving the death's-head a twisted grin that seemed to mock

him. He felt his blood go cold, and a scream he was barely able to keep in threatened to overwhelm him.



Later that day, Daniel was called to Mr. Foucault's office, and he answered the summons with the belief that he was to be banned from the open circuit forever.

But Foucault said nothing, merely handing him a black credit card silently. Daniel opened his mouth to speak, but upon seeing the ornate letter sitting on Foucault's desk, he merely nodded his thanks and departed. To his surprise, the card had enough money on it to repair both his *Guillotine* and the *Grasshopper*, and he couldn't help but pause on his way out of the manager's office, looking out the window at the executive boxes overlooking the stadium from the opposite wall. For a moment, it seemed as if the curtain in Box Five shifted slightly, but then it was still. Fighting the chill that seemed to creep up his spine, Daniel hurried down the stairs and out into the frigid winter air.





GAUSS RIFLES

MATTHEW CROSS

BME 210: ADVANCED WEAPONRY ENGINEERING FOR MECHWARRIORS
DR. KIRAN SUZUKI
NEW AVALON INSTITUTE OF SCIENCE, FALL SEMESTER
LECTURE 4: THE GAUSS RIFLE: A PILOT'S WORST ENEMY
18 SEPTEMBER 3125

Begin Transcript

All right class, I think it's about time to start the lecture. And I'll forgive this today, but in general (looking at you two, Johnson and Crick), cooling vests and shorts are not appropriate class attire, no matter how close drills are to class period. No one wants to see that.

Today we are going to talk about the almighty Gauss rifle and its associated derivatives: the light, heavy, improved heavy, and Silver Bullet Gauss rifles. (Don't worry, the Clan-made hyper-assault Gauss rifle will be covered in a future lecture on Clan improvements to Inner Sphere technology.)

Developed by the Terran Hegemony in 2587 and then redeveloped by the Free Worlds League in 3040, the Gauss rifle has been a mainstay weapon of all armed forces in the Inner Sphere. After its reintroduction in 3040, it became extremely common to replace Class-20 autocannons with Gauss rifles to provide much-needed range to heavy-hitting 'Mechs and combat vehicles. The weapon is practically ubiquitous for nearly any battlefield engagement from 3080 forward, which should make you more afraid than excited. I'm sure you have seen the "Best of Solaris Headshots" holovid making its rounds of late: this should be a reminder, not entertainment.

The Gauss rifle was one of many weapon systems that were considered *lostech*. Though the principles of the weapon have been understood for over a millennium, its components made the weapon

impossible to produce. Everyone knows that when you strike a Gauss rifle the right way, it explodes. This is because the capacitors within the Gauss rifle, which comprise a significant portion of its mass, have the habit of eruptively releasing their energy when charged, and not always in the designed fashion. The technology to safely make these extremely complicated capacitors was lost, along with the superconducting inductors needed to generate the electromagnetic fields necessary to propel the projectile at hypersonic velocities. These inductors have to be forged with difficult-to-produce high-temperature superconductors. Despite being back in production for nearly a century, they are still extremely expensive to produce. So please, refrain from blowing any of them up during your next live-fire "laboratory exercise."

Now, as you may have determined, the Gauss rifle requires extreme amounts of electrical energy to fire. Some 'Mechs will show visible stuttering in their movement when firing this weapon, especially OmniMechs that were not designed specifically with them in mind. Furthermore, most internal combustion-powered vehicles struggle to use the Gauss rifle at all, because of the weapon's extreme power usage and the limited power generation of the tank itself. The Gauss variant of the *Demolisher* tank is an example of this, as it must stagger the firing of its two rifles a few seconds apart to prevent critical power loss in other parts of the vehicle. Other examples of ICE vees with Gauss rifles include the *Yellow Jacket* VTOL. It is said pilots have to gun the engines before firing, not only to provide enough power for the weapon but to counter the massive amount of recoil. VTOL pilots are damned fools if you ask me.

The light Gauss rifle and heavy Gauss rifle were logical expansions of the weapon, and obviously the light Gauss rifle was the easier of the two weapons to develop. Once production of the capacitors and superconducting barrels of the standard Gauss rifle was properly understood and standardized, making them smaller was simple engineering. While engineers were making them smaller, they extended the barrel and the adjusted projective geometry to extend the range out to nearly as far as a Class-2 Ultra autocannon, with double the damage potential.

The heavy Gauss rifle was a much harder weapon to nail down. You can't just scale up a Gauss rifle and expect it to, well, not explode. And I'll tell you, kids, when these things blew, it was a spectacular sight. Between the massive electrical bolts, the capacitors that split into shrapnel, and the fireballs, it was a thing of beauty. And death. Quite a few technicians were lost... But it was beautiful...

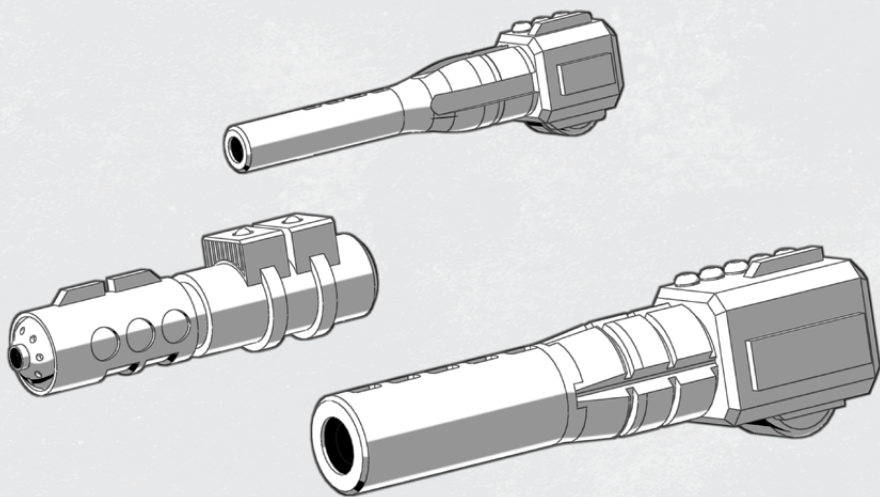
After much experimentation, the solution ended up being to shorten the barrel (relative to a scaled up standard rifle) and use uniquely geometric ammunition to ensure the best possible conductance projectile. The unique ammunition geometry, along with its specialized conductive coating, is the reason behind the heavy Gauss rifle's poor

performance in the farther half of the weapon's standard operational range. And I still don't consider this the heavy's weakest point.

Let me ask this question: have you ever seen a 100-ton 'Mech fall over, flat on its back? I have. I watched an experienced MechWarrior in an *Atlas AS7-S3* fire his heavy Gauss rifle without bracing, and the fall registered on seismographs over 100 kilometers away. And it will happen to you if you ever fire a heavy Gauss rifle without being ready for it. That weapon is a 'Mech killer, but it's also a 'Mech *tipper*. This is why we don't have any training 'Mechs equipped with one. The last thing we need is for you to fall backward, nick a capacitor, and blow up. If it happens to experienced test pilots, it sure as hell will happen to you amateurs.

The Lyrans turned around and had a production-ready improved heavy Gauss rifle ready by 3080. This weapon utilized a new, heavier barrel and new ammunition geometry to smooth out the damage profile. It actually has a slightly lower muzzle velocity, but the new ammo and enhanced inducting coils mean that it keeps its velocity and kinetic energy for the entire length of the operational range. But it comes at a price. A literal price. These things are another 200,000 C-bills over a standard heavy Gauss to produce per weapon, and they weigh as much as a *Stinger*. They'll also *destroy* a *Stinger* in a single shot, so some say the tradeoff is worth it.

Now, Solaris fans may recognize the final variant produced by the Great Houses. The Silver Bullet Gauss rifle. Why is it named the Silver Bullet? I have no idea. Why are LB-X autocannons named LB-X? Well, actually, I *do* know that one, but that's for another day. Anyway, the SB Gauss was an NAIS effort to produce an LB-X-like effect for the



standard Gauss Rifle. While the project was starved for funds, it did produce a weapon that could fire a fragmentation round similar to an LB-X cluster round. A specially designed Gauss-style slug is loaded into the barrel and instantly fragments upon firing, but a strong induced magnetic field keeps a tight spread on the shot. When a traditional round is loaded, the same field that keeps the tight spread on the fragments causes the round to tumble, sometimes hitting as many as fifty meters off target in a random direction or worse, lodging the round in the barrel of the rifle, forcing a complete barrel replacement.

As of today, only a single production 'Mech utilizes the SB Gauss: the Oriente trooper 'Mech, the *Carronade*. While other 'Mechs have used it due to the Word of Blake and the Great Houses experimenting with the technology, the *Carronade* is the only one produced on a large scale. It uses a Silver Bullet Gauss in conjunction with a standard Gauss rifle for a one-two punch effect, and while it hasn't seen much action yet, the Solaris leaderboards are showing its great potential. In the end, while the weapon has found some specialized uses, its role is usually usurped by LB 10-X autocannons or fifteen-tube LRM launchers.

For your laboratory exercise, the tech and astech cadets will be loading up a lance of *Blackjack* Omnis with Alternate Configuration B so you can see how the Gauss rifle affects your piloting systems while firing on the move. The simulators are good, but they never simulate that "power-loss stutter" quite right. As for tactics, you may be tempted to aim for the head of your target. While a cockpit shot results in an instant kill, you are better off nailing a few torso hits and coring an engine rather than knocking out the pilot. Keep your range, and utilize that advantage. Just because you can kill something at range, doesn't mean they can't kill you back. Big guns don't make you invincible.

Also, we'll be keeping one *Blackjack* with its Gauss rifle swapped with a Silver Bullet Gauss rifle so the top performers on the exercise can try it out on the range. It is a treat few MechWarriors have experienced, so do your best to try earning a spot on that command couch.

Now that we have covered the weapons at a high level, please load the file NAIS_X_MkI.ivt on your noteputers so we can examine the finer details of the NAIS Mk. I Gauss rifle.

End Transcript





DAYBREAK ON SHINING MOUNTAIN

TRAVIS HEERMANN

TUTANEKAI

DEEP PERIPHERY

3 JULY 3075, THE 309TH LANDING DAY

Captain Akahata Beddow throttled back his 90-ton *Cyclops*. In the distance, the brightening penumbra of Hinemoa's eclipse crept across the stark, cratered plain. Hinemoa, Tutanekai's sister planet, filled a third of the sky.

"Watch your heat levels, grommets!" he called over the comms. "Daybreak in three minutes."

"Why the hell are we out here training on Landing Day? There's beer to drink!"

Beddow clenched his teeth at Bravo Two's tone. "Bravo Two, your mic is on."

"Yeah, I reckon it is."

"Another insubordinate word and you're grounded, Bravo Two," Beddow growled.

"Yessir, sir."

Goddammit.

He stabbed a button with his finger to launch the next stage of the exercise.

Along the ridgeline about a kilometer distant, the outlines of four "enemy 'Mechs" appeared.

"Contact!" said Joe Fepuleai from his *Galahad*, Bravo Three. "Bearing three-two-zero."

The four *Galahads* swung toward the targets.

The Winds of Dawn began to catch up the fine grit of Cook Plain, even in Tutanekai's super-thin atmosphere—traces of nitrogen, carbon

monoxide, and methane—as the terminator of the eclipse swept across the planet’s naked face, creating drastic gradients in temperature and atmospheric pressure. In moments, the surface temperature would spike from -150°C to 280°C . Such conditions prohibited weapons fire and kept most 'Mechs moving slow or else risk overheating.

The targets had cover, the high ground, and one other advantage that would shortly become apparent.

From the center of Bravo Lance’s formation, Bravo Two paused its advance and fired one of its Gauss rifles. One of the targets collapsed from a direct hit on its “cockpit.” Bravo Two was a *Galahad* GLH-2D, which mounted a Gauss rifle on each arm, rather than the GLH-1Ds that made up the rest of the lance and mounted large lasers and PPCs on each arm. Bravo Two was special.

“Wow, great shooting, mate!” said Fepuleai.

Bravo Two said nothing, but regained balance, took aim, and fired again. A second target flashed **DESTROYED (COCKPIT)** on Beddow’s command display.

The rudimentary AIs controlling the targets’ movements drove them all behind cover.

A tingle went through Beddow at the display of marksmanship. And bloodthirstiness. Due to MechWarrior ejection seats and the nature of 'Mech warfare, MechWarriors had a better-than-average chance of surviving most engagements—unless someone blasted a rugby ball-sized nickel-iron slug through their cockpit at tremendous velocity.

The lance leader, Agnes Kirikiri in Bravo One, said, “Great shooting, Maki. Now, let’s aim for the ridgeline approach to the left and try to flank them.”

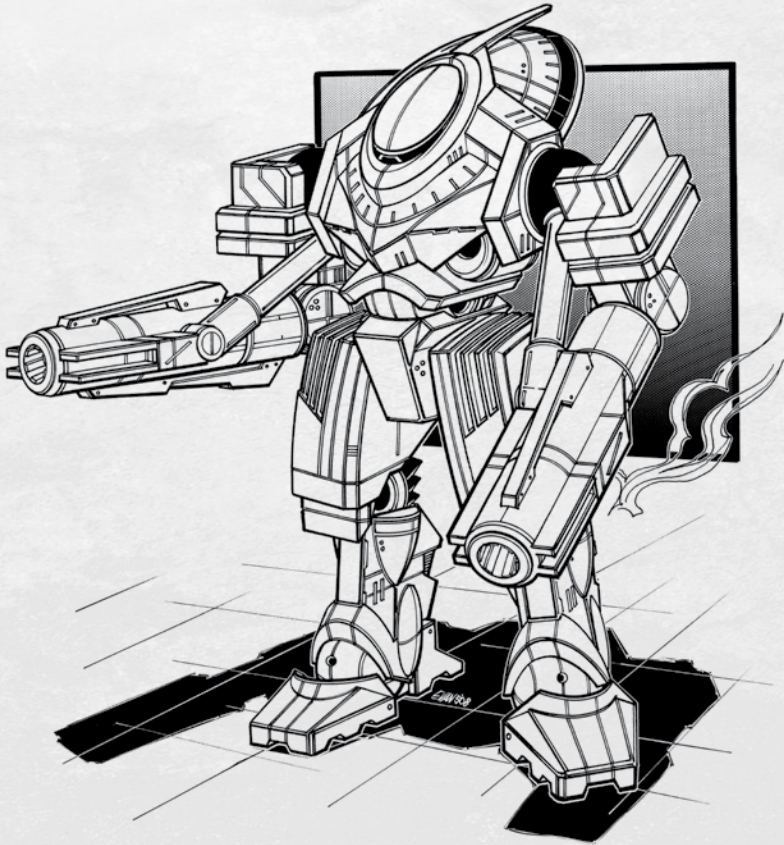
Bravo Lance’s four *Galahads* swung toward the inclined road that led to the ridgeline, Bravo Two stumbling alone behind as its pilot tried to regain balance.

The planets Tutanekai and Hinemoa, named for star-crossed lovers of a millennia-old Maori tradition, formed a binary, both orbiting a single point between them on their path around the sun, tidally locked so that their faces remained ever turned toward one another. Both barren, inhospitable worlds, at least on the surface. Sunlight blazed around the rim of Hinemoa.

Behind him, the ice-crusted cone of Taranaki Mountain, 31 kilometers high, glimmered blue-white against the tapestry of stars. Eons-old water ice so thick even the periodic scorching of “day” could not boil it off, and beneath that the warrens Beddow’s ancestors had dug.

He smiled grimly and shook his head, muttering, “Silly, silly grommets.” He stabbed another button.

Another lance of targets popped up from another bank of jagged rocks—rocks that shaded the targets from the sun. Simulated laser beams speared Bravo Lance, and computers calculated damage. Bravo



Lance turned their torsos and returned fire. Then the original targets reemerged and opened fire, catching Bravo Lance in a crossfire. Laser fire poured relentlessly down. Because the simulated enemies were positioned in the shade, where the temperature was still below -100 C, they could maintain their fire with slower heat buildup. Launching an alpha strike from a secure position without heat consequences was a MechWarrior's dream, the sweet spot. And Bravo Lance was in the bull's-eye.

Simulated damage displays flashed dire results across Bravo Lance as the low-power lasers played over them. Simulated missiles from the first group of targets rained down. Bravo Lance returned fire, and in the increasing glare of sunlight, their heat meters spiked.

Bravo Two fired a Gauss rifle again. One of the new attackers flashed **DESTROYED (COCKPIT)**.

Damn, that girl could shoot.

Bravo Lance lumbered toward their targets at 54 kilometers per hour to close with their shorter-range weapons. Whorls of vapor and

ice twisted and tore in the wind. Bravo Three slowed and halted. Heat shutdown. *Galahads* that mounted energy weapons required careful heat management, due to a design that was light on heat sinks.

Simulated fire blasted down on the immobile 'Mech.

"Bravo Three," Beddow said, "you're dead."

Fepuleai's cursing came back over the comms.

"Come on, guys!" cried Bravo Two. "We can take 'em!"

The rest of them barreled on. Beddow followed in his *Cyclops* two hundred meters behind, watching the action with an instructor's eye. He wiped away the sweat gathering in the ridges and whorls of his *moko* facial tattoos.

Bravo One ground to a halt. Heat shutdown.

"Bravo One, you're dead," Beddow said.

Agnes Kirikiri, the lance grommet-commander, grumbled.

Then Conor Corbett in Bravo Four as well.

Bravo Two charged on, saved only by the comparatively low heat generation of the Gauss rifles. But then the simulated fire of five 'Mechs blasted over her, and her *Galahad* died in an imagined conflagration.

"You're all dead."

More cursing came over the comms.

"Simulation ended." Beddow walked his *Cyclops* over to Bravo Three and pushed it over, facedown. It hit the dirt with a thump he felt up through his 'Mech's legs. "Now, all you dead grommets, what is the Rule?"

A sheepish voice from Joe Fepuleai. "We fight in the shade. The enemy fights in the sun."

Beddow walked over to Bravo One and shoved it facedown.

Kirikiri's "oof" at the impact came over the comms.

"What is the Rule?" he said.

A much more confident voice came from Fepuleai. "We fight in the shade. *They* fight in the sun!"

Beddow walked over to Bravo Four and shoved Corbett onto his back. "*What is the Rule?*"

Four voices chorused. "*We fight in the shade. They fight in the sun!*"

He walked up to Bravo Two, the last to die, and stood before it. He gazed five meters down through two cockpit windows. Makareta "Maki" Beddow met her father's gaze with a simmering, dark-eyed glare.

He shoved her 'Mech onto his back.

"Do I need to tattoo it on your lips? Carve it in your *moko*?"

Four voices chorused, "*No, sir.*"

"I guess we'll see. Now, get up, and get back to the barn."



As the massive doors of Taranaki Mountain's airlock closed behind her 'Mech, Maki Beddow still fumed.

Her friends were all partying for Landing Day. They were watching the Zone Six Raiders and Zone Two Blackshirts in the rugby championship match. They were drinking brews and kissing their sweethearts. Maki was busy getting humiliated by an old man who refused to acknowledge that she was an absolute badass with a Gauss rifle. And she was *sans* sweetheart these days. Joe had blown her off, and that geek from the Radio-Astronomy Department apparently had interstellar comm signals to decode.

“‘Grommet’ my ass,” she muttered.

Bravo Lance lumbered into the ‘Mech bay and took their positions among the other three lances.

While she waited for her *Galahad*’s armor to cool down before exiting, she switched her comms to the entertainment feeds. She rolled her eyes at the sight of Taranaki Mountain’s admin, Celia Xiao, giving the Landing Day address from the center of the rugby pitch.

“...and so, on this Landing Day, three hundred and nine years after our ancestors arrived to build this installation, three hundred and nine years after we were forgotten by the rest of the galaxy, we have built not only an installation but a colony, hollowed from the very rock of this desolate world. From the depths of our lush subterranean farms and gardens to the top of this impenetrable mountain, we are Tutanekai. Someday, we will rejoin the rest of the galaxy. Someday, we will complete the construction of the hyperpulse generator that brought our ancestors here. Someday, we will be enfolded into the arms of the Department of Communications with a pat on the back, and a ‘job well done.’ And let’s not forget three centuries of back pay.”

Laughter echoed from the crowd of ten thousand surrounding the admin.

“Someday, we will return to the stars like our brethren *out there*.”

Maki rolled her eyes again at that. What “brethren” did Xiao mean? The Ghost Bear incursion of thirty years ago? They had come to claim Tutanekai as their own—and failed, thanks to the Rule her father was always on about. The insane Clan had brought two dozen ‘Mechs, faced Tutanekai’s mere single company, and fled with their stubby little tails between their legs. Was Xiao talking about the “brethren” of the Terran Hegemony’s Department of Communications who, 309 years ago, had landed five thousand workers on a barren, deadly rock—with insufficient equipment and materials to actually finish the job they’d been given—and disappeared, never to return, leaving no HPG communications, not even a JumpShip?

Screw them.

If more Ghost Bears ever showed up—or for that matter anyone thinking they might “claim” the home her ancestors had built—she would give them a nickel-iron slug between the eyes.

Xiao continued her address: “Until that day, however, we will celebrate Landing Day, celebrate the world we have built, and carry

on as we've always done. We work hard, and we *play* hard." She threw up her arms, and the crowd cheered. "So let's get ready to play the greatest sport known to mankind!"

The cheers rose.

A knock on Maki's hatch let her know the heat level was safe enough for a tech to let her out, so she powered down all the systems, removed her neurohelmet, unbuckled her safety harness, and jumped out onto the gantry. In the coolness of the vast cavern, her sweat-soaked uniform offered a welcome chill after the cockpit's sweltering heat.

The tech, Jess Brougham, gave her a look that said better-luck-next-time. "Tough day."

"More like stupid," Maki said, shouldering past her, "and I don't mean me."

Brougham backed off.

Even as she climbed down the gantry, Maki could feel the heat radiating from the *Galahad's* metal skin. She snorted. There were better things to do on Landing Day than be made a fool.

A message from her best mate Ari pinged over her wristcomm. "Party already started. Pukeko Pub in Zone Five." A couple of ales would help quench the steam in her chest. A quick shower and then—

"Makareta!"

The boom of her CO's voice—her father's voice—cranked her shoulders a centimeter higher. He strode toward her from across the 'Mech bay, like an ambulatory block of basalt. His dark eyes gleamed dangerously. She squared herself to take it and prepared to return fire.

He stabbed a finger toward her. "When are you going to learn?"

"That was a bullshit exercise."

Her return volley slowed him for only a moment. "What is the first thing you should have done?"

"I opened fire because—"

"What is the first thing?"

"—because I reckoned I could take out all four of them before the sunlight hit us."

"What is the first thing?" He swiped his hand like the head of a pickax and glared at her, into her. "Stand at attention when I'm talking to you!"

She snapped to attention, took a deep breath and let it out. "Our first course of action in that situation should have been to seek cover and protection from the sun."

"And what effect did your pausing to open fire have on that course of action?"

She blinked.

"What effect?"

"Uh, they stopped to wait for me."

"Right. Your lance stuck to you like they're supposed to. And if you'd done the right thing, you would have made it safely to cover. So if you knew the correct course of action, why did you not carry it out?"

"Because..." Because she wanted to show him what she could do in live-fire exercise. She had spent thousands of hours in the simulator, honing an eye that no one could match with a Gauss rifle.

"Because you wanted to show off! And you would have gotten four 'Mechs turned into scrap, and maybe the MechWarriors, too. We have sixteen 'Mechs on Tutanekai. *That's it.* Our entire defense force is one reinforced company. Losing *one* 'Mech in battle, much less an entire lance, is an unacceptable outcome." His facial tattoos and wide eyes gave him a ferocity that turned weaker hearts into runny putty. "And if you ever speak with that kind of insubordination again to a senior officer, you will lose your 'Mech and spend the rest of your days as a tech."

The MechWarriors of Tutanekai were the elite of the elite, there being only sixteen of them in a colony that over the last three centuries had grown to fifty thousand. Her father was a MechWarrior. Her mother was a MechWarrior. She had never dreamed of being anything else. How many others would leap at the chance for an open slot? Stripping her of her 'Mech would, in effect, be denying any future children their heritage. Her father never made idle threats. She tried to swallow the lump in her throat.

His voice softened. "We taught you better than that."

She stiffened, and her vision blurred with tears. For once, there was nothing she could say. Her mother's name was inscribed on the plaque in the cockpit of Maki's *Galahad*, the most recent name in a list going back three centuries. Hers was the only GLH-2D, the only *Galahad* that mounted Gauss rifles, which made it unique in Tutanekai's defense forces. But it wasn't really *her Galahad*, not yet. She was just a grommet, a trainee, a provisional MechWarrior. She hadn't yet earned her MechWarrior *moko*. Only after that would the 'Mech Corps perform the Ceremony to transfer possession of the *Galahad* to Maki. And none of that would bring back her mother, or cure the cancer that had turned the strongest woman on Tutanekai into a wrecked, ashen shell.

"Well? What have you to say?" he said.

Her voice would *not* crack. "I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"Dismissed."

She turned and marched away from him, the pressure of his disappointment like twin lasers burning holes in her back.



"Thanks for coming, Captain Beddow. We're sorry to drag you away from Landing Day festivities." Dr. Joseph Hyatt, chief of Taranaki's Communications Department, gestured toward a chair beside the polished-metal table, and pushed his spectacles higher on his nose. "Tea?"

Beddow nodded, and a steward set about brewing a fresh pot. Maybe it would settle the sourness his guts from the flank-chewing he'd given Maki. "It must be important." He seldom made it this far into the upper reaches of Taranaki Mountain, near the summit where the telescopes, the transmission antennas, and the half-finished HPG were installed. With fewer bodies here, the corridors were cleaner, the air fresher. Tasteful paintings in ocher and cream decorated the polished igneous walls.

The door opened again, and Admin Celia Xiao swept into the room, flanked by two bodyguards. She had fresh strands of gray in her hair and only reached Beddow's breastbone, but her presence filled the room. A born politician, to be sure.

"Gentlemen, apologies for my tardiness," Xiao said. "The crowds."

"Thank you for coming, Madam Admin," Hyatt said. "Impressive speech at the rugby match."

"No need to stroke me, Joe. Your funding is in no danger," she said with wry confidence, seating herself opposite Beddow at the table.

Hyatt rubbed his shiny, narrow pate and laughed. "I'll get to it then, shall I?" He cleared his throat and activated a video screen. "You know how difficult it is to pick up any radio transmissions from the Inner Sphere this far out. Even the oldest transmissions from twenty-first-century Terra have not yet reached us. Occasionally we pick up comm traffic from nearby systems that's only a decade or two old. And to date, no one we know of has heard *our* transmissions."

"No one except the Ghost Bears," Beddow said.

Hyatt cleared his throat. "Yes, well. Nevertheless, *we* listen and—"

"Cut to the bedrock, Joe," Xiao said. "Please."

Hyatt squirmed at the scrutiny. Techies and scientists weren't accustomed to dealing with the highest ranked personages in Taranaki Mountain. "In the three centuries since our isolation, the rest of the Inner Sphere seems to have undergone massive upheavals. As Captain Beddow already mentioned, there were the Ghost Bears, who seem to be one player in a massive war. We get only snippets of broadcasts, most of which are difficult to date, so it's nearly impossible to tell if wars are starting, ending, or ongoing. For all we know, the rest of the Inner Sphere has been at war continuously since the year we landed here."

Leave it to a scientist to drone on as if his audience were ignorant compost muckers. The people of Tutanekai had long surmised that the reason the Department of Communications had never returned with the parts necessary to complete the HPG was some widespread, all-out war around the time of First Landing. In the chaos of conflict, JumpShips could be waylaid, installations razed, records lost.

"But there's something new happening," Hyatt said. "We've cross-referenced it from a number of sources, but there seems to be some ultra-powerful force ravaging the Inner Sphere, all the way to Old Terra."

"Another war," Beddow said. "What makes this one different?"

Hyatt's voice quavered. "I must say, it's different in its catastrophic scale, as if the sole aim is total destruction. Entire worlds nuked into oblivion, old worlds, populated worlds. Perhaps even Mars and Old Terra, but we're not sure about that, only that there have been many massive attacks. It seems at least one faction believes in war without limits." Hyatt touched his data pad. The screen behind him flashed a slideshow of grainy images. A down-pointed broadsword with some sort of jewel at the cross guard. Strange 'Mechs and aerospace fighters bearing the same emblem. Scenes of nuclear armageddon.

"Then we should be happy we're far from it," Beddow said.

"So who are they?" Xiao said.

"The Word of Blake, it seems."

"Sounds religious," Xiao said.

"Indeed it does." Hyatt twisted his fingers into knots.

"Surely the Great Houses could quit squabbling long enough to destroy such an enemy," Xiao said. "But you still haven't said why you brought this to our attention *today*. Surely this could go in a standard weekly briefing."

"Astute as ever, Madam Admin. I bring this to your attention because we caught mention of Tutanekai's old DepCom reference—when this planet was still just letters and numbers—in a snippet of transmission."

"Can you play it for us?" Xiao said.

Hyatt keyed his data pad, and the video screen switched to a voice-only transmission. "This was a radio transmission from an unknown system. We've edited out the propagation delays."

"...There's somebody there, I'm telling you."

"...all the charts as a dead system."

"Yeah, except this old ComStar one I found goes all the way back to the... Here."

"Send me the chart... Do you really think there are people still there?"

"Have to check the records but..."

"...worth looking into..."

The conversation faded to static.

Beddow said, "Can you triangulate the source? That might give us a likely date, given the light-year distance of the identified system."

"Who knows what worlds have been colonized out here in the last three hundred years? We have charts, but little idea what occurred in those systems."

"Well, I for one would call this cause for celebration," Xiao said. "Somebody knows we're here."

"And those insane Ghost Bears also knew we were here," said Beddow. "This raises some questions. What is ComStar, for instance, and why would they know about us? And what is our move if someone shows up again?"

"We welcome them, of course," Xiao said.

"And the last time we did that, a bunch of furry barbarians tried to take what was ours. Maybe you're not old enough to remember—"

Xiao's voice frosted. "I'm well aware of your battle record, Captain."

"We got lucky! And maybe they left because they had juicier targets. If they had come back with a bigger force, we'd have been finished. If there's somebody out there nuking entire planets, why in the galaxy would you welcome them?"

"Better a welcome than an immediate war."

"You're talking about appeasement."

"And you're talking about antagonism. Besides, isn't it best for a military force to hide its true strength?"

"Sometimes. And sometimes it's best to get right in a stranger's face and scare the shit out of them so you don't have to fight." He bulged his eyes and bared his tongue, extending it down to his chin in the war grimace of his ancient people.

She looked away, unfazed. "Duly noted. We will wait and see what happens if we ever detect an emergence signature. In the meantime, keep up your training. I understand you have an entire lance of trainees."

"Had a rash of...retirements."

She nodded. "We lost a great one in your wife. She is missed."

"She is." A shiver went through his body, as if Jenny's fingers had just brushed up his back.

"Now if you'll excuse me, let's not let the festivities get away from us, eh? Dr. Hyatt, please keep us apprised."



The Granite Head was the kind of pub Maki liked—loud, raucous, and smelling of chips and ale.

She ignored the buzzing on her wristcomm of her friends asking where she was. Joining them now would be a disservice to them. After the chewing her father had executed on her arse, she wasn't fit company for anyone. Ari would understand.

Eyes glued to the video screens, the entire pub groaned and cheered alternatively as the rugby action ebbed and flowed. Here in Zone Two, the air was warmer from closer proximity to the mountain's geothermal ducts and smelled of moist earth and greenery.

These farmers loved their Blackshirts. Which was why she was wearing her Raiders jersey.

By the time she got all the way down here in the mountain's hollowed-out bowels, the second half had begun, and the Blackshirts were getting shucked like corncobs. That would put the locals into a downright surly state of mind.

She shouldered up to the bar between two burly lunkheads, standing to about their triceps, and ordered an ale. In the closeness, she caught a whiff of herself, still smelling of sweat. Her hair was no doubt an unkempt black froth, like an exploded ball of carbon fiber.

On the screen above the bar, the Raiders scored again to extend a nigh-insurmountable lead. The entire bar moaned and cursed. Maki raised her drink and cheered as loud as she could.

The lunkheads noticed the worm between them.

"Where the hell did you come from?" said one.

"My mum," she answered.

"Wise arse, are yas?"

"At least I know who my mum is."

The second one slapped the first on the shoulder and laughed. "She's a cheeky bit, eh, mate?"

The first one glowered at her jersey. "You're far from home, little bit?"

The bartender, a paunchy, sweaty bloke named Phil, leaned over the bar. "You cause trouble in here again, Maki, you'll get the boot."

She grinned at him. "Me? I'm just here to enjoy the wallop."

The bartender gave her a stern look, then moved on.

The second one turned to her. "I'm Ross. My charming mate here is Thorn. So what's your code?" A shorthand for asking where she was from.

She faced him. "Let me guess. Yours is A-6, Agricultural Compost Mucker." She thumbed over her shoulder. "And your mate's here—what was his name...Prick?—is A-25, Agricultural Compost Taster."

An enormous hand fell on her shoulder. "Now just a minute, little bit—"

She spun on Thorn and jerked her shoulder away. "The next part of you that touches me gets twisted off."

Ross laughed at Thorn's reddening face. "We got us a real sizzler, here, don't we, mate? Bound to be more entertaining than this goddamn disgrace of a rugby match."

"Useless bastards haven't won a championship since '62," grumbled another patron behind Ross.

Maki took a deep pull on her drink. "I'm not here to entertain you smelly lumpers."

Ross said, "I'll have you know that my code is *Executive Compost Mucker*." He winked at her.

Dammit if she hadn't come down to blow off some steam and here was this cute, dirt-stained farmer trying to steam her up again. And it was working.

"Lemme guess—Maki, was it?—your code is P-1."

"I don't know that one," said Thorn.

"Yes, do enlighten me, oh witty potato-picker," Maki said, leaning toward him, chin in palm. She knew of no job code with a "P" prefix.

"Chief Pain in the Arse."

Thorn guffawed behind her, too long and too loud.

The small hairs on her neck rose, and her eyes narrowed. "I suppose that depends on who you ask."

Ross turned back to the screen and took a drink. "I reckon it would be unanimous."

The corner of her mouth quirked upward. Cheeky bastard indeed.

The Blackshirts managed a desperate forward kick, which one of their quickest players nabbed and ran for a spectacular score. The bar erupted in cheers.

Maki cursed and threw up her hands, sloshing ale across the front of Thorn's worn, black coverall.

Thorn cursed and glared at her, his patience disappearing with the foam on his chest.

She turned her back on him and faced Ross, smirking inwardly at the bluster rising behind her like a heat meter.

"So you never gave us yas code," Ross said. "You obviously don't belong around here."

She puffed up a little. "M-5."

"M'... What the hell is 'M'?" Thorn grumbled.

"MechWarrior."

A moment passed as all the eyes within earshot turned on her.

"Haw!" Thorn wheezed a guffaw. "I don't see any tattoo on your face. Hell, *I'm* a MechWarrior! Or maybe a unicorn!" He slapped her shoulder.

That was when she seized two of his fingers and twisted them until he howled. Snacks and ale sprayed in intricate, graceful displays of Newtonian physics and fluid dynamics.

The last thing she remembered before the police stunned her was her legs wrapped around Thorn's waist, climbing him like a pillar, and headbutting him over and over, laughing with the taste of blood in her mouth as they went down.



The eyes of the Zone Two police officer bugged out of her skull at the sight of Captain Akahata Beddow standing before her kiosk window. 'Mech Corps COs were always celebrities, being second in authority only to the admin.

"I'm here for my daughter," he said.

The officer escorted him to the detention block. His guts simmered with the mix of anger and shame. No parent ever dreamed of bailing their child out of jail.

The officer kept eyeing him over her shoulder, as if she couldn't believe he was walking right next to her.

"What are the charges?" he said.

"Assault, battery, and disorderly conduct."

"Sentence?"

"Two weeks confinement. Six months probation. Restitution to the victim."

"Who was the victim?"

"An aggie twice her size."

He smirked. "Is he all right?"

"Nothing a few bandages and staples won't fix."

The detention block was a series of caverns and cells carved into solid basalt. It was dark, dingy, and stank of urine and bad decisions. Thankfully, he hadn't made such bad decisions in a good many years.

Serious crime was rare. Everyone had too much to do to think about murder or theft. So the worst reprobate with whom Maki was likely to share a cell was herself.

The officer led him into the cell block, past a few other drunks sleeping off Landing Day excess, and then to the hollowed-out stone cell where Maki sat alone. A split lip. The start of a shiner. Massive lump on her forehead.

"I gather the other bloke got the rough end of the piston," Beddow said.

Maki jumped to her feet and stood at attention.

He faced her squarely, hands behind his back. "What were you doing down here?"

"Trying to find a less destructive way to focus my anger, sir."

"Less destructive than what?"

"Than punching you in the teeth, sir."

"For what?"

"For humiliating us grommets in a...questionable exercise. Sir."

He tamped down the surge of defensiveness. Beddow had undergone the same exercise as a grommet, intended to drive home the way conditions on the surface could change almost instantaneously, and how to use that to best advantage.

"And for ignoring the fact that I scored three one-shot kills. Sir."

"Being able to shoot doesn't make you a MechWarrior, Maki. But I'll give you that. I've never seen anyone do what you did today."

Surprise flickered beneath her furrowed brows.

"But you were foolish, and you got yourself and rest of your lance killed." He fixed her with a hard glare, but then Jenny's defiance flared out like a star's corona from his little girl's eyes, and he had no choice but to look away. "So how *did* you get to be a crack shot with a Gauss with only one live-fire exercise under your belt?"

"Simulator, sir."

"How many hours?"

"With the *Galahad* or all of them?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Let's start with the *Galahad*."

"About two thousand hours."

He nearly choked. "And the others?"

"All models and variants?"

"Um, yes."

"About seven thousand."

He whistled his amazement. “You’re only nineteen! How in hell have you racked up that many sim hours?”

“Mum gave me her keycodes.”

Maki and Jenny had often colluded good-naturedly behind his back. He did his best to pretend he was ignorant of it. But this—he had no idea. And the techs who ran the sims must have been in on it. He couldn’t begin to do the arithmetic behind seven thousand hours of simulator practice. “How long has this been going on?”

“Since I was twelve, sir. As soon as I could reach the pedals.”

All that, and high marks all through school.

He cleared a lump from his throat. “Well, I guess we learn something new every—” He clamped down onto the crack in his voice.

Maki was a pillar of battered strength there in her dark, cold cell.

He took a deep breath and composed himself. “Our job is to *protect* civilians, not use them for a heavy bag. Next time, put your anger where it belongs.” His hard, dark gaze held hers. “See you in a couple of weeks.”

He spun and marched out.



“Captain,” said Dr. Hyatt over Beddow’s wrist comm. “We have detected an emergence signature. Admin Xiao is requesting an immediate meeting.”

Beddow put away his materiel reports, his office suddenly chilly. A JumpShip had arrived in-system.

Before departing for the admin’s offices, he put the entire ‘Mech Corps on high alert. All ‘Mechs were to prep for immediate action and remain so until further notice. Taranaki Mountain’s militia would stand little chance against any force that could wipe out a thousand tons of BattleMechs, but it was also time to muster them. They might be able to provide a last-bastion defense.

He met Admin Xiao, along with the heads of all departments—Science and Technology, Communications, Mining, Agriculture, and Education—in a spacious conference room in the administrative sector of Zone One. Everyone looked nervous and fidgety. Some of them weren’t old enough to remember the last time an emergence signature had been detected in-system, to remember the elation, then the dashed hopes, then the terror. Whispers and mutterings circulated around the room. Beddow sat at the end of the long table, opposite Xiao.

The admin glanced only briefly at him as she took her seat. He couldn’t get a semblance of intent from her glance, which put him on alert.

Xiao told the assemblage, “Just to reiterate, we detected an emergence signature at 1617 hours standard time from a JumpShip of unknown configuration. We have not yet received any hails, but their jump point lies approximately twenty-five light-minutes away,

and we dropped into Hinemoa's shadow twelve minutes after their arrival. Before we fell into eclipse, our telescopes detected thrust flares from two, perhaps three DropShips, also of unknown configuration."

They would all spend nine hours in the darkness of Hinemoa's eclipse, deaf and blind.

"Now, I'm pretty sure there are fundamentally two viewpoints on this event," she continued. "One is a great big 'Huzzah! Let's go give them a big hug, bring them home, and show them around.' And the other is fear that this is a military incursion, more folks like the Ghost Bears coming to take our home away. Anything else is a variation of these two possibilities. Any alternative viewpoints?"

No one spoke.

"Very well, we'll proceed under the military assumption, rather than wishful thinking. The possibility that this is the Department of Communications showing up after three centuries to fulfill our contract is somewhat low on the list of likelihoods. So we need to find out which it is as quickly as possible. Therefore, I propose an off-world parley. My administrative staff and I will take the *Greenstone* out to meet them. We'll find out who they are and what they want, with all communications and data beamed back to Tutanekai in real time."

Greenstone was Tutanekai's only spaceworthy DropShip, a *Danais*-class cargo carrier with a few "special" modifications. A couple centuries back, an administration had grown worried about pirate threat, and incorporated armament, essentially turning the *Greenstone* into a Q-ship. They had been able to manufacture their own suborbital personnel and cargo carriers to service the mining outposts, but any further DropShips, much less a JumpShip, were beyond their engineering and fabrication capabilities.

Beddow cleared his throat. "I would like permission to accompany you, Madam Admin."

She gave him a little smile, as if she had expected this. "Absolutely not, Captain. You personally represent one-sixteenth of our fighting strength, and your leadership is critical."

Dr. Hyatt leaned onto the table and raised a hand. "Madam Admin, what if something happens to you?"

She turned her green eyes squarely on Beddow. "Then you'll know, won't you?" A general expostulation of protest circulated around the room. She raised her hands to quiet them. "As I'm not entirely naive, however, I will take a force of our best-trained militia. For protection only. I've no wish to be called a pirate. Unless it's a costume party."

Her quip lightened the atmosphere in the room to marginally less dire.

With his wristcomm, Beddow sent Xiao a text-only query: *Is GS fully loaded with ammo?*

The *Greenstone*'s crew was fully trained in using its armaments, an array of 120 long-range missile tubes hidden behind blow-away panels,

plus eight large lasers and ten Gauss rifles. It was small, as DropShips went, but it packed enough punch give any pirate pause.

Xiao eased back into a chair, dipping her hands out of view. Her response buzzed into Beddow's wrist: *Yes*.

She said, "If anything happens to me, Captain Beddow will assume command of this facility until military operations have ceased. Beyond that, use standard succession and promotion protocols. Am I clear?"

He nodded to her faintly.



The officer swung open the door to Maki's cell and stepped aside.

Maki paused her fifth set of abdominal crunches and stared at the guard.

"You're free to go," the officer said.

"But I have six days left on my sentence."

"Your sentence has been commuted."

Something in the officer's voice gave Maki a chill of warning. She scrambled to her feet. "What happened?"

"We got company."

"You mean—"

"Someone's at the door. Now, what are you waiting for? Move your arse."

Maki hurried out of the cell block and breathed free air. Eight days in the slam felt like an incredible waste of life. She should have been training.

The first thing she did outside in the larger cavern was to lock her eyeballs onto a news feed and dispel eight days of blackout.

The *Greenstone* had just launched to meet the incoming visitors, expecting rendezvous in about eleven days. Telescopes had identified two incoming DropShips, class unknown.

It was really happening.

She felt a sick mix of elation and trepidation, like lava sluicing over an ice cap. Even though she grew up hearing her father's stories of the Ghost Bear attack, she had dreamed of nothing but exploring the wide open galaxy. Dreams of becoming a renowned MechWarrior in the shining stellar empires of the Inner Sphere had filled her thoughts for as long as she could remember. Surely their technology now surpassed Tutanekai's centuries-old junk. It all still worked just fine, but she dreamed of Gauss rifles with greater punch, optics with greater magnification, targeting systems with better threat identification and range, 'Mechs that were faster, tougher, and packing even greater firepower.

If these visitors were hostile, she might have to face advanced 'Mechs with that selfsame, centuries-old junk.

This Zone Two cavern had been one bustle short of a riot on Landing Day, but now the echoes hung long and distant in the empty

expanse of cold, dark rock. Grocery and sundries shops were open—but empty; pubs and arcades were not. A tractor pulling a tiered wagon of vegetables rumbled by.

The train back up to Zone One was nearly empty on what should have been a regular workday, but nonessential workers were being reassigned to disaster drills and militia and emergency training. Defense gunners. Ammunition haulers. Triage. Repairs.

Taranaki Mountain's sheer size made it well-fortified. It stood just over thirty-one kilometers high atop a plateau seven hundred kilometers in diameter, an extinct volcano formed at the focal point of the tidal forces between the binary planets. Most of the colony, with thousands of miles of tunnels and connected caverns, was buried hundreds of meters below the surface, completely self-sustained, impervious to orbital bombardment. The only parts of the colony not easily defensible were the mining outposts, but those workers had already been evacuated to Taranaki Mountain.

But could they fend off a sustained, concerted military assault?

Her quarters were as she had left them. The half-eaten sandwich on the counter had turned to a shapeless amoeba. The pile of empty food wrappers in the corner was starting to smell.

When she received her *moko*—if she did—she'd get more spacious quarters, but she'd never been dissatisfied with her single bunk, chair, and kitchenette in a room she could cross in three steps. She spent nearly all of her waking hours in a simulator anyway.

The vid screen in her quarters lit with a message to report to the 'Mech bay immediately.

She paused, however, and withdrew a polished obsidian box from a bureau drawer. Inside the box lay a necklace—a jade carving of a hammerhead shark's tooth. Maki had never seen a hammerhead shark, nor would she likely ever, but this necklace had been passed from warrior to warrior down fifty generations from her ancient island homeland on Old Terra. The shark's tooth represented strength and resilience. Three days before she died, Maki's mother had offered her the necklace. As a child, Maki had begged her mother for the necklace. She loved it for its beautiful emerald hue, gleaming and sharp as if it had come from the jaws of a living, *pounamu* shark. Her mother had sharply denied the childish demands for years. But on the day it was finally offered, Maki refused it.

I can't take it, Mum, you need it now more than ever.

No, sweetheart. You do.

In her mother's pale face, the tattoos turned from rich, dark blue to colorless gray. The final descent had come quickly after that.

Maki had never been able to bring herself to wear the necklace.

With a prayer to her mother's spirit, she slipped it around her neck.

A special news broadcast flashed on her screen.

"This is a special report. The *Greenstone* has received its first signal from the incoming DropShips and relayed it live. We replay the exchange here in its entirety with signal-propagation delays edited out."

Something in the newscaster's voice ran a cold finger up Maki's spine.

A pale, aquiline face appeared on the screen. "This is Precentor James Wilmarth, commander of this exploratory mission, aboard the DropShip *Sword of Peace*. With whom am I speaking?" His eyes were narrow and colorless, like her dying mother's tattoos. His alien accent grated on Maki's ears, English so strange it was barely intelligible. The lilt and sway of it were all wrong, too staccato, too terse. And what the hell was a precentor?

The admin's face appeared on the screen, smiling but guarded. "This Celia Xiao, aboard the DropShip *Greenstone*. I am chief administrator of Taranaki Mountain, an official installation of the Department of Communications. I wish to welcome you to our out-of-the-way system."

"Madam Admin, the Word of Blake welcomes your hospitality. I'm afraid you have been isolated for a very, very long time. The Department of Communications as you know it has not existed for more than three hundred years. Have you truly had no visitors in that time?"

"May I ask, what are your intentions?"

"I appreciate your caution, Madam Admin. We received intelligence that a long-lost installation of ComStar—excuse me, the Department of Communications—might still exist out here in the Deep Periphery. Nearly all records of your existence were lost during the First Succession War, a terrible conflict that almost plunged the Inner Sphere back into a new dark age. We have come to welcome you into the arms of the Word. Our records indicate you were intended to be a Deep Periphery HPG point, the first in this sector."

"That is correct."

"What is the status of your hyperpulse generator? I take it the installation remains unfinished?"

"Apparently our parts requisition was misplaced."

"I admire your tenacity. We have come with everything necessary to complete your HPG and connect this remote system to the rest of human space. Soon you'll have JumpShips aplenty arriving."

"And what of...ComStar?"

"ComStar took a very unfortunate path. The Word of Blake is all that remains of ComStar."

"It seems we have a bit of catching up to do, Precentor Wilmarth. I look forward to sharing information with you in person. Would you be willing to rendezvous?"

"Of course, Madam Admin."

The news broadcaster's face reappeared on the screen. "Admin Xiao continues on course to the *Sword of Peace* for this historic rendezvous in eleven days' time. Our best wishes go with her."

The broadcast immediately launched into a gabble of analysts who would spend the next several hours picking apart every syllable of the exchange.

Maki's heart fluttered at the possibilities. Finally, after all these generations, someone had *come*. But there was an arrogance, a trace of condescension in Wilmarth's voice. How many Succession Wars had there been? And the Department of Communications had not only changed its name but disappeared altogether? How? What of the Great Houses? What of the Ghost Bears? Questions rattled in her brain like scattered pebbles.

She imagined the strength of the hammerhead shark suffusing her as she tramped toward her father's office several levels above hers. She imagined the shark's rippling muscles as it sliced through dark waters, a predator of matchless ferocity, an implacable force from before the existence of humankind.

Then she knocked on her father's door, and those thoughts glided away into the deep.

"Enter."

Her father's office was as spartan as his demeanor. The only decoration was a framed graphite drawing of her mother, commissioned at a Landing Day Festival when Maki was a little girl. He sat behind a cold, gray desk in a room of cold, gray rock, and regarded her with basalt eyes.

She snapped a salute. "Reporting for duty, Captain." Then she braced herself for the scolding of a lifetime.

But instead, his voice was neutral. "You may stand at ease." His thick shoulders were tense, however.

She relaxed her stance. "Sir, thank you for commuting my—"

"You have Admin Xiao to thank for that. She seemed to think we need a full company of 'Mechs."

His voice carried no trace of frustration or disapproval, only a neutrality so careful it had to be screening something, a hidden magma chamber. He had never been a dispassionate man.

"I will thank her personally the moment she gets back," Maki said.

The array of screens usually surrounding his desk was retracted. What lay before him was something she had seen only once before. Brought here all the way from Old Terra by their ancestors, the broad, spatulate war club of nephrite jade, *pounamu* in the Old Tongue, *greenstone* in the New. Shaped like a leaf or a tear-drop, the *mere* was a rich, living green, a Stone Age weapon made for splitting skulls in close quarters. The last time she had seen it was during the ceremony where her father had assumed command of the 'Mech Corps. She could feel the *mana* imbued in the weapon—and through it, in her father—by centuries of warrior ancestors, like a gravitational pull.

He picked up the *mere* and turned it over and over in his hands, then clutched the narrow grip. "Xiao thinks we won't have to fight. She's wrong. Did you see the broadcast?"

She nodded.

"That Wilmarth is a true believer."

"A what?"

"Someone who'll do anything, kill anyone, because they are *right*, absolutely and without question. Everybody else is *wrong*. Disagree? You are an infidel. A traitor. There is no compromise with such people. They are coming to take our home, and if we don't give to them, they'll kill us all."

"If they want an HPG for themselves, way out here, why not just build one in orbit? Or on Hinemoa?"

"True believers do not share with outsiders. Ever." He ran this dark fingers over the *mere's* rounded edge, as if imagining using it to strike an enemy in the face or the throat or the temple. "Live-fire training is suspended, but the simulators are prepped with some new scenarios. Familiarize yourself."

"Yes, sir." She saluted.

"Dismissed."

Maki spun and departed. She been expecting an epic verbal barrage, but somehow the absence of it frightened her even more.



The 'Mech bay always remained fourteen degrees Celsius. The 'Mechs stood in their individual bays like a circle of colossi, graduated in height from the "little" 30-ton *Spiders* on up to the *Galahads*, then into the heavy and assault 'Mechs, culminating in her father's 90-ton *Cyclops*.

Pallets of ammunition filled the corners of the huge chamber: Gauss rifle, autocannon, and machine-gun rounds, plus long- and short-range missiles. Because of their long isolation and limited manufacturing capabilities, the 'Mech Corps had moved its 'Mech configurations toward energy weapons. Tutanekai had a wealth of minerals, so the early colonists had ample raw materials to build manufacturing facilities, but they'd lacked the specialized know-how, components, and rare elements to fashion an HPG or a JumpShip. Fortunately they had landed with the capabilities to maintain their 'Mechs indefinitely. Many of these old beasts around her boasted parts "custom-made from eight-gauge wire, bad language, and good intentions."

She stood looking up at her *Galahad*, fingering the greenstone shark tooth under her uniform.

A voice called her name from across the 'Mech bay.

Joe, Conor, and Agnes, the other grommets, were crossing the 'Mech bay toward her. Their faces were neutral, guarded.

She smiled and faced them. "Bet you didn't expect to see me back so soon."

Agnes said, "Thought you had two weeks on your sentence."

Maki's face flushed. "Yeah, it seems somebody higher up thinks I have better places to be."

Agnes crossed her arms. "It's good that *somebody* does."

Maki frowned and clenched her teeth. "Fine. Give it to me. You got something to say."

"You don't belong in a 'Mech."

Maki wasn't sure what she had been expecting, but that wasn't it. She flinched as if from a blow.

"A boxing ring, maybe," Agnes said. "But not a 'Mech."

"I've logged more sim time that all of you combined—"

"I don't give a fizzling shart! And you don't need me to tell you why. It's been drilled in from Day One, but you ignore all that. If I was your real CO, you'd be gone. But you've got somebody cutting you breaks, don't you?"

Joe stepped in. "Hey, Agnes, ease back."

Maki's fists clenched at her sides. Everything in her wanted to pound Agnes into a whimpering smear. But that would prove the point, wouldn't it? Her voice crawled between gritted teeth. "You're right."

"What did you say?" Agnes gaped.

"I said you're right." Maki's words tumbled out this time, cracking, and the truth of it was like the moment an avalanche broke loose. Her vision blurred. "And I'm sorry." Then she spun and stalked away before any of them could say another word.



The 'Mech Corps stood around the vid screens in Beddow's ready room, watching the video relay from *Greenstone*, along with the stream of telemetry.

As soon as the incoming Word of Blake DropShips came into the visual range, *Greenstone* began recording and sending high-definition video back for analysis. Every rivet would be scrutinized. Intelligence analysts had dusted off their old libraries and determined the DropShips to be *Overlord*-class, spheroid military vessels built to carry up to thirty-six 'Mechs each. There were two of them inbound, each three times *Greenstone*'s mass.

As soon as Beddow had learned this, his guts clenched. How could sixteen 'Mechs stand against seventy-two, even with the advantages Tutanekai offered to the home team?

All twelve MechWarriors, plus the four grommets, had been glued to the video and data feed for three hours, waiting for the historic moment when the *Greenstone* would dock with the *Sword of Peace*. Pots of tea and fresh scones had long since gone cold.

Comm chatter crossed between the vessels as they adjusted their vectors to rendezvous. The approaching DropShips had grown from

pebbles to fists to plates in the video feed. Now they had finally closed to within two kilometers.

The faces of the men and women around Beddow were tight, with narrowed eyes, chewed lips, crossed arms. He was the eldest among them. It had been a painful thing to lose four MechWarriors in one year—one to an accident, two to retirement, and Jenny to cancer—necessitating four trainees at once. He had considered temporarily reinstating the two retirees, but retirement only came when it was clear that their bodies simply could not do what was needed. He had invited them to this meeting, hoping their wisdom would infuse the grommets, but they had elected to remain home with their families. The grommets looked like children to him, Maki included. He had to remind himself they were, in fact, adults, and the hearts of warriors beat in their chests.

When the DropShips opened fire on *Greenstone*, all breath in the room disappeared as if the door had opened to hard vacuum.

Missiles streaked with silvery trails of propellant. The video shuddered with impacts. Laser beams and PPC bolts raked *Greenstone's* hull.

Panic rose in the voices of *Greenstone's* command crew, but Xiao's steady voice rallied them. "Blow all panels. Evasive maneuvers. Concentrate fire on *Sword of Peace*." Cold vengeance crept into her voice like the tendrils of a nebula. "All Gauss-rifle gunners, focus fire on their bridge and don't stop until you've vented them to space."

Fountains of silent sparks erupted as the Gauss rounds pounded the armor on *Sword of Peace's* nose.

Xiao looked into the bridge camera, resignation and determination painting her face. "Looks like you were right, Captain. We're going to try to better your odds."

The enemy DropShips pummeled *Greenstone* with salvo after salvo, and *Greenstone* returned the sentiment. The vicious melee of hammers and daggers continued, millions of kilometers from the helpless onlookers. The entire colony was watching, breathless, speechless. There was nothing Beddow could tell her, nothing anyone could say, because the battle had taken place twelve light-minutes ago. It was already decided. All they could do was wait for the light to catch up and show them the results.

Explosions ripped through *Greenstone*. A DropShip's sheer mass let it soak up tremendous punishment—at least until that punishment found its way into critical systems.

The video and data feeds sputtered. Sparks floated through the bridge. Smoke thickened the air. Xiao coughed, clutching her command couch, thrown against her straps by the wrenching of high-g maneuvers.

"Hull breach on decks four through six!"

"Armor critical on the enemy bridge!"

"All weapons, focus *there!*" Xiao's face was white with the stress of the maneuvers. Nothing sucked one's breath away like mortal combat. Naval officers were trained for this; civilians were not. Tenacity and courage were no match for tactical ability and training.

Abruptly, like flipping a switch, the data feed ceased, leaving them with only live telescope video, too distant to discern any details.

The silence in the room thickened, all of them staring at the star-spattered screen, until someone said, "Bastards."

One minute passed.

Two minutes.

Three minutes.

Beddow understood why they had attacked without provocation. Like the Ghost Bears, the Word of Blake had come only to take, and by cutting off the head, to weaken and demoralize. A sudden, vicious attack could often end a fight before the other side could brace up its courage.

Thirty-three years ago, when Beddow had assumed command of his first lance, the administrator at that time had been lobbying the other department heads to close down and disband the 'Mech Corps. The colony bylaws required unanimous agreement for so drastic an action. The 'Mech Corps was outdated, the admin said, unnecessary to a world that had no enemies, a waste of resources, its 'Mechs overdue for obsolescence. Surely any enemy who could reach them would bring such superior technology that centuries-old fighting machines would be as effective as throwing stones. MechWarriors were parasites to society, living free on the hard work of others.

This hateful statement was not when Beddow had punched him.

Beddow had sought him out the following day, requested a meeting, which the admin granted. While being ushered into the presence, Beddow doubled the man in two with a punch to the gut and then laid him out with a solid shot to the cheekbone. Then he had sat down and waited for the police.

While the admin crawled away, moaning, trying to right himself, Beddow had calmly explained to him that this event—a sudden, vicious, unexpected attack—was precisely why the 'Mech Corps was absolutely essential. Out here in the Deep Periphery, the law ultimately derived from the emitter of a PPC, the lens of a laser.

A month in jail was enough to satisfy the admin's bruised pride, and all talk of disbanding the 'Mech Corps disappeared into the air scrubbers. Even though Beddow was a MechWarrior, he could have lost his command over that stunt. His commanding officer privately thanked him.

Beddow moved to the head of the room and stood before the screen. "They'll be here in eleven days. Time to prepare a welcome."



Maki pulled on her boots in the darkness. Ross rolled over with long, quiet snore. After the paces they'd put each other through last night, he'd sleep for a week. But she was awake, practically vibrating.

The waiting was the worst.

Eleven days to see your potential end coming, the end of the everything you know. And what do you do in that time? Party it up? Hunker down under your blanket? Weep with despair? Go about your business as if nothing were going to change?

The enemy would hit orbit in ten hours. This was the last liberty she would see until this was all over.

As she let herself out of Ross's quarters deep in the warrens of Zone Two, she felt another moment of gratitude that the *Greenstone* had somehow managed to take out one of the incoming DropShips. Three days ago, after the planet emerged from Hinemoa's eclipse, telescopes and sensors had confirmed only a single inbound DropShip, with no sign of *Greenstone* or the other DropShip.

Her father had declared martial law, as per Xiao's express wishes. When the invaders were gone, he would relinquish command of the colony to the next duly chosen civilian admin.

A sense of finality settled over her, a blanket of quietude, as the tech shut the *Galahad's* hatch. Would she ever walk on her own legs again?

Six hours until the enemy hit orbit.

All sixteen 'Mechs assembled in the Hub, a hollowed-out cavern where eight tunnels came together like the spokes of a wheel. The tunnels radiated out to various parts of the plateau surrounding the mountain, connecting a network of carefully hidden bunkers. These tunnels would allow them to bring an attack on the enemy almost anywhere they chose to land within striking distance of the mountain's entrance.

Some of the civilian leaders had recommended hunkering down inside the mountain to outlast the coming siege. The whole population could stay in the mountain for another three centuries with everything they needed. Then her father had brought up the possibility that unless they controlled the approach to the mountain's entrance, there was nothing to stop the enemy from driving an armored vehicle up to their door and detonating a nuke. And what about the cowardly attack on *Greenstone*? The ship had been a symbol of independence, of strength, of courage.

No, there would be no waiting. The entire 'Mech Corps, even the militia, itched for vengeance.

Five minutes after the DropShip was to have assumed orbit around Tutanekai, an audio message arrived.

"This is Demi-Precentor Alistair McFinn. You are ordered to surrender your facility immediately. If you comply, you will be welcomed into the arms of Blake and given a place in the new order. If you fail

to comply, we will vent your entire facility to vacuum. You have three minutes to respond.”

Maki tried to watch her father’s reaction inside his cockpit, but at a hundred meters, he was too far away for her to see anything but the glow of instruments on his face.

When it came, his voice was as immovable as a megaton of solid granite. “This is Captain Akahata Beddow, commander of Taranaki Mountain Defense Forces and acting administrator of Tutanekai. You are ordered to leave this system immediately. Depart, and we will take no further action against you. Come down here, and we will kill and eat you all.”

Maki laughed at that. Let them think they were walking into a den of sociopathic cannibals turned mad by three centuries stranded in the Black. No doubt that DropShip in orbit was scanning every pebble of the surface, evaluating, analyzing, planning.

Video feeds were coming from the heart of Zone Three, a demonstration of civilians gathered with signs and banners praising the ‘Mech Corps and the courage of the MechWarriors. Sixteen warriors against many. Musicians led the crowd in old ballads and new rugby fight songs.

The farmers in Zone Two, more than two thousand of them, gathered for a massive *haka*, an ancient war dance. On Old Terra, *haka* were once chanted in the Old Tongue and danced to intimidate an incoming enemy and psych up the tribe’s warriors for battle.

Positioning themselves in carefully spaced rows, men and women danced and chanted in unison, knees bent deep and wide, fiercely slapping their chests, their elbows, their rooted thighs, faces contorted into maniacal grimaces of bulging eyes and protruding tongues. Youngsters lined the margins clapping with enthusiasm.

*You die! You die!
We live! We live!
You die! You die!
We live! We live!
Our hair is wild!
Our eyes aflame!
Tutanekai and Hinemoa dance!
And you die! You die!
We climb the mountain!
The mountain of your corpses!
In the dark!
In the light!
The sun shines!
Rise!*

Hearing those thousands of voices booming from the depths swelled her heart, thrummed in her blood, and brought tears to her

eyes. The greenstone tooth against her breastbone felt razor sharp, imparting its power to her like a predator's fury. Her teeth clenched with determination to fight until her last breath.



Beddow was not expecting any further verbal communication with the enemy. Both sides had said what they needed to.

He was unsurprised when word came over the comms. "DropShip is deorbiting, projecting path onto Taranaki plateau, sector six, deploying six fighters."

Aerospace support was something Beddow had never faced, a dimension for which he had not prepared.

Just beyond range of the weapon emplacements, the *Overlord*-class DropShip landed two kilometers from the mountain's main entrance, deep in the night shadows of the two sharp ridges that funneled any approach toward the massive doors. The *Overlord*'s significant firepower would cover its 'Mechs as they deployed.

The entire plateau was dotted with camouflaged security and sensor stations. Every square meter on the plateau fell within view of cameras and sensors. The defenders watched the DropShip's six radial doors open around its spheroid circumference and emit endless tons of thundering BattleMechs.

First, fleet-footed light 'Mechs emerged and accelerated into running circles around the DropShip, establishing a perimeter, scanning for threats, throwing up clouds of electronic countermeasures. Next, the medium 'Mechs came in four different configurations, only two of which, *Galahads* and *Trebuchets*, were familiar to Beddow. Next came the pounding of the heavies, two full lances of *Grasshoppers*, *Crusaders*, and *Catapults*.

And then a chill dashed down his back. He recognized the *Atlas*'s silhouette and death's-head profile immediately as it lumbered down the gangway onto the ice—a 100-ton assault 'Mech, a behemoth of destruction. But it wasn't just an *Atlas*; it was an *Atlas II*.

And then came the second *Atlas II*.

And then two *King Crabs*.

And then three more 'Mechs that looked at least 90 tons.

Having so little military intelligence available made Beddow more hesitant than he wanted to be. His confidence that his people would prevail wiggled in his grip and threatened to escape.

Even as his eyes tried to fathom the sheer tonnage arrayed against him, the eyes of analysts even now were swarming over the video feed, identifying weapon systems, countermeasures, likely armor classifications, jump jets, and other capabilities.

The 'Mechs around him stood unmoving, main systems powered down to prevent any chance the DropShip would detect them before they struck.

Beddow said, "They're generously tipping their hand, but if they're smart, they're not showing us all their cards, only showing us what they must. The analysis will be coming into your feeds shortly over the next few minutes. Study their weapon configurations, people. Anytime you can make them waste ammo on a bad shot, do it."

Fully deployed now, the enemy 'Mechs assumed formations and turned toward the entrance to Taranaki Mountain.

Beddow opened comms to the turret gunners near the outer doors. "Focus fire on the light 'Mechs. You'll only get a few shots before they destroy your turrets. Make those shots count." The turrets were camouflaged but stationary; as soon as they opened fire, they would be targeted.

"Yes, Captain," came Lieutenant Talbot's reply. The turrets were controlled from a command center buried under a hundred meters of rock, so the gunners would not be in physical danger, but the quaver of impending battle thickened the militiaman's voice.

Beddow watched through the cameras as the turrets opened fire.

Lasers and PPCs blasted a lethal crossfire through the narrow valley, protecting the approach to the fifteen-meter-high doors into the complex.

The enemy 'Mechs maintained their approach but swiveled their torsos to target the turrets. One of the light 'Mechs burst sparks and smoke and went down onto its chin. Turrets mushroomed into orange flame and black smoke. Another light 'Mech lost a leg and tumbled onto its side into the scree field that lined a shallow crater. A direct hit from twinned PPCs turned a light 'Mech's cockpit into a smashed, blackened eggshell. And still, the enemy 'Mechs waded through destruction and dealt it out in kind. Within two minutes of the first shot, the turrets were blasted to slag. The enemies' armor was scored, smoking, and glowing with the heat of red-hot metal. Five light 'Mechs lay dead or disabled, left behind by the pounding thunder of the other thirty-one machines. A squadron of aerospace fighters crisscrossed the sky.

The 'Mechs with the longest ranges opened fire on the outer doors. Lasers and PPCs gouged and raked. Sparks sprayed in all directions. Roiling smoke obscured the doors. The two-meter thick doors would hold for only a little while.

The enemy 'Mechs had moved a kilometer up the valley from the DropShip, now closer to the doors than their ride.

Beddow said, "Bravo Lance. Fire Point Foxtrot."

Agnes Kirikiri said, "Yes, sir."

Bravo Lance turned down the passageway leading to Fire Point Foxtrot, a series of bunkers within half a kilometer of the DropShip.

"Delta Lance, Fire Point X-Ray. Charlie Lance, Fire Point Whiskey. You have your orders."



Within two minutes, Maki and Bravo Lance had taken positions in a bunker hidden in the valley wall. The bunkers were specially designed as a firing position for 'Mechs, spacious enough for even twelve-meter-tall heavy 'Mechs.

"Open Foxtrot doors!" Agnes called.

The wall before them rolled down. Starlight poured into the bunker.

Half a kilometer down the slope of icy boulders and scree, the DropShip stood like a monstrous egg. It stood alone, confident no enemies were within firing range.

"You ran the sims, you know the drill," Agnes said. "Target engines and landing pods. Fire!"

If Bravo Lance managed to cripple the DropShip, the enemy force was trapped here without supplies, repairs, food, or transportation back to the JumpShip.

Maki zoomed her optics onto the DropShip's engines—lining up a shot on a stationary target was child's play—and fired her Gauss rifles. Fire from Bravo Lance rained down on the DropShip, but after the first fusillade, the DropShip returned fire with large lasers, autocannons, and PPCs. Nuclear fire bloomed under its base, gathering thrust for escape. Exploding projectiles, concentrated proton streams, and flickering needles of laser beams blazed against the night sky. Maki aimed and fired again. The DropShip's hide was armored, but even that wouldn't stand up long to pinpoint strikes from Gauss rifles.

"Pour it on!" Agnes shouted.

Her father's voice came over the comms. "Bravo Lance, you have their attention. Fighters inbound on your position."

Maki ignored the incoming threat and fired shot after shot into the DropShip's base as it rose into the sky. Thirty meters. Fifty. One hundred. At two hundred meters, it would rise above their field of fire.

She saw it happen. Her Gauss round punched deep into an engine, which went out like a light bulb, showering sparks. The ship's ascent paused. It began to list.

"Yeah!" Agnes roared. "Don't let—!"

The bunker openings erupted in a conflagration of incoming fire. Agnes's torso erupted in flame. A direct hit. Her 'Mech toppled back and crashed to the floor of the bunker.

Six silvery shapes flashed past overhead.

The pause in the DropShip's flight gave Bravo Lance the moment they needed for another punishing fusillade.

A second engine began to sputter. The DropShip descended, attempting to tilt away from Bravo's field of fire.

Her father's voice: "Bravo Lance, fighters coming in for another pass."

Maki fired round after round into the DropShip as it came down. It skidded into a rocky slope, tried to right itself, attitude thrusters bursting with furious desperation, but a PPC-damaged landing jack

collapsed under it. It tumbled onto its side like the massive egg it was, then rolled down the slope until it crunched to a halt against a twenty-meter-high boulder.

Cheers erupted over the comms.

Then the bunker exploded around her, and massive shockwaves pummeled her into blackness.



Beddow flinched when the HE bomb detonations hit the Foxtrot bunker, but there was no time for him to worry about Maki's fate.

The mobility of those aerospace fighters promised more trouble than the relatively slow-moving company of 'Mechs up the valley.

"Charlie and Delta," he said, "are you in position?"

"Charlie in position, Captain."

"Delta in position, Captain."

"Alpha Lance, follow me," Beddow said.

He turned his *Cyclops* down a passageway leading away from the Hub and throttled up, checking his chronometer. Hinemoa's eclipse would pass in two hours, time enough for the enemy assault 'Mechs to punch through Taranaki's outer doors. The medium 'Mechs and remaining lights were moving back down the valley to secure the DropShip crash site.

Those light 'Mechs had the foot speed to put a crimp in his plan. Much depended on their reaction once the plan was in motion.

The passageway was three kilometers of cave-black vacuum, lit only by Alpha Lance's running lights. His *Cyclops* was the 'Mech Corps's heaviest assault 'Mech. The other members of Alpha Lance drove 80-ton *Awesomes*, nearly perfect 'Mechs for Tutanekai's environment. Each was equipped with three PPCs, which used no ammunition and the tremendous heat of firing them quickly dissipated in nighttime conditions. At 50 kph, they thundered down the dark tunnel. As they went, he listened to the comm chatter as crews tried to extract Bravo Lance from the rubble of Fire Point Foxtrot. No word yet on casualties.

The doors parted as Alpha Lance reached the hidden tunnel doors. After several hours in the dark, emerging into starlight seemed as bright as day. Millions of brilliant pinpricks spattered the sky. The dark globe of Hinemoa obscured the sun. Wispy trails of icy fog whipped over the surface, turning the distance into haze. The mountain's immense cone seemed to meet the stars themselves.

They were four kilometers from the mountain entrance, three kilometers from the DropShip. Beddow led Alpha Lance into the open and scanned the sky for the fighter squadron. At this point, the valley of ice and boulders widened to three kilometers across, but the wall from which they had just emerged was a rugged escarpment.

"Captain," came Lieutenant Talbot's voice from the Command Center. "Those fighters are using ECM. We can't get a missile lock, but we have visual. Inbound on your position. Marking vector."

A red blip appeared on Beddow's command display. He turned to face the incoming slivers of threat.

It was important that Alpha Lance not *look* like bait.

With several quick flicks of his fingers, he assigned targets to maximize fire concentration. They needed to take those fighters out in a single pass.

He steadied his targeting reticle on the lead fighter.

The fighters spat electric-blue PPC bolts down onto Alpha Lance.

"Fire!" he growled.

Alpha Lance unleashed a barrage of PPC fire right back at the incoming fighters.

And then Charlie and Delta Lances popped up in the bunkers in the rock face above—Fire Points Sierra and X-Ray—and opened fire.

The blazing torrent of energy weapons and projectiles raked the fighter formation, PPC bolts crackling like lightning over their skins, laser beams ripping furrows in streamlined wings. The fighters scattered like flakes of mica in a blast of wind.

Beddow's ancient Zeus-36 Mark III autocannon sent a single 203mm HEAP round right up the lead fighter's nose. The craft exploded in a fiery burst, tumbling in red-hot chunks toward the ground. Maki wasn't the only Beddow who could shoot.

Two fighters emerged from the smoke and fire, swooping up and away, trailing ribbons of smoke. Two others spun like pinwheels, flinging off bits of themselves as they tumbled to their deaths. Another lost attitude control and inverted itself into the ground.

Beddow had never seen such high-g maneuvers, wings sweeping back almost biologically, like birds—though he had never seen a real bird—and wondered if they might be remote piloted. How could human beings withstand such banks and turns without pulping themselves against a bulkhead?

Lieutenant Talbot said, "Captain, assault 'Mechs are moving away from the outer doors."

Beddow didn't know whether to fear or rejoice. Thirty-one angry BattleMechs were inbound on his position.



Maki struggled to extract her *Galahad* from the rubble as loader crews tried to drag away the boulders. Her head pounded from the massive detonation that had brought the ceiling of the bunker down onto Bravo Lance. The armor on her 'Mech's head, arm, and torso showed serious damage. A single shot could punch through and finish her.

"Bravo Lance, report!" she said.

Joe's voice came through. "Bravo Three here."

Conor's voice crackled with interference. "Bravo Four here."

There would be no report from Agnes Kirikiri.

"Alpha One, this is Bravo Two. Bravo One is down. Do you read?"

Her father's voice sounded like it came from a star system away. "Bravo Two, this is Alpha One. You are in command of Bravo Lance. Report."

"Three 'Mechs damaged but viable. Still working on getting free."

"Report the moment you are mobile. Alpha One out."

Lieutenant Talbot's said, "Alpha One, the enemy assault 'Mechs have rendezvoused with the heavies at the DropShip. Six lances of heavies and assaults heading for your position. Two lances of lights and mediums hold station at the DropShip."

"And the DropShip?" her father said.

"Crippled, but sensors and targeting are still active."

Two boulders pinned the legs of Maki's *Galahad*. Struggle as she might, she would have to wait until the loader crews dragged one of them away before she could extricate her 'Mech. "Where's that megaloader?" she snarled. "The fight will be over before we can get back to it!"

"Still rolling down," said the civilian foreman. "ETA, five minutes."

"Dammit!"

Alpha Lance would be under heavy fire in less than two.



Beddow watched the formation of dark shapes pounding down the valley slope, twenty-four heavy and assault 'Mechs. He sifted through the telemetry, looking for clues, at the same time keeping watch for the two remaining fighters.

And worse, the big *Atlases* carried Guardian ECM packages. He couldn't get a target lock on any 'Mech within two hundred meters of them.

"Doors open," he said. "Prepare to withdraw."

When the enemy reached a kilometer distant, his alarms began to sound. Warnings flashed in his HUD: **MISSILE LAUNCH DETECTED**.

Streaks of missile launches rose from the distant behemoths, arcing high.

"Get inside!"

The *Awesomes* spun and ran back through the doors.

Beddow backed his *Cyclops* through the opening as the long-range missiles pelted him. He rotated his torso to spread the impact pattern across as much armor as possible, minimizing the concentration of damage.

The moment he was inside, the doors closed, and he silently thanked his ancestors for having the tactical wisdom to devise this network of tunnels. This was going to be a battle of attrition, and unless the enemy blasted their way into these tunnels, the defenders could

keep up this game indefinitely, always chipping at the corners of the enemy's numerical and technological superiority.

"Captain," Lieutenant Talbot said. "The remaining two fighters have landed near the DropShip. EVA suits appear to be servicing."

"Status on Bravo Lance? Can they put fire on those fighters?"

"Negative, sir. Bravo Lance is still combat ineffective."

From Fire Point X-Ray, Lieutenant Turow of Charlie Lance, the heavy 'Mechs, broke into comms. "Enemy coming into range, Captain. Engage?"

"Engage. But if return fire gets hot, withdraw."

"Yes, sir. Engaging."

On Beddow's command display, the marching red blips at the fringes of the enemy formation lit up with damage estimates.

The enemy formation changed direction, angling toward Fire Points X-Ray and Sierra. Even in the silence of vacuum, he could imagine the conflagration of destruction coalescing on those bunkers.

It was time for another distraction.

"Alpha Lance, Fire Point Omega."

They throttled up, heading for the next bunker. Keep the enemy moving. Keep them guessing. Hammer the corners and then fade away.



Five minutes after the megaloader arrived, Maki's 'Mech was free. Hers was the last of Bravo Lance remaining.

"Captain, Bravo Lance is now combat effective," she said. "What are your orders?"

The EM static generated by PPC fire tore out chunks of her father's reply. "—roceed to Fire Po— Golf and fin— off those fighters."

"Yes, sir!"

She slammed her throttle forward and led Bravo Lance four hundred meters away from Foxtrot to the next bunker in the chain. Right now she wished for a 100 kph light 'Mech.

Fire Point Golf brought them out about eight hundred meters from the crash site. Long shots, but still within range of Gauss rifles and PPCs.

But the fighters were already gone.



"Captain, two fighters inbound on your position."

"Acknowledged. Charlie Lance, target incoming fighters."

From the bunker of Fire Point Omega, Beddow squeezed the autocannon trigger over and over, trying to ignore his ammo supply falling into single digits. The concentrated fire of his three lances had blasted four incoming heavy 'Mechs into smoking wreckage, with only minimal damage in return. His plan was working perfectly.

The enemy 'Mechs halted their advance and began to withdraw. They had closed to roughly five hundred meters, but now reversed

direction and backed away at full speed, careful not to expose their weaker rear armor.

"Keep up your fire until they're out of range," he said.

The fighters made another pass, but Charlie Lance alone was not enough to destroy them. The fighters pounded Fire Point Whiskey with energy weapons, then flashed past.

A lull fell, allowing heat levels to decrease, breath to slow, aching trigger fingers to relax.

Twenty-seven enemy 'Mechs remained.

"Talbot, where are they going?" Beddow said. "Do you have visual?"

"Negative, sir. Too much ECM as well."

A minute passed. Two.

Uneasiness crawled into his belly.

Suddenly his HUD blazed with flashing red warnings: **RADIOACTIVE**

SIGNATURE DETECTED.

His guts turned to water.

An instant later, a sun exploded over his head.



The entire landscape jumped like a drumhead covered in dust. Untold tons of vaporized ice and rock blasted into the sky amid a blazing white ball of nuclear fire. The concussion slammed Maki's teeth together, laced her mouth with a strange metallic taste.

She could barely see the cliffside five kilometers distant where Alpha, Charlie, and Delta were bunkered. She instinctively ducked her *Galahad*.

The comms hissed with static, ghosts of voices lost in the electromagnetic pulse of a nuclear detonation. Their comm systems were hardened against EMPs, but other systems weren't.

The next several minutes was a chaos she would only barely remember. She caught herself saying, over and over, "Alpha One, do you read?"

No reply came.

"Maki," came Joe's voice tentatively over the comms, "are we all that's left?"

The vivid, cold reality seized her. "Until we learn otherwise, yes."

"What are your orders?"

"Lieutenant Talbot, do you copy?" she said. "Command Center, do you copy?"

"This is Lieutenant Talbot. Who is this?"

"This is Bravo Two. Bravo Lance still has three functional 'Mechs. What can you give me on the enemy?"

"We have no eyes on the enemy. It was only a tactical nuke, maybe one kiloton, but the EMP fried all of our cameras down the valley. Too much smoke for a visual from here."

"What about...?" She couldn't finish the sentence.

"We've received no telemetry and no comms." The tone of his voice was tentative, fearful. "Wait, we have something... It looks like enemy 'Mechs marching back up the valley."

"How long until daybreak?"

"Forty-seven minutes."

If they could slow the enemy down and catch them in the sun, they might have a chance.

The formation of 'Mechs was stomping up into the valley again, their armor blackened by proximity to the nuclear attack. They were hugging the same side of the valley as Fire Point Romeo, where Bravo Lance waited for them.

During the displacement, Lieutenant Talbot had sent Maki a still image of an *Atlas II* her father had marked as a possible command 'Mech. She had memorized the markings and made that 'Mech her primary target.

One of the Gauss rifle's benefits was no telltale energy beam. It was the perfect 'Mech-scale sniper weapon, able to punch through a cockpit or even an assault 'Mech's rear armor in a single shot.

She laid out her plan for the other two MechWarriors.

"Let's do it," Joe said.

The enemy formation passed by Fire Point Romeo, and Maki held fire. She wanted a clean flanking shot.

Joe and Conor lined up on a *King Crab* trundling away on its reverse-jointed legs. With a massive autocannon on each arm, the *King Crab* could kill them with one shot.

"Remember: fire, duck, and displace," Maki said.

"You got it," Conor said.

What if those fighters came back with another nuke? What if the enemy 'Mechs were too quick to react, or had better targeting, longer ranges? She pushed those thoughts aside, took a deep breath, and steadied her Gauss rifles on the lip of the bunker's aperture.

Both Joe and Conor fired their large lasers and PPCs at the *King Crab's* rear torso. It was a difficult shot at four hundred meters.

But they did it.

The combined shots tore through the *King Crab's* internals, and an ammo explosion did the rest.

The three other 'Mechs of the assault lance spun their torsos in alarm to shield their vulnerable flanks from the incoming threat.

That was when Maki fired a Gauss round straight into the cockpit of the second *King Crab*. The metal beast stiffened and started turning in a circle. A tiny wisp of smoke trailed from its cockpit. The *King Crab* made another tight circle, like a mining crawler with one tread frozen.

Its death dance so fascinated her, she forgot to duck until an incoming PPC bolt splattered molten basalt over her cockpit window.

She ducked then and hurried away from Fire Point Romeo only moments before it erupted in blazing destruction.

This maneuver worked only one more time, from Fire Point Papa, where they managed to take out a heavy 'Mech. After that, however, the enemy formation moved to the middle of the valley, into the open but extending the range to the bunkers hidden in the valley escarpments.

Galahads were not fleet-footed, only able to muster 54 kph, marginally faster than the lumbering assault 'Mechs. The enemy would reach the apex of the valley ahead of Bravo Lance and resume their assault on the outer doors. The range would be closer, but range was a weapon that cut both ways.

Thirty-six minutes to daybreak.

The enemy formation marched past the DropShip, taking their time, scanning for threats.

The landscape of the lower valley was a blackened, smoking wound.

Maki led Bravo Lance to Fire Point Echo, the bunker only two hundred and fifty meters from the outer doors, allowing them to bring their medium lasers to bear. But a single successful alpha strike from any of those assault 'Mechs, which carried many, many more medium lasers, would turn a *Galahad* into scrap.

If the enemy managed to cut through the outer doors, the colony would still be protected for a short time by the airlock's second stage, but the inner doors were far less robust.

The assault 'Mechs took positions and resumed blasting the outer doors.

Maki identified the 'Mech her father had marked and relayed it to Joe and Conor. It was within range of their weapons, but the moment they popped up to fire, they would appear on their enemies' threat displays. They would have time for only one salvo.

"Take the shot, Maki?" Joe asked.

"Not yet."

Twelve minutes.

Dammit, that was too much time. They would cut through by then. They had to slow them down.

"You two stay here." She had to make the enemy think the defenders were still a much larger force.

"Where are you going?" Joe said.

"Fire Point Hotel."

"That's over a kilometer from here!"

"Got to draw them away again. You two take your shot when I give the order, then keep your heads down."

She ran her *Galahad* down the tunnels toward the Hotel bunker, praying the doors would hold just a little longer. Her 'Mech's top speed felt like a crawl. She was violating the chief tenet of her training, the single most important thing, even more critical than the Rule: stay with your lance, under no circumstances go off on your own. A lone 'Mech was an exposed nail that attracted hammers.

Three minutes later, ensconced in Fire Point Hotel, she peered across the icy expanse of scree and boulders. Two lances of heavy 'Mechs were blasting the outer doors with salvo after salvo, while the remaining assault 'Mechs stood sentinel, facing out over the valley, scanning for threats. Eight hundred meters to her right, two lances of light and medium 'Mechs guarded the fallen DropShip. If they spotted her, they would close the range quickly.

"Just like before," she told her comrades. "Fire, duck, and displace."

The *Atlas II* was still flagged in her HUD, standing sentinel with its missile racks ready, autocannons tracking. Its cockpit lurked behind one eye of the skull-like death's-head, twelve hundred meters distant.

Seven minutes until daybreak.

She took over a minute to line up the shot, adjusting for ballistic drop and elevation, taking slow, deep breaths, relaxing her hands, her shoulders.

Five minutes until daybreak.

Hold breath.

Squeeze the trigger.

Sparks fountained from the head of the *Atlas II*.

But it remained upright.

She could almost see the MechWarrior's anger in the machine's posture.

She had missed the cockpit.

The frenzy that erupted was a joy to behold. The enemy 'Mechs immediately launched into movement to present more difficult targets. But with no target, they couldn't return fire.

"Maki?" Joe whispered. Silly to whisper over comms, but the tension was thick in his voice.

"Not yet."

The assault 'Mechs started coming down the valley slope toward her. The heavies kept pummeling the outer doors.

Oh, the arrogance. The driver of that *Atlas II* must have thought her shot was a fluke.

A smile tugged at her lips.

The lights and mediums around the DropShip fanned out to seek the threat.

The *Atlas II* came straight toward her, closing the range.

Three minutes.

Nine hundred meters.

Fire.

Sparks and flame erupted from the *Atlas II*'s eye. The 100-ton behemoth shuddered, one leg in mid-stride, and then fell onto its side.

"Now!" Maki cried. "Fire, fire, fire!"

Another assault 'Mech's torso spewed flame and sparks from its rear torso. Its legs shuddered to a halt, arms falling slack.

Laser beams raked the valley walls, tearing at any place that might hide a bunker.

"You just keep building up that heat," Maki said.

Two minutes.

Maki fired again. A hit to another *Atlas II*'s center of mass.

A formation of light 'Mechs closed on her with astonishing speed, sweeping across her field of fire, scanning. When their torsos held on her, she knew she'd been spotted. Missiles swarmed toward her. The slicing azure of a large laser speared into her 'Mech's left shoulder. The pop and sizzle of vaporized titanium and myomer fibers sent quakes through the *Galahad* as its severed left arm spun free, depriving her of one of her Gauss rifles. The entire 'Mech faltered as the control systems recalibrated and compensated. But she still had a weapon.

Outside, the Winds of Dawn kicked up a blizzard of ultrafine ice crystals.

She fired again on the *Atlas II*, this time aiming for its cockpit. At only six hundred meters, she could have made the shot in the dark.

Sparks erupted precisely where she had aimed, but the 'Mech kept coming. Had she failed to kill the pilot?

Missile explosions peppered the mouth of the bunker, obscuring her vision, but she did not take cover.

That *Atlas II* was going down.

A chunk of shrapnel cracked her cockpit window.

She drew aim.

A medium laser slashed across her torso.

Daybreak.

The enemy 'Mechs gleamed in the sunlight.

Her eyes watered at the sudden brightness.

Fire.

Another shot, straight through the *Atlas II*'s eye.

The top of the death's-head erupted in shrapnel.

The rear of the assault formation lost another 'Mech to Joe and Conor's combined flanking fire.

The incoming fire ceased.

The enemy 'Mechs' movement slowed to a crawl.

"Their heat is spiking!" Joe cried.

She checked her thermal imaging to confirm. In the sunlight, already having peaked their heat levels with full-throttle movement and sustained weapons fire, the enemy 'Mechs practically sizzled with heat. Several of them ground to a halt.

Her own heat levels rose slightly, but she was still in the shade. And she still had ammo.

After dispatching five light 'Mechs, she began to pity them, able to move only painfully slowly. For the next eighteen hours, there would be no cover for them, nowhere they could flee. Only their most powerful weapons could reach her—weapons they did not dare fire.

Techs brought trolleys of fresh Gauss rounds, reloaded Bravo Lance, and they carried on the business of tearing the enemy apart, one 'Mech at a time.



Five hours after the battle ended, crews found Alpha and Delta Lance buried under cave-ins.

As soon as the word came, Maki was there with her *Galahad*, wishing her 'Mech had a hand to help drag away boulders.

First, they found an *Awesome*. Little more than scrap remained. Delvin Jhaveri, a MechWarrior for longer than Maki had been alive, one of the Old Guard, was dead.

Then they found another *Awesome*, Cody Lam's Alpha Three, another of the Old Guard. Cody's expression of weary joy gleamed from the shadows as the last boulder revealed the cockpit. He raised a fist to a chorus of cheers.

Eleven hours after the battle ended, a megaloader dragged the last boulder from the *Cyclops*'s twisted remains. How long would emergency life support keep someone alive in a dead 'Mech?

Maki strained to see. Her heart stopped, and her eyes misted over. Was the cockpit intact? Voices crackled over the comms as the EVA-suited crews scrambled over the hulk, but they were a useless gabble until she heard one thing.

"I think he's alive!"

Another chorus of cheers.

But she couldn't see. Was he hurt? She felt like jumping up and down with anticipation, like a little girl waiting for papa to come home, but no one wanted to see a 60-ton bipedal tank do that kind of dance.

The ambulance crews extracted her father.

"He's in and out. Vomit everywhere. Radiation poisoning."

"They'll need decontamination."

And so would the crews. Everyone knew they were swimming in fallout. But they did their jobs anyway.

When the ambulance trundled away up the tunnel, all the strength left Maki's limbs, and then her eyes snapped open. She'd been dead asleep for a few seconds. It was time for a rest before she hurt somebody.



Throughout the mountain's zones, euphoria gushed in waves over the resounding victory against incredible odds, but in the quiet of her cockpit, of her quarters, of her mind, Maki held her joy in check. There were still dead to be honored. Her father and five others were being treated for radiation sickness. The funerals would last for days; the mourning, for weeks.

A few chunks of slagged armor were the only remains of Charlie Lance ever found. The tactical nuke had flown right through the bunker window. The resulting cave-in had killed three members of Delta Lance, their 'Mechs' lighter armor more susceptible to crushing than the assault 'Mechs.

The surviving Blakists surrendered—their choices were to surrender or die of starvation in their DropShip or of asphyxiation inside their crippled 'Mechs—and were imprisoned.

With some repair work and salvage of the enemy 'Mechs, the Tutanekai 'Mech Corps would nearly triple its original size. Better still, with even more repair work, they could restore the *Overlord*-class DropShip. And even better, that DropShip carried the components necessary to complete the construction of the hyperpulse generator.

Tutanekai would soon be in communication with the rest of the galaxy.



After the dust of battle had settled, came the day of the Ceremony.

Maki lay on a cold, granite slab, dressed in only a simple, white frock in the Ceremony chamber. Remembrances of ten generations of MechWarriors covered the walls.

The *tohunga* placed his tools beside her head—a polished, stone bowl full of midnight-blue ink, and a set of obsidian-tipped chisels.

Five MechWarriors surrounded the slab.

Her father stood proudly at her side, but still unsteady, the greenstone *mere* in his fist, holding it above her. His eyes filled with tears that trickled down and caught the ridges of his *moko*. In the Old Tongue, he extolled his lineage and hers back to the beginning. It took forty minutes, and with each successive verse, her blood thrummed back through generations of flesh and DNA, language and custom, all the way back to grass skirts and rain-soaked bush and seafaring dugout canoes.

At the end of it all, he introduced her to her new brethren of full-fledged MechWarriors. The *Galahad* was now *hers*.

Then he nodded to the *tohunga*.

The MechWarriors began the chant that would continue until her warrior *moko* was complete, supporting her on her bed of blood and pain.

The *tohunga* took up a chisel and a metal rod that would be used as a striker and leaned over her cheek.





SECRETS OF THE SPHERE: THE PROTOMECH PROBLEM

MICHAEL J. CIARAVELLA

—Recorded at an Undisclosed Location, 10 July 3150

Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen! Welcome back to *Secrets of the Sphere*, your source for the true story on all that occurs in the Inner Sphere. As always, I am your host, Kyle DiNoto, the Questioner. Tonight's topic: the ProtoMech Problem.

As I am sure you all know, I keep agents throughout the Inner Sphere to gather the unadulterated data for you, and I regularly undertake investigations to follow up on specific areas of interest, such as our recent exposé on the House Cameron heir. Tonight we have an even more exciting story for you, as we delve into a follow-up on a series of mysterious disappearances on the planet Wolcott.

There are few who do not know of Wolcott, the planet where *Gunji-no-Kanrei* Theodore Kurita famously handed the Clans one of their first major defeats with Operation Sakkaku. By using Clan bidding practices against the Clan Smoke Jaguar forces and misleading them about the quality of warriors they would face, *Kanrei* Kurita managed to not only defend the planet from invasion but also successfully win several of their OmniMechs and battle armor, which were examined and reverse-engineered to help reduce the Clans' technological advantage.

As the Clans once again threaten our beloved birthworld of Terra, it is only fitting for things to focus on Wolcott again, in one of the places where the Clans truly knew defeat.

Over the last several months there have been reports of several colonists on Wolcott going missing, usually late at night with no sign of a struggle. While that would not normally be too strange, especially on a planet known for its fog-covered marshes and dense jungles, a couple of key points caught the attention of one of my investigators,

whom we will call Cerberus. Firstly, despite its unique nature, Wolcott does not boast a large amount of apex predators. Secondly, following the successful defense of the planet in 3050, the Draconis Combine used Wolcott as a staging ground against the encroaching Clan forces, staging many raids against Clan Smoke Jaguar as they continued their march towards Terra. Accordingly, many soldiers put down roots on the planet, finding a higher standard of living there than on the Combine planets they had come from.

As such, following the Truce of Tukayyid, significant numbers of former Combine troops decided to remain on the planet, seeing it as an idyllic place to start their lives when the Clan threat abated. These former soldiers are the very types who would be prepared to protect their land against all threats, and the majority that go around armed on a regular basis is significant, especially for a Combine world. As a curious fact, a significant number of retired soldiers are among the missing, and every person who disappeared owned a registered personal-defense weapon, all of which were not found in their homes afterward, leaning towards the theory that these missing people had been armed when they were taken.

No bodies have yet been recovered, although copious amounts of blood have been found in the woodlands surrounding the homesteads, lending further credence to the thought that something attacked from the woods in the dead of night.

I originally sent Cerberus to investigate the situation based off of several other promising investigations we had running in the same area (the Minnesota Tribe Body Snatchers, Bigfoot's recent sightings within the Free Rasalhague Republic, Word of Blake cultists seeking to manufacture new Manei Domini by kidnapping former Solaris MechWarriors), but what he had found has proven to be even more terrifying...

EXCERPT FROM RECORDING:

CERBERUS: I have found something interesting on the Wolcott thing. What do you know about ProtoMechs?

QUESTIONER: Following the Clan losses at Tukayyid, the Smoke Jaguar scientist caste began working on the development of a hybrid between battle armor and a light BattleMech, the ProtoMech. It allowed for a new level of combat from a more versatile platform than either Elemental battle armor or light OmniMechs at that time.

C: Exactly. Unfortunately, the idea never caught on. ProtoMechs were used for the first time on Huntress...

Q: *(coughing)*

C: Please, Kyle. No crazy theories about the Smoke Jaguars still being out there...

Q: Fine.

C: Anyway, most of the other Clans would do their own research into the concept following the defeat on Huntress, but eventually the majority would relegate ProtoMechs to niche roles in their *toumans*.

Q: Gotcha.

C: Now, the leading theory for their lack of efficacy was due to their pilots: most Clan warriors, whether Elementals, MechWarriors, or aerospace pilots, are the product of a very specific phenotype, each created over decades through the Clan eugenics program to create the most effective warriors possible. Kilogram for kilogram, Trueborn warriors are faster, stronger, and better adapted to their chosen form of warfare than their Inner Sphere counterparts. The theory about why the ProtoMech never caught on was because there was no ProtoMech phenotype made for it. That's what we all believed, myself included.

Q: Sounds like you now have cause for doubt...

C: Maybe. I have been tracking down some leads for a while now, specifically while chasing the rumor that Bigfoot once ran for a seat in the Free Worlds League Parliament, and I recently came up with something from a Clan Sea Fox trader that I think you need to see. The following video was acquired in a Trial of Possession from a former Clan Smoke Jaguar research facility on Huntress.

(A camera shows a Star of Harpy ProtoMechs engaging a Nova OmniMech, moving with the impressive agility of a Clan warrior that is one with their machines. The ProtoMechs quickly kneecap the larger machine and take it down, beginning to swiftly fire their lasers into the shoulder and knee joints of the OmniMech, allowing it to be salvaged later, while ensuring that it is no longer able to fight. Unfortunately, they are unable to disable it before a medium laser shears away a portion of the armor on one ProtoMech's chest plate. Through the darkness of the interior of the suit, the outline of a face, although it is hard to tell if the face is covered in fur or a full beard, but the eyes that shine out from within the suit resemble those of a jungle cat, like the smoke jaguars that are the Clan's namesake, but clearly more animal than man, lit in eerie neon green by what must be their warrior's Enhanced Imaging tattoos.

(The attack sends the ProtoMech warrior into a frenzy, and it leaps on the Nova's chest, tearing at the OmniMech's head with its battle claws. While there is no sound to the recording, it is clear that those watching are trying to summon reinforcements, or order the ProtoMechs to stand down. The wounded Harpy rips away the Nova's reinforced cockpit glass, and the feed mercifully cuts off as the Smoke Jaguar MechWarrior is torn bucking and screaming from the cockpit.)

Q: By the *Unfinished Book*...

C: I think it is safe to say we have finally confirmed that the Smoke Jaguar scientist caste *did* create a viable ProtoMech phenotype. Following the events on that tape, Scientist-General Kaban ordered the entire phenotype reaved, all evidence of the program's failure destroyed. Washed out MechWarrior and Elemental candidates were

given the opportunity to take over the program, but no further members of the ProtoMech phenotype were created.

Q: I can understand why. You think there's some sort of connection between these beasts and the disappearances on Wolcott?

C: I do. A search of the declassified files the Eridani Light Horse recovered on Huntress under the banner of the Second Star League proved to be the key. I found Kaban's termination order for the phenotype but no confirmation that it had actually ever been carried out. Eight days after the order was given, a Smoke Jaguar JumpShip, the *Jaguar's Pride*, was sent down the Jaguars' invasion corridor.

Q: So you believe the ProtoMech pilots might have been sent to Wolcott?

C: Yes. From the files, Byesville was the ship's intended destination, a single jump from Wolcott, although we have no confirmation that it ever arrived. Still, I wouldn't put it past the Smoke Jaguars to find a final use for the ProtoMech warriors. I don't know if the Khan or the scientist who created them would've been behind it, but it seems plausible.

Q: Were you able to track down the scientist?

C: No, she went missing approximately around the time of the rumored Society rebellion, and I had no luck tracking her down from there.

Q: That is incredible!

C: There's something else. Now, think about the timeline from when they were created. Even with the speed of Clan maturation...

Q: These creatures, if they exist, would be over a century old.

C: Or worse...they're not. Not the initial creatures, that is.

Q: This sounds like something I'm not going to want to hear.

C: I know I didn't. Following this revelation, I expanded my search and found similar disappearances on at least eight planets surrounding Wolcott, not to mention two dozen missing citizens across the planet.

Q: Which means...

C: Kyle, from the data I have here, only a single Star of the prototypes were created. That means either these creatures figured out JumpShip travel on their own...

Q: Or there are more of them now.

I don't know about you, devoted listeners, but I will be sleeping a little more lightly tonight. Cerberus is back on the case, but until then, keep your doors locked and your weapons handy, as there is a secret phenotype of Clan warriors, driven half mad by their creator, and they could be anywhere in the Inner Sphere. If you have any new leads, send them to our secured space, and we will follow up.

What do you think, however? Are the Smoke Jaguar phenotype to blame for the disappearances on Wolcott, or is there something even more sinister lurking out in the darkness?

Tune in next time to hear more about the answers to these pressing questions and more on *Secrets of the Sphere*. This is your host, Kyle DiNoto, reminding you to keep ever vigilant, and *keep questioning!*





IF AULD ACQUAINTANCE BE FORGOT... (A KELL HOUNDS STORY)

MICHAEL A. STACKPOLE

PART 2 (OF 4)

I

**TYROL HOUSE HOTEL, RAVENSBURG
CENTRAL RIVER DISTRICT
ZAVIJAVA
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
30 DECEMBER 3010**

As exhausted as he was, Morgan Kell gave his brother Patrick a big smile and a bigger hug. "You look like I feel."

"Yeah, well, it's not the light-years, it's the command-circuit jumps and hard burns that do it." Patrick Kell slapped his brother on the back. "Great to see you, too."

"You have no idea." Morgan hung on tightly, taking a moment to rein in his feelings. He'd been working so hard at ignoring his anxiety and frustration that the joy at seeing his brother again threatened to open up the floodgates and let his emotions just pour out.

"It's going to be okay, Morgan. Have you learned anything new?"

Morgan released Patrick and held him out at arm's length. The weariness at fast-burning into a gravity well showed in the redness of the younger Kell's eyes and the mushroom pallor of his skin. His hair hadn't been properly combed, and his uniform had clearly been slept in during the quick descent into atmosphere. Yet despite his fatigue, Patrick wore a hopeful smile, and his eyes narrowed as he focused his attention on Morgan, who shook his head.

"We don't really know much more about Veronica than I was able to relay on your way in, and the political situation here has gotten a tiny bit more complicated since then."

Morgan had transformed the Archon's Suite into his command headquarters, and had taken over the other three suites on the top floor for operational security and ease of coordination with local officials. "The Ion Knights did enough damage to local militia and constabulary forces that a few dissident elements have decided to do everything from staging a mine strike to declaring complete independence, and the Barovsky crime family has used the power vacuum as a chance to consolidate their power over rivals. Now that you've brought the Hounds with you, we can start setting things to rights again."

"Remember, I only brought a company. The rest are on their way." Patrick stared at the holographic display hovering above the suite's dining room table. "Negotiate with the miners so we have reactor fuel; isolate the independents; and break the Barovsky assets as needed?"

Morgan nodded, smiling. That was one of the things he loved about his brother, his ability to assess and sort problems at a glance. As Patrick studied each of them in greater detail, he would take deeper dives and spot aspects others often missed, and usually provided a solution to even the most complex of problems. He had a genius for that sort of thing, though he would deny he was special in any way.

Patrick arched an eyebrow. "And nothing new about Veronica? Even guesses?"

"No, I'm afraid not." Veronica Matova had accompanied Morgan to Zavijava for a tour and as cover for a covert scouting mission. The Ion Knights' raid had transformed a vacation playground into a war zone. Morgan, with the help of Prince Ian Davion and Quintus Allard—both of the Federated Suns—had rallied the local troops and driven the mercenaries off-world. When Morgan had returned to the Tyrol House to celebrate with Veronica, she'd vanished, and later, they'd determined she had been kidnapped.

"We have no idea who took her or why, and the fact they found her here was just bad luck. Someone wanted her, and circulated her data through a network where high-end freelance operatives look for jobs. Somehow, she was recognized here and taken. Local authorities tracked down a group of people we thought were holding her; but they had another hostage—" Morgan grimaced at the memory of seeing washed-up trideo actor Constantine Fisk in a dirty blond wig, "—and we've come up empty since then."

Patrick scratched the back of his neck. "Who would want her, that we know of? That sounds bad, but you know what I mean."

"You're good." Morgan began ticking names off on his fingers. "Haskell Blizzard, who disappeared after we broke his power on Galatea. He'd seen her as belonging to him, and probably thinks she

had a hand in his defeat. Then there was a Count Somokis, who was behind the Ion Knights, and had met her on Galatea, too."

"He's connected to Blizzard, then?"

"Tangentially. There's an actor, Constantine Fisk..."

"The *I, MechWarrior* guy?"

"You watch that crap?"

"Best cure for insomnia ever invented." Patrick pulled a chair back from the dining table and dropped into it. "How does he figure in?"

"One of those holovids they shot on Galatea. Count Somokis was an investor, so he was there. They had a big wrap party and Veronica provided women. Somokis later suggested that instead of investing in holovids, they should use the production company's resources to actually raid a planet and make some serious money." Morgan jerked a thumb at the holographic display. "Buried there somewhere is the accounting for what they stole and destroyed. If even half of the insurance claims are accurate, they probably turned a profit with the raid—even losing as much hardware as they did."

"And Somokis sees Veronica as spoils of war?"

"Possibly." Morgan sighed. "Then there's the Church of Jesus Christ Majificent. We crushed them on Galatea, but they have that splinter sect, the Petrine Order, that could have come looking for her. She was once one of them, and her association with us..."

"Prime target for revenge." Patrick nodded slowly. "And if we look at revenge, and look at her as a means to get at you, we can't discount Alessandro."

"No." Alessandro Steiner had been the previous Archon of the Lyran Commonwealth. He'd seen Katrina Steiner as a threat, and sent assassins after her and her companions—one of them being Morgan. Katrina Steiner, Arthur Luvon, and Morgan had eluded Alessandro's agents, and Katrina had deposed Alessandro. While he remained in internal exile, he hadn't forgotten Morgan's role in taking him down, and was definitely a man to bear a grudge. Going after Veronica to get at Morgan would have been perfectly acceptable to Alessandro.

"So, we don't have any idea who snatched her, and we don't even know if she's still on Zavijava, right?"

Morgan shook his head again. "One of those DropShips going up while you came down could have had her in it. One jump, and she'll be thirty light-years away from here."

"We'll find her, Morgan." Patrick nodded solemnly. "And then whoever took her will pay very dearly for that mistake."

II

**TYROL HOUSE HOTEL, RAVENSBURG
CENTRAL RIVER DISTRICT
ZAVIJAVA
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
30 DECEMBER 3010**

Patrick Kell watched his brother's face, searching for a clue as to his thoughts. He could easily read the exhaustion and determination, but there were moments, tiny snippets of time, where Morgan paused and his stare grew distant. Patrick knew he cared for Veronica, but in those absent moments he gained some insight into the depth of his brother's feelings.

Morgan blinked, then nodded. "Yes, we will make them pay. We have some powerful allies in all this. Even though Ian is heading out of the system, he's attached Quintus Allard to us for the interim, which means Federated Suns intel assets are at our disposal. We've also got the Lyran Intelligence Corps helping us. Between them, I'm hoping we can count on resources and data from the Free Worlds League, in case that's where Veronica is headed."

Patrick winced. "Raiding another nation may get tricky, especially depending how far in we have to go."

"I know, but that's a bridge we cross when we come to it. Right now we have to..." Morgan stopped as his personal communicator buzzed. "You have Morgan. You're on speaker. Go ahead."

"Agent Phipps, sir, in the lobby. There's a man here who wants to speak to you. He says he knows who kidnapped Ms. Matova."

Patrick frowned. Her disappearance wasn't common knowledge, so the chances of the guy being a know-nothing nutter shrank compared to his being someone who might have legitimate information. "Do you want me to go down?"

Morgan shook his head. "Agent Phipps, would you mind clearing this individual and conducting him up here?"

"Yes, sir. Phipps out."

Patrick stood. "How do you want to play this?"

"I'm not certain." The larger of the Kell boys exhaled heavily. "Don't let me do anything stupid, and backstop me in case I miss something. We have to see if this person is legit first, and then get whatever actionable intel out of them we can."

"Makes sense." Patrick hit a button on the data display console and the hologram died. "Fingers crossed, right?"

"Right."

A light knock on the door presaged its opening. Agent Phipps, a dark-haired woman of medium height, ushered a man into the

suite. His appearance surprised Patrick because he'd been expecting someone seedy and easily identifiable as a criminal with experience at kidnapping.

Instead, he found himself looking at a tall, slender man wearing a gray blazer and slacks over a white shirt and lavender tie. The ensemble, while rather retro, gave him an air of elegance. He wore a camel-hair long coat draped over his shoulders, and tugged black leather gloves from his long-fingered hands. He wore his white-blond hair tight on the sides and back, but abundant and wavy on top. Blue eyes rested in a sharply featured face, lending a vulpine cast to his appearance.

The man smiled, nodding to each of the brothers in turn. "I am Thomas Ryan. I have information—"

Morgan's hands balled into fists. "You're the one who took her."

"Oh, Mama Kell raised no dullards." Ryan grinned. "What gave me away? You certainly didn't recognize me from the surveillance holovid."

"You didn't look around the room. You knew it already." Morgan's fists opened slowly. "Not many kidnappers personally present ransom demands."

Ryan shrugged his coat off and draped it over back of the couch. "I was the facilitator in the kidnapping. You already know I am a professional. I did not know who she was, or who you were, until this morning. Nor did I care. I arranged to have Ms. Matova taken from here and passed to a group that cared for and exfiltrated her. I am given to understand she was well treated and remains in good health."

Patrick frowned. "Do you know where she is?"

"No." Ryan held up a finger. "I should say that while the time I spent with her was brief, I found her to be intelligent and personable. She acted calmly, and saved me the necessity of killing the serving woman who brought your dinner up to the suite that evening. I shall also surmise that Ms. Matova was intelligent enough to have left you clues that told you she was taken against her will."

Morgan nodded. "From what you just said, you didn't know who she was until this morning. Am I wrong in thinking that your client reached out to you again to ask you to make demands on their behalf?"

"I like the use of *'their'*, Colonel." The man shrugged. "I have no idea of their identity or any detail about them, beyond their apparent wealth and willingness to spend freely."

Morgan's eyes narrowed. "If she's harmed, I will find them, and I will kill them. You, as well."

"Indeed, as I would expect." Ryan inclined his head. "Just so you know, if she were to be harmed, I should happily work to find out who my client is, and then help you in that endeavor."

Patrick shook his head. "For a hefty fee, no doubt."

"Like you, Patrick Kell, I am a mercenary. I may operate within a different ethical framework, but that does not mean I do not have my own ethical code. I abhor when people lie to me. This job came framed

as a simple extraction, with penalties accruing were Ms. Matova to be harmed in any way. This is why I took the job and why, upon being contacted again, I agreed to act as an intermediary.”

“I’m not liking this, Morgan.”

“Nor do I, Patrick. I need proof of life. *Current* proof of life.”

“I fully understand. I assumed that would be a condition, Colonel Kell, and have requested it.” Ryan glanced at his chronometer. “It will be holovid, and you can examine it to see if it has been tampered with.”

Patrick nodded. “You better believe we will.”

“What are the terms, Mr. Ryan?” Morgan folded his arms over his chest and stared down at the man.

“The client has indicated there are three conditions for her return. The second and third will be revealed upon the successful completion of the first.” The man lifted his chin and clasped his hands at the small of his back. “You have ‘Mechs. The Barovsky Syndicate has a facility in which they are holding some items my client wishes to possess.”

Patrick frowned. “A heist? Couldn’t you put together a professional crew and get whatever it is your client wants better than us using ‘Mechs to do the same thing?”

“Doubtless I could, but apparently that is not the point.” Ryan shrugged. “I believe that even more than the items, it is my client’s wish to have the Barovskys punished, and your Kell Hounds are to be the instrument of their discipline.”

III

OUTBOUND, DROPSHIP *UNKNOWN*

ZAVIJAVA

LYRAN COMMONWEALTH

30 DECEMBER 3010

Veronica Matova ached all over. The DropShip she had been stashed on had been burning hard for the Zavijava jump point. There it would connect with a JumpShip and in the blink of an eye, the Kearny-Fuchida drives would propel it thirty light-years away from Zavijava. Because of their hasty departure, the ship’s thrust exerted more than a normal gravity’s worth of pressure. It didn’t prevent her from moving, but made her feel heavy and slothful.

Her captors had taken great pains to avoid revealing their identities, and Veronica was thankful for that. If she didn’t know who they were, she couldn’t testify against them, so they had no reason to kill her. When your life has been reduced to being an ambulatory lump of meat, any comfort, no matter how small, was appreciated.

Something heavy banged on the hatch to the small, spartanly furnished cabin she was imprisoned in. Veronica dragged herself to a corner and faced it as the hatch opened. She expected to hear the *clank* of a tray being dropped to the deck just inside the hatchway, but it didn't come. Nor did the door close quickly. Instead she caught the heavy tramp of boots.

Before she could turn, two large people grabbed her upper arms and lifted her. They turned her around, revealing two more people—all four wearing hoods, goggles, nondescript overalls, and gloves. They didn't reveal enough flesh for her to guess at anyone's age or race, and save for the woman setting a metal chair in the middle of the deck, she wasn't certain of their gender either.

The fourth individual produced a compact holovid camera with a light and integrated boom microphone on it. The red light began blinking, and the camera person nodded. "Strip off your clothes."

Veronica's expression betrayed no shock at the demand. She felt none. The moment she saw the camera, she knew what was happening. *Proof of life. Whomever they've asked to ransom me, or the person buying me wants proof of life, and they want to make sure the merchandise hasn't been roughly handled.*

She quickly shed her jacket, blouse, and slacks—none of it from her wardrobe, but supplied by her captors on Zavijava—and kicked them toward the woman. "Is this enough?"

The holovideographer shrugged. "It'll do. Turn around, slowly. Gotta show there's no bruises."

Veronica did as requested, staring intently at the two captors who had dragged her to her feet. She couldn't see past the dark lenses of their goggles, but one of them shied a bit as she stared at his eyes. She felt certain he had to be male, for only a man would retreat from her angry stare. She memorized any detail she could see about him, including a stray strand of hair slightly darker than her own golden hue on his shoulder. *I may be able to use that.*

"Okay, good, now sit in the chair."

Veronica complied with the request, but sat forward as the chair's cold seat raised gooseflesh, and she didn't want to lean back against the metal.

The woman handed her a small noteputer with the latest Zavijava news on it. "You want me to read this so they'll be able to tell that I was alive at least until this headline stopped being current?"

"That's the drill."

"Who am I making the vid for?"

The videographer shook his head. "I was just told to make it."

"Very well." Veronica lifted her chin and stared straight at the camera. "I am Veronica Matova. According to the timestamp on the News Prime information feed, it is the thirtieth of December. The leading news story is titled 'Extra Joy for New Year's.' I should read it,

but the story, if the lede is any indication, is insipid drivel suggesting that the retreat of the Ion Knights means there is much more to celebrate this year."

"That's enough."

"No, it is not. Keep shooting." Veronica's features sharpened. "My captors have been remote, but kind and quite professional. I anticipate no difficulty during my stay with them. If I had champagne, I should feel quite at home. I shall be fine."

She handed the noteputer back to the woman. "Will there be anything else?"

The videographer shut the camera off. "Get dressed and do whatever you do to get ready. We'll be jumping inside two hours."

"Of course." Veronica did not move from the chair, but instead leaned over and plucked her clothes from the deck. She drew the trousers on, then started with her shirt. She stared hard at the blond man when he turned to look at her, and ignored the woman who was waiting to recover the chair. But the videographer simply waved his companions out of the cabin, giving Veronica her tiny victory.

The hatch closed solidly, and Veronica finished dressing, her fingers working buttons unconsciously, as her mind was several light-years away. She had no doubt that the proof of life was meant for Morgan, which is why she'd gone off script. Her captors could analyze her commentary for a code and never find one. The message hadn't been in her words, but how she had said them. Morgan would know she was in control and not worried, which would give him time and space to figure out what to do.

Not that she expected him to rescue her, or had any intention of waiting around for him to do that. She had never wanted a man to be her savior; she took care of herself. This was the core she had recreated for herself once she'd escaped the abusive religious community in which she'd been raised. And in her given career, she depended on men the same way cattle ranchers depended on cattle. While many a man wanted to possess her, she never wanted to be a possession, and worked hard to avoid that fate.

No, she would get herself out of her predicament. She trusted Morgan would likewise take care of himself. Between them and their efforts, the person who had taken her would fail utterly and completely. *Now, to learn who that is, and then destroy him; this is my reason to live.*

IV

**TYROL HOUSE HOTEL, RAVENSBURG
CENTRAL RIVER DISTRICT
ZAVIJAVA
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
31 DECEMBER 3010**

Patrick Kell watched the holovid again, dividing his attention between it and the output from several diagnostics programs running alongside it. They confirmed that the video had been sent uncut, and that the soundtrack and holovideo were completely integrated and in sync. The voice stress analyzer did indicate stress, but it returned the same values for the sound from others in the room, suggesting the stress was, at least in part, physical because of the DropShip's acceleration. Analysis of sounds which the holovid carried but couldn't be heard by human ears confirmed they were on a DropShip, presumably hurtling toward Zavijava's jump point.

Morgan sat forward on the couch, elbow on his knees, palms covering his eyes. He'd watched the holovid the first couple of times they played it, then just listened. Surprise and relief had washed over his features on that first pass, then determination and concentration had taken over.

Ryan, seated in a white leather chair opposite, pressed his fingertips together. "I understand the desire to learn as much as you may from the holovid, Colonel Kell. I shall leave it with you so you can tear it apart as much as you want. I know your brother has already made copies and has other programs analyzing it."

Patrick glanced over at the man. "I don't care how well you think you scrubbed it, Mr. Ryan, I will find something."

"I did not scrub it at all. I have no reason to. My conveying it to you is certainly enough for you to bring criminal charges for aiding, abetting, and conspiracy to commit, so I hardly need to do more. But messenger is all that I am, in this instance."

Ryan rested his hands on the chair's arms. "You're both aware that three JumpShips have departed Zavijava within the last twelve hours, and at least two DropShips, traveling very rapidly, reached them in time to depart; not to mention smaller craft which could have transferred people and cargo to other DropShips. Ms. Matova is likely far away from here right now, and only my client knows where she is."

Morgan sat back. "You said your client had three tasks for us to perform. What is the first?"

Ryan pulled a small noteputer from his jacket pocket, unfolded it, then flicked a file toward Patrick's computer. "The Mecklenberg

Economic Opportunity Compound, down south, on the coast. It serves as a free port. You know what that is, yes?"

Patrick minimized the windows with Veronica's holovid on them and opened the file Ryan had relayed. Static images depicted a sprawling warehouse district on a coastline, with half of the structure built into a cliff face. It appeared to be a common port facility, with cranes, DropShip landing areas, wharves for wet freighters, runways for cargo planes, and phalanxes of shipping containers. The only unusual aspect was three concentric fences surrounding the area, with heavy watch towers and heavier anti-'Mech emplacements surrounding it on the landward side. *It looks more like a prison.*

Morgan rubbed his forehead with a hand. "It's a physical tax haven. Goods stored there are not subject to taxation and tariffs until they leave the compound and arrive at another destination. Very wealthy clientele store valuables there and freely trade between themselves and others, shielding those transactions from taxes. There's no real guessing at the value locked up in there, and piecing together an accurate inventory would be all but impossible."

"Bravo, you do understand." Ryan offered a quick, soft bit of mocking applause. "The Ion Knights were supposed to secure the compound in the second full phase of their raid but never got around to it. In the power vacuum created by the invasion, the Barovsky family has secured the facility. They are taking protection money from people and corporations that have holdings therein and looting those who refuse to pay. Very specifically there is, within the mountain, a storage area in which some very rare Kuritan relics are stored. My client wants the lot recovered and delivered intact."

Patrick frowned. "The Barovsky Syndicate has 'Mechs. Military grade, or are they converting dock 'Mechs?"

"I wouldn't know. That is up to you to assess. I mean, infiltrating a target, creating a profile, then a battleplan, that *is* what mercenaries do, yes?"

"So, Draconis Combine treasures for Veronica is step one?" Morgan stood. "Is there a deadline?"

"None given, but I shall ask for clarification." Ryan likewise stood and gave Morgan a short, perfunctory bow. "I shall check back on your progress in a few days, unless I have a more immediate update for you. Is that satisfactory?"

"Yes, thank you." Morgan walked with the man to the suite's door and closed it behind him. "Go ahead and say it, Patrick."

Patrick swiveled his chair around to face his brother. "I don't think I'm going to say what you think I am."

"No?"

"I'm good with doing whatever we have to do to get Veronica back. If it involves divesting a criminal syndicate of ill-gotten gains,

I'm for that. It's in keeping with you being military governor and the imposition of martial law."

The hint of a grin tugged at the corner of Morgan's mouth. "But?"

"What we're being asked to do is clearly more than just stealing something some idiot collector wants. The Dracs take their keepsakes very seriously. Whatever we're stealing, House Kurita is going to want that stuff fiercely. I bet the things are hidden on Zavijava because it's the last place anyone would look for valuables like that. This request is the kidnapper bending a mercenary unit to his will, and if he ever decides he wants to destroy us, all he has to do is leak information that links us with the theft of such relics. The Combine will be more than happy to execute us just for touching their artifacts."

"You have a good point there. And your point about the kidnapper wanting to bend us to his will, also good." Morgan folded his arms over his chest. "Ian Davion posited a similar idea. He hoped whatever the kidnapper wanted wouldn't send us into the Federated Suns, because he said he'd hate to have to kill us."

"I wouldn't be too keen on that, either."

Morgan frowned. "But what you said about this mission being more than just stealing something a collector wants, that has me thinking. We might be able to turn that to our advantage."

Patrick smiled. "How so?"

"Not sure yet. I need to think it through a bit. But I need you to do target analysis on the compound. Use Frost, and pull the LIC files on it. Also ask Quintus what they have. If we have to do this big and flashy, we will, but I hope there's a more surgical approach we can take. The kidnapper may be calling the tune, but we get to do the arranging, and that may allow us to get out of this with our hides intact."

V

DROPSHIP UNKNOWN

LOCATION UNKNOWN

2 JANUARY 3011

Veronica awoke and immediately felt a sense of dislocation. She found herself in a new cabin, and immediately caught the scent of fresh flowers. She cracked an eye open and there, on a table in the middle of the cabin's generous expanse, a cut-crystal vase contained a riot of flowers and greenery. Though two meters away, they appeared natural and fresh, and certainly smelled like it. They *could* have been elaborate artificial blossoms doused with perfume, but the tremble of the petals matching the low thrum of the engines suggested otherwise.

She threw back the covers, confirming that her cast-off clothes had been replaced with silk pajamas of a light blue hue. The very fact she was in an actual bed and in a luxurious cabin suggested she'd been moved to another ship—the transfer accomplished after she'd been drugged to unconsciousness. *But are we on a yacht descending to a world, or being taken aboard a transport pod for another jump?*

Veronica remembered having jumped out of the Zavijava system. In an instant, she'd felt her consciousness spread throughout reality. She knew everything, and had she still been religious, she'd have said she touched the face of God, and He had taken delight in her. Satisfaction and pleasure had flooded through her, then reality snapped back together as the jump ended. All the varied memories vanished, and great sadness seized her at their loss.

As it always is when I jump.

She hesitated. The previous few jumps had been different. She'd been traveling with Morgan Kell, and they'd held hands as they jumped. Somehow, the sense of his presence had anchored her. She focused on his touch, on the warmth of his hand, the strength of his grasp, and those things had grown to become the whole of her experience. No, it wasn't touching the godhead, but the security and pleasure she'd taken in holding his hand also had not completely vanished. Morgan had still been there, a permanence in a universe that had just gone through quantum dissolution.

She swung her legs around and got out of the bed. A thick rug covered the ship's cold, metal decking. She pulled on the silk robe that matched her pajamas and loosely cinched the tie around her waist. She walked to the table and brushed a finger beneath a blossom.

Definitely real.

Veronica immediately began appraising everything she could see. Fresh flowers either had come up from a world in the system, or from another system and were jumped in, or were sourced locally. That would require a greenhouse on the ship—and the talent to keep the flowers growing under hostile conditions. She couldn't put an exact C-bill price tag on what that would cost, but she guessed that on Galatea the monthly expense would have purchased a modestly sized home.

That is an impressive amount of money to throw away on flowers that will be dead by the time we reach a planet. Why would someone spend that sort of money? Was it intended to impress her, or perhaps to apologize for how she had been treated so far? *Or is this person just filling his new pet's cage with toys?* Perhaps it was even an attempt on her patron's part to assuage his own guilt at having kidnapped her. Nice treatment after so rough a time certainly would balance the scales in his mind.

And she was certain it was a man. Nice treatment smacked of rescue, and proving to her that he knew her value. She further surmised that while he may have known of her career as a madam and escort,

he'd never enjoyed her company before. Had he, the expense he would have gone to would have paralleled the rates she charged on Galatea. While she had never been cheap, the cost of the flowers alone would have procured her services for the better part of a week.

No, this is the spending of someone who wants to be seen as a friend and suitor, not a client. He has to be more—his ego won't allow him to just be one of many. He clearly expected his generosity to raise himself in her eyes, and then raise their relationship out of the gutter. By lavishing on her the gifts he would give any woman he courted, he was legitimizing her in his eyes. He was rescuing her socially and morally as well as physically.

Her captor was not the first man to take that approach. Morgan Kell had been different. Kind and courteous, yes, to a fault; and prone to wanting to rescue her, absolutely. He was a man, after all, and the desire to be a white knight came with the Y chromosome. But Morgan had resisted it. Successfully. He was comfortable with who he was and who she was, and he was content to wait until she accepted that as the truth that would underpin their relationship.

She'd not have believed it until she'd seen him interact with his brother. They had a love for each other that gave them incredible freedom. They could joke and tease and argue and even fight, yet each one would be there for the other no matter what. She'd looked for hidden feelings and had seen none—and holographs of the brothers down through the years revealed that their relationship had always been open and incredibly strong. Once she could see that strength in Morgan for his brother, she accepted that he could and *did* feel the same about her.

Veronica smiled as she touched the blossom again, openly displaying delight on her face—for she was certain she was being surveilled every second. *Morgan will be coming, and if he catches you, there will be little left.* She let her smile grow. *And if I am the one to deal with you first—which I shall be—there will be nothing left of you at all.*

VI

**TYROL HOUSE HOTEL, RAVENSBURG
CENTRAL RIVER DISTRICT
ZAVIJAVA
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
2 JANUARY 3011**

Morgan Kell studied the holographic model of the Mecklenberg Economic Opportunity Compound. Based on the best intelligence available, including scouting reports from Patrick and Frost's

reconnaissance runs, the well defended compound presented a formidable problem. The gunnery emplacements protecting all landward approaches had hardened defenses and superior overlapping fields of fire. Moreover, the emplacement had secondary batteries which could rotate around to cover the interior of the compound as defense against 'Mechs doing a combat drop. The Barovsky Syndicate had up-armored and weaponized the compound's IndustrialMechs, imported a few similarly modified MiningMechs, and had at least one militia lance from Mecklenberg available.

Morgan shook his head. "We have no idea what is in the containers, nor what kind of anti-intruder preparations we'll run into inside the mountain?"

Patrick sat back in his chair at the table. "We talked to a couple of people who own storage space inside the mountain. They worked with security experts to create their space. When they arrived at the compound to deposit their treasures, they were sealed inside a hovercar with blacked-out windows and driven robotically to their storage area. They said the vehicle stopped a couple of times, so they assumed heavy blast doors were being opened. They didn't see much more than the corridor in which their storage unit was placed. Corridors were wide enough for 'Mechs to do load lifting, but other than that, they're clueless."

Quintus Allard nodded. "I have access to some inventories—only a few of which I can share with you—but agent reports from those we've gotten inside are similar. Very compartmentalized, with up-to-date security precautions. Not that a 'Mech's heavy laser couldn't burn through things quickly enough, but all that heat won't do much for the contents of the storage area."

"So the idea of a smash-and-grab is out." The elder Kell brother leaned on the table and stared at the slowly rotating model. "We've probably got enough firepower to take the doors down to the mountain and chew through the 'Mechs they have defending the place. Still, the gunnery emplacements could grind on us."

"That's all true, Morgan, but I really don't like fighting inside the compound itself because of all the unknowns. We have no idea what's inside those storage containers. As much as I don't want to be burning up some ancient bits of artwork, I'm even less happy about the idea that someone might be storing some munitions and we light all that off. Plus, any damage done to the containers that do hold valuables means we'll anger everyone who loses stuff, plus all those who blame us for the facility not being secure. We'll survive this, but our reputations won't. And if we don't get the Combine artifacts, we can forget seeing Veronica again."

"There is a way to crack this nut." Morgan pointed toward the seaside. "The defenses from this side largely don't exist."

"Yeah, but we don't have a navy." Patrick shook his head. "It's a deep-water port, rubble fill with mines and anti-'Mech netting. Loading a freighter with 'Mechs and driving it into the facility would get them in, but we're still looking at serious damage."

"I'm not really in favor of that, either." Morgan straightened. "It occurs to me that we're looking at this the wrong way. We're assuming the ransom request is set up to paint us in a bad light, largely because we assume the kidnapper is angry with us. Now the story about the Ion Knights wanting whatever's in that storage facility might be correct, but what else happens in our taking the Combine treasure?"

Quintus stroked a hand along his jaw. "At the very least, it does nothing for the Barovsky Syndicate. Taking the compound was their major play in establishing a foothold in the south. They'll take a lot of damage in this, both to hardware and reputation, and there's always other groups willing to tear into them after you soften them up."

"So they have as much to lose here as we do. Which means we need to up the ante." Morgan smiled. "Patrick, work up operational plans for an air assault, for an amphibious assault, and a landward assault. Toss in anything else you can think of, if another plan suggests itself. Start requesting support units for each of those plans, place purchase orders for equipment..."

"Order up food and billet space for assault troops, warehouse space for all of our munitions." Patrick slowly grinned. "We can parade our 'Mechs around if you want."

"Everything but the 'Mech parade. I want the Barovsky Syndicate to discover our 'Mech strength through their own work, otherwise they won't believe what they learn."

Quintus frowned. "If you leak multiple plans, won't they disbelieve all of them?"

"Maybe, but most likely they'll decide we're going with whatever plan works best against them. As with any operation, the weak point is people and their fear. They'll cover where they're afraid we'll hit them, and they'll pull in all the resources they have to make us think twice."

The Federated Suns intelligence operative smiled. "By their actions you'll know how you should come after them; and forcing them to shift resources around will cause confusion and some entropic breakdown of their forces. Once they show their hand, you'll know how to play against them."

Morgan chuckled. "Oh, I think I already know how to do that, my friend. Yes, the big show will be for the Barovsky Syndicate, but it will also be for the kidnapper. We'll convince him that he's successfully manipulated us into unwittingly doing what he wants. His pleasure will reinforce his self-confidence. To him, we'll just be puppets and he'll pull our strings."

Patrick clapped his hands together. "And then, when we climb those strings and bite off his fingers, he's got no one to blame but himself."

VII

DROPSHIP UNKNOWN

LOCATION UNKNOWN

3 JANUARY 3011

The jet of cold water blasted Veronica in the back, pitching her across the ship's hold and into a bulkhead. She hit hard, then rebounded unsteadily. The water slashed down across her legs. Her feet flew out from beneath her, and she landed with a splash in the growing puddle.

Her silken pajamas clung to her, the cold puckering her flesh. She rolled over onto her flank and swept drenched hair out of her face. The water jet returned, catching her in the shoulder and spinning her around on her hip. Her back hit the bulkhead again, and on her side, she drew her knees up to protect her belly.

Her captors had descended on her while she slept, snatching her up and dragging her to the hold. They'd left her there in the darkness for as long as it took for her finally fall back to sleep. Then they noisily opened the hatch, and when she stood, shielding her eyes with a hand, they'd hit her with the water.

They said nothing—not that their hostility didn't come through loud and clear when the water hit her. Veronica had no idea why the change in attitude, for she'd done nothing. *That I can remember.* And the fact that she couldn't remember pointed to other things they were doing.

Her headache, and the difficulty thinking, meant they'd cut back on the percentage of oxygen in the hold. Her lungs burned. The air was as thin as it would have been were she atop a mountain. She gasped for breath and couldn't muster the strength to clutch her knees against her chest. She slowly sprawled, her cheek against the deck, her breath spraying out the water that had trickled into her open mouth.

She couldn't even manage to shiver against the cold seeping into her flesh. The warm bed, the flowers, the delicious meals she'd been served—paired with suitable wines—all distant memories. *Just as well, I would vomit it all up now.*

Veronica lay there in the dark, her body boneless, for an incalculable amount of time. She couldn't reason, but emotions surged through her. Fear of death seized her, and shame at having thought herself in control. She'd foolishly felt confident and was now paying for it. As her body cooled, life ebbed. She felt certain she would die.

Her mind went back, back to her childhood. Back then she'd known fear and doubt, because the strict sect she'd been raised in had terrorized the children, telling them they would never be saved, and harshly disciplining them for any slight, real or imagined. At times the children were punished simply because to be happy clearly offended God.

Offended the very same God she'd prayed to for succor when fear and shame and pain had seized her as a child. She'd prayed so fervently, so honestly, and waited so patiently for Him to answer her. While she hoped she was worthy of His grace, His continued silence told her she was not. Or, she had wondered, was God testing her as He tested Job? *Will my impatience deny me the Promised Land as Moses's impatience denied it to him?*

And now, lying there, soaked to the skin, dying by degrees, transported all the way back to her childhood, she sought to recall the prayers she'd offered before. While the little girl in her did that, the adult who had rejected God laughed. When she'd escaped the sect, she had rejected all of its values and all of the "truths" on which they had based their lives. She gave herself over to hedonistic pleasures and materialism. While she might help some people, her kindness was afforded those who amused her, or whom she could use later. She'd wanted nothing to do with God, and took great delight in ruining the sanctimonious among her former community.

Veronica recovered the words and began running them through her mind on a constant loop: *Dear God, I am not worthy of your love and grace. Forgive this sinner, and save me from the wages of my sins.* Again and again she formed the words into sentences. With each pass she layered more sincerity and more pain into them. She let her abject fear underscore her unworthiness; and let her hopes that God might extend to her His mercy complete the circuit positively.

At some point she realized that she was actually mouthing the words. Then she heard them distantly, uttered in a child's terrified whisper, echoing through the darkness. And she felt His mercy in that the water seemed warmer and her body shivered with His grace. She breathed a little deeper, and the fire in her lungs abated. *He has heard me!*

The moment that thought came to her, she snorted. *He didn't answer at all, not God, just someone who thinks he's God.* The ability to reason, the warmth, all those came from someone manipulating the life support controls for the ship's hold. *I'm too valuable for him to kill, but he has no trouble letting me know that I exist at his whim.* Whoever her captor was, he saw her as a possession and would play with her as a cat does a mouse. *He wants to break me, and that just won't happen.*

She forced herself to lie there, appearing far weaker than she felt. *Let him think he's won. Let him become overconfident.* Veronica wanted to smile but killed the impulse, not wanting to reveal anything to

her captor. *And when he is certain none can bring him down, I shall do exactly that.*

VIII

**MECKLENBERG ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY COMPOUND, MECKLENBERG
SOUTH COAST DISTRICT
ZAVIJAVA
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
5 JANUARY 3011**

Patrick Kell studied the Mecklenberg Economic Opportunity Compound from the cockpit of his brother's *Archer*. The mist rolling in from the sea as the sun slowly rose gave the compound a ghostly atmosphere. He refrained from shifting over to IR or magres, which would have displayed the fencing and concrete towers plainly. The fog could easily be smoke from the future, from the Kell Hounds taking the compound apart. It would hide a lot of death. *A lot of needless death.*

Patrick keyed his radio. "Barrage Lance, please paint target T1. Only fire on my order." A series of clicks came back through his headset, acknowledging his command.

He flipped the radio over to the frequency the compound's internal security forces had been using. The Barovsky Syndicate's lack of communications discipline and the Hounds employing the latest in encryption programs and equipment meant the compound's occupants had been broadcasting in the clear for the last two days. This included not only mundane readiness reports but all the casual greetings between people, chitchat as they swapped duty stations, and the griping by reinforcements they'd conscripted from Mecklenberg.

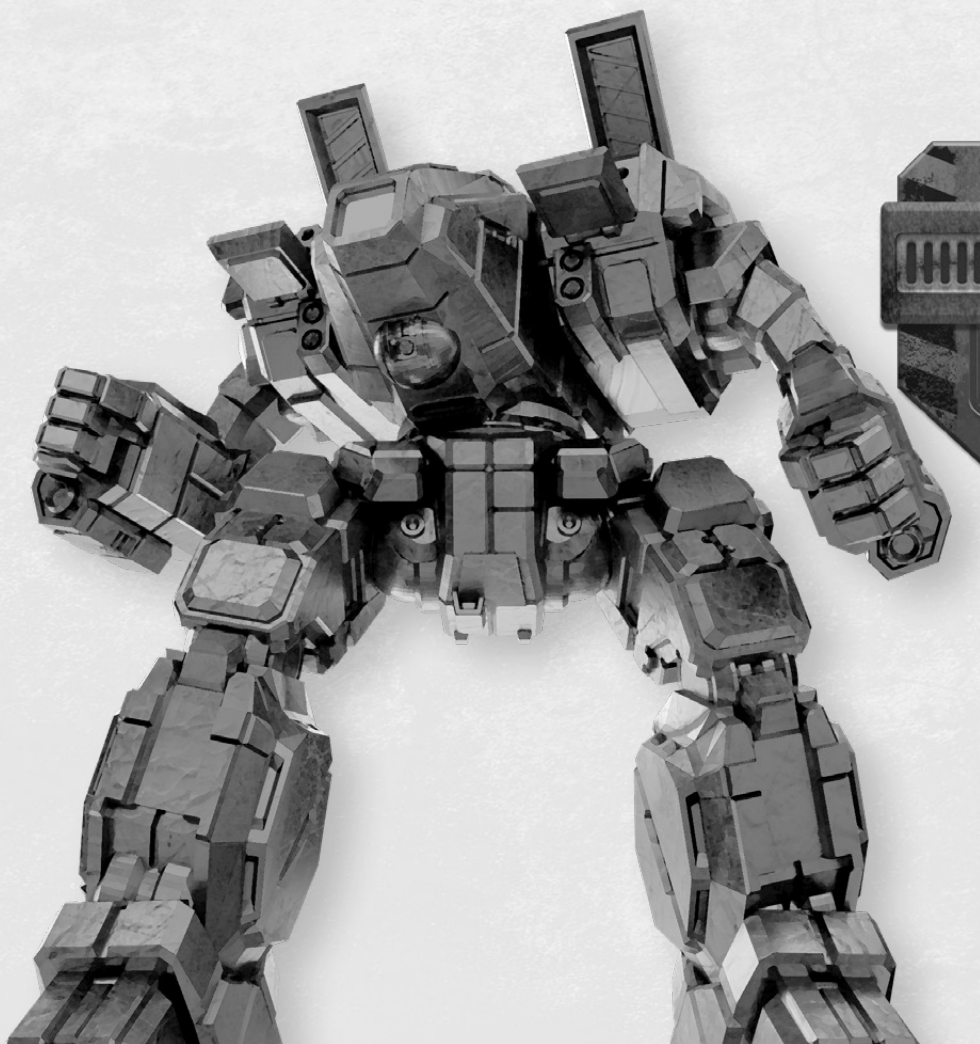
Morgan's strategy had worked like a charm. Leaking the plans had inspired the Syndicate to concentrate their firepower defending the compound. They'd pulled not only security forces from as far north as Ravensburg, but had commandeered and modified normal IndustrialMechs. The operators—who called themselves operators and not pilots—protested being drafted into a military conflict, but the Syndicate coerced them into driving.

The Syndicate, to its credit, hadn't rushed into things willy-nilly. When they became aware of Hound or local militia units shadowing them, they took up defensive positions. The Hounds didn't initiate any firefights, but their harassment slowed the reinforcements, depriving the operators of sleep and eating up fuel and rations.

Patrick checked his secondary monitor for a top-down view of the compound. The Hounds' screening force effectively blockaded more

reinforcements coming in along the roads. 'Mechs at the entrance to the harbor effectively discouraged commercial freighters from coming in. While the Syndicate forces in the compound made the prospects of taking it very bloody, the prospect of a long siege hardly favored the Syndicate.

Patrick opened his radio frequency. "This is Lieutenant-Colonel Patrick Kell. I am under direct orders of Zavijava's military governor. You are assembled unlawfully here, in accord with Civil Defense Codes Section XI, and are illegally in possession of heavy weapons. You will lay down your arms immediately, or we will commence your destruction. You will surrender unconditionally and be treated as captured combatants. Resisters will be considered common criminals and dealt with to the full extent possible within the strictures of martial law."



He waited for a reply, hoping someone would see sense. He gave it five minutes, during which time a few 'Mechs shifted position and squads of ground troops scurried from cover to cover. When the Syndicate troops maintained their silence, he flipped the radio back to Tac-One. "Barrage Lance, one salvo, fire!" As he spoke, he toggled his sensors over to magres, dropped the golden crosshairs in his holographic display onto the blocky outline, and tightened up on the triggers.

The launch covers over the twin long-range missile racks built into the *Archer's* chest snapped open. Fire blossomed and heat poured into the 'Mech's cockpit. The 70-ton war machine twisted left and right as the missiles arced skyward, riding jets of bright flame.

The missiles burned through the fog and slammed into the squat gunnery tower in the middle of the northern perimeter, halfway between the gate and the tower atop the seaside stone mountain. Explosions rippled from the base up toward the turtle roof. Concrete chunks sprayed out in all directions, peppering the smaller towers on either side. Patrick's large lasers etched green beams into the concrete, connecting impact craters with molten trenches. Rebar glowed white. Then depleted-uranium slugs from autocannons chipped away more of the gray stone.

"Barrage lance, withdraw." Patrick stepped the *Archer* backward, keeping pace with Walter de Mesnil's *Blackjack*. They pulled back far enough to place themselves beyond the effective range of the guns in the tower, providing the Syndicate gunners with a difficult targeting problem. They knew, from eavesdropping on Syndicate radio broadcasts and from studying the constabulary's files on Syndicate members, that few had combat experience, and those few weren't assigned to the towers. They had their own 'Mechs, and weren't going to give them up for room in a bunker.

The smaller towers each contained machine guns for anti-personnel fighting, and a pair of medium lasers. A few of the gunners lit those off, but the beams never found a target.

T1 boasted two large lasers and fired both of them. One missed cleanly, but the other hit the *Archer*. The green beam slagged armor on the 'Mech's left leg, doing damage that a few armor plates and a paint job would make disappear.

A light burned on Patrick's communications console, and he punched it. "Sorry about the paint, Morgan. Do we go again?"

"No, just hold there. I'll be back with you in five." His brother's voice carried a mild hint of amusement. "We're set here. If they move to counterattack, just proceed as planned."

"Will do. Good luck." Patrick shook his head, then opened the frequency to the compound. "We are still awaiting your surrender. You have thirty minutes. For your own sake, do nothing rash."

IX

**OTLICHNAYA GAVAN, OUTSIDE RAVENSBURG
CENTRAL RIVER DISTRICT
ZAVIJAVA
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
5 JANUARY 3011**

Morgan Kell, unarmed, wearing the Kell Hounds uniform of black slacks beneath a double-breasted dress jacket of black with bright red sleeves, shoved open the doors to Ivan Barovsky's office and smiled as if seeing an old friend after many years.

The office had old-Terra charm, with bright yellow walls, gilded columns half embedded in them, and gilded, baroque furnishings that harkened back to the Tsarist period in ancient Russia. In fact, only the holoprojection unit halfway to the desk and a pair of angry Pomeranians protesting the intrusion spoiled the ambiance.

Behind Morgan, four of the Kell Hounds' best infantry and an equal number of the LIC's local special weapons squad fanned out, aiming their assault carbines in Ivan's direction. The crime boss's assistant, a dark-haired woman with ebon skin and an angry squint, slowly straightened and raised her hands.

The crime boss—balding, with a bit of a paunch and a ragged scar across his unshaven chin—sat back in a leather chair and covered a yawn with his hand. One of the dogs trotted over and leaped into his lap, turning to face Morgan and bare its teeth.

Morgan walked through the holoimage of the compound and paused. "Do we need introductions?"

"No, but you should consider this is a poor way to make a favorable first impression."

Morgan jerked a thumb at the display. "The assault on the compound, or my appearance here? I don't care about favorable. I want this to be a *lasting* impression."

The crime boss sat up, resting both hands on the desk's green blotter. "Lasting will be wasted, Colonel Kell, because you won't be here that long. No one Tharkad sends out here remains that long. You go away on your own, or when the Mariks decide Zavijava is theirs, it makes no difference. You will vanish, whereas we are eternal."

"I accept the veracity of two of your points. Your being eternal, I'm not so sure." Morgan half turned toward the holoivid, which comprised a large square showing the compound from a security camera high up on a cargo lift at the wharf. Down the side, stacked one above the other, four smaller squares provided different views Barovsky could swap for the larger image with the flick of a button. "You must understand by

now that the reason our various plans leaked was to get you to reinforce the compound. And that, in turn..."

"Was to get me to shift 'Mechs I had guarding my home down to the compound. Yes, an oversight on my part." Barovsky shrugged. "But now I have all of those forces gathered at the compound, and that means I have far more in the way of resources there than you do. In fact..."

On the display the compound's main gate slowly opened. Within the center of the compound, two companies of 'Mechs formed up, and two more companies of jury-rigged IndustrialMechs joined them. Opposing them, the Kell Hounds only had a company of mercenaries. *That the Syndicate can see.* They also had a company of local militia on standby to reinforce them, but if things progressed to the point where they had to be called in, the battle would already be lost.

Morgan's eyes tightened. "This is about more than the weight of metal. My people are trained in warfare, in military tactics and engagements. The few pilots you do have with experience would never have made the cut to join the Hounds. You order your people forward, and I guarantee they won't be eternal."

Ivan stood, his eyes narrowed and his head cocked. "Are you bluffing? Do you take me for a coward or a fool?"

"I take you for a man who is neither stupid nor craven, but I also know you're a man who hasn't had to deal with someone like me before." Morgan folded his arms over his chest. "Go ahead, give the order. The result will illustrate my point."

Ivan glanced at his aide and nodded.

She picked up a small noteputer and punched a button. "Message sent, action authorized."

Ivan waved a hand at a row of chairs against the wall. "Make yourself comfortable."

Morgan shook his head. "I won't have time to."

The Syndicate 'Mechs moved out in good order, heading for the gates. Towers, like the one his brother had shot up, flanked it. Four 'Mechs could travel abreast through the gate, but because of the triple line of fencing and obstacles, they'd be forced into a sixty-meter-long gauntlet where the Kell Hounds could pound on them. The compound defenses would be able to fire back at the Hounds, but the damage dealt to the Syndicate 'Mechs would be crippling, especially if they couldn't move through the gauntlet quickly.

As the Syndicate 'Mechs neared the gate, the clifftop tower opened up. It swung its turret around, aimed at the gate, and lit the Syndicate force up, blasting it in the flank. Two large lasers took an *UrbanMech's* right leg off at the knee. It crashed down on its belly, sliding across the ferrocrete, sparks flying, and slammed into one of the smaller defense turrets.

The other turrets swung their guns around and in that moment, the operators discovered that while all the weapons could depress enough to sweep the ground, none could elevate and shoot at the cliff-top tower. Its guns, on the other hand, could hit anything. Moreover, its position gave it command of the right side of the battlefield, so the mercenaries could bring up a lance beneath its shadow, using the cliffside as defense against the other towers and still let them target the gate.

The cliff-top tower fired again, targeting one of the up-armored IndustrialMechs. Armor vanished, and its right arm evaporated into a black cloud. The other IndustrialMechs broke ranks, pulling back and away from it. Operators raised their 'Mechs' arms, popped their cockpit canopies.

Ivan frowned. "You bought my people off?"

"Didn't have to. We've been listening to everything you've been saying to each other for the past two days. I had commandos infiltrate your towers as the crews changed during the last watch." Morgan shook his head. "Your Pomeranians here put up more of a fight than your tower crews did."

"The rest of them won't go down so easily."

"The fight's not there, it's here." Morgan glanced at the crime boss. "No one else needs to die. You can save them."

"And what's in it for me?"

"You'll get that chance at being eternal." Morgan grinned. "Look, we have an enemy in common. Someone who hates you so much that he forced me to attempt to attack and destroy you. So, do the right thing, and together we'll figure out who hates us. And then, we decide what to do about him."

X

**TYROL HOUSE HOTEL, RAVENSBURG
CENTRAL RIVER DISTRICT
ZAVIJAVA
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
7 JANUARY 3011**

"Good lord, Patrick, you look like you've been on campaign, not supervising the Barovsky surrender."

Patrick shrugged at his brother's remark and tossed his duffel bag onto the suite's couch. Cleaning up the situation at the compound hadn't taken too long after Ivan Barovsky ordered his people to stand down. The Syndicate members weren't terribly keen on being divested

of their 'Mechs, even in the short term, but they acquiesced when promised they'd be released without bail or monitoring devices, and be able to reclaim their 'Mechs after thirty days.

"Yes, well, dealing with crooks and criminals and dockworkers was a hell of a lot easier than handling folks who had their family heirlooms tucked away in the compound. I'm not sure which was more exhausting, dealing with the entitled rants or the ever-escalating bribes. Anyway, I used the militia to deal with them. We got the Kurita artifacts packaged up, and Ryan has possession of them. I told him we'd disarm the security devices on the crate once we have more proof of life of Veronica, so he's working on that."

"Very good." Morgan sighed and dropped into a white leather chair. "It was a bit easier to deal with Barovsky for the most part. I've tucked him away in prison with that actor who was part of the Ion Knights, so we can have Ryan tell his client that Barovsky has been eliminated."

"I'm sure he and Constantine Fisk will have fun getting to know each other in custody." Patrick massaged the back of his neck with a hand. "Has Barovsky helped you pinpoint your common enemy?"

The elder brother shook his head. "Sort of. Barovsky's interests extend well beyond Zavijava, and he's run afoul of a number of other syndicates. And then there are those syndicates which have a good partnership with him but would still love to keep the money they send him."

"Anything on Galatea?"

"No. His mother ran the business before him, and warned him off doing anything there. He also didn't know Veronica. I have LIC and Quintus going through the information he gave me. There has to be a connection somewhere—even if it's just someone who knows about life on Zavijava, and picked Barovsky because of his involvement with the compound. This first mission was a test, after all."

Patrick nodded. "One we passed."

"I hope so, Patrick." Morgan hunched forward in the chair. "And I'm really not looking forward at what they're going to have us do next."

DROPSHIP UNKNOWN

LOCATION UNKNOWN

8 JANUARY 3011

It felt like a trap to Veronica. She had no idea how time had been passing because her days became being blasted with cold water, then passing out because of thin air. She'd later wake up feeling warmer but still soaked and find a ration biscuit or two by the door. The only water she got was whatever she could drink off the floor. She would have

described the experience as miserable, but she'd known worse as a child. It was just that the repetition became monotonous.

But this morning, things had changed. The lights came up and her captors came in again carrying a holovid camera. They stripped her down to her skin and had her display herself. She turned slowly, not caring what she looked like. She knew they wanted proof of life, and didn't really care about much else.

Then a new person entered the hold and handed her a big, fluffy robe. *Warm, too.* Veronica pulled it on and tied the waist tight. She accepted a towel from the same woman, dried and wrapped her hair up. And just beyond the hatch someone had placed a pair of slippers on the deck.

Veronica's guide led her up a ship's ladder and down a narrow corridor to a small cabin. It had a bunk above a small desk on the left, and then a tiny round table with comfortable seats on the right. A small water closet provided both toilet and showering facilities near the door, and opposite, a wardrobe opened with a half dozen outfits on hangers.

Her guide remained in the hatchway. "Get dressed. The navy blue is what he wants you to wear."

Veronica explored the drawers in the wardrobe's lower half and found lingerie in her size. She donned a matching set in light blue satin. She pulled on a white blouse, then wore navy slacks and a blazer over. She quickly combed her hair out, then pulled it back into a ponytail. The WC had no makeup and no grooming equipment beyond a brush and a comb, so Veronica studied her own face in the mirror as little as possible.

Her guide rapped on the hatch. "It will not do to keep him waiting."

"Yes, of course." Veronica had no idea who the *him* was, but she knew enough to know he controlled her fate. He took her from a luxurious cabin to the hold, and now had raised her up again, at least partially. *He controls my life. We both know it. The question is, how to make the best of it?*

The guide led her forward along the companionway, then stopped her with a hand. "Wait here." The guide slipped into the cabin beyond the hatch. Veronica caught muffled voices, then the hatch opened. "Come."

Veronica smiled, recognizing the new cabin as the one she'd enjoyed initially on board. Everything looked to be the same, though it smelled different. *Male musk, and floral scents to mask it. And I've caught that scent before.*

A mousy man with long and luxurious mustaches swung his feet off the bed and stood beside it. He wore a uniform of sorts, with black slacks, knee-high riding boots, and a lavender jacket with gold-braid trim. He looked more like the leader of marching band who had lost his tall hat in a gale, but the little dagger hanging off the belt around his waist suggested he was to be taken as a MechWarrior.

Better he greets me in this than a cooling vest and shorts.

"Ah, Miss Matova, so good to see you again. I should apologize for all the intrigues and games, but you cannot imagine my delight when I was informed you were on Zavijava." He stroked his mustache, curling the right side up. "I can assure you, my dear, that your passage from this point forward will be nothing but pleasant. As long as you behave, of course."

Veronica smiled in return, making it disarming and appearing so sincere. "Count Markham Somokis, of course. What every woman in distress requires—an honorable man of breeding and sophistication to provide succor. I am in your debt."

"Please, my dear, be seated. I have the staff preparing you a quick bite, and I am hoping you will dine with me later." He spread his arms. "We have a jump to make, and then you will have my full attention."

"Of course, my lord. You are most kind." Veronica seated herself at the small table where she'd taken meals before. *And I shall happily use your kindness to destroy you, and pay you back for all I have been forced to endure.*



To be continued in Shrapnel #3!



PLANET DIGEST: MINETTE III

TOM STANLEY

Star Type (Recharge Time): G1V (182 hours)

Position in System: 3 (of 11)

Time to Jump Point: 9.75 days

Number of Satellites: 1 (Minium)

Surface Gravity: 0.70

Atm. Pressure: Low (Breathable)

Equatorial Temperature: 24°C (Arid)

Surface Water: 30%

Recharge Station: Zenith (before 2839), none (after 2839)

HPG Class: B

Highest Native Life: Amphibians

Population: 68,000,000 Value as of (3145)

Socio-Industrial Levels: A-B-A-B-C

Landmasses (Capital City): Camma (Schmetzan), Sinatus,
Black Water Isle

Minette's founding was due in part to families living in fear of Edmund and Edward Davion, the Twin Tyrants. Their political rivals and numerous minor houses packed up every valuable they owned and headed out to the rim of Federated Suns space. Eventually they settled on a rather arid yet pleasant world they named Minette.

From this world, the Federated Suns coordinated and launched various colonization enterprises into the region that would become known as the Outer Marches. Minette being a waypoint saw many forms of business flourish on the planet, which led to the establishment of the Trans-Federation Stock and Commodities Exchange (TFSCE) to serve the Outer Marches. By 2571 Minette was not only the capital of its operational area, but many saw it as a potential future province

capital. However, political and financial influence in the region shaped the Minnettian mindset, giving the people a sense of superiority over their Outer Marches brethren.

Two massive continents comprise the majority of Minette, with minor islands surrounding the pair. Geologists theorized that the two landmasses split apart millions of years ago and formed Camma with its smaller continent Sinatus. Surrounding the two continents is the body of water the locals call the Big Puddle, and between them lies Black Water Isle, a chunk of land broken from Sinatus.

Constant cold, small amounts of wildlife, and wild weather patterns in the north and south poles forced the original settlers along the equator. As more potential pioneers headed on to the Periphery, some stayed on Minette and tamed the lands. Most nobility at the time joked that Minette was “the last stop of civilization” before reaching the wild Outback worlds. New merchant opportunities arose on Minette as the economy grew, allowing people unable reach New Avalon, New Syrtis, or Robinson a chance to live “the good life.” This allowed multiple cliques within the noble circles to grow.

The planet’s social circles ran on the principle that, at times, knowing the right people was more important than having skills. Some family lines excelled in certain industries, while having the right friends—or even the wrong ones—would dictate future goals.

As the Star League formed, Minette’s influence grew when Star League scientists used the world for filtration research and water reclamation. Research facilities dotted the world during the height of the Golden Age. The Minettians, flush with money and technology, grew to support the Star League’s ideals even after it crumbled.

Minette underwent various reforms and cultural upheavals during the centuries as the Federated Suns changed. Due to their fear of the Twin Tyrants, the planet’s population held a week long jubilation when Simon Davion finally ascended the throne. A stronger sense of support for New Avalon grew during these times of greater leadership; consequently, whenever less-than-ideal Davion leadership assumed the throne, the ruling families of Minette embraced their internal fears and paranoia.

During the Star League Civil War, Minette’s population clamored to support Aleksandr Kerensky despite the First Prince John Davion’s silence. This did not stop many from smuggling items of support to troops or outright providing passage to the Periphery in case the Star League’s war spilled over to the Federated Suns. As Kerensky’s Exodus from the Inner Sphere was made public, another cultural shift emerged: the founding families of Minette wanted to fund expeditions to the Periphery and look for Kerensky’s missing fleet. However, the newer influential families, more loyal to House Davion, disagreed with such notion because Minette was always a Federated Suns world; they believed the Star League was dead and should be thrown into the

dustbin of history. Out of this came a compromise from a third party, the Merchant Guild based on Black Water Isle. The guild knew various technologies could be lost if war were to ravage the Federated Suns. They also acknowledged that House Davion was their rightful ruler, since the times of horror with Edmund and Edward Davion were history.

Due to this compromise, Minette became a shining fusion of old Star League technology and ideals along with Suns culture and nobility. While the First Succession War raged, efforts were made to protect neighboring systems from barbarism. As the Second Succession War erupted, teachers, intellectuals, and scientists stored research and texts in caches dotting the Northlands district. However, Minette soon fell into civil war after their only recharge station was destroyed via sabotage in 2839, and old family feuds caused blame to be tossed around as often as gunfire.

Tiberius Minsk-Davion, an up-and-coming political figure, accused Planet Speaker Marcus Alaimo for the sabotage due to his insistence on reducing military recruitment as a means of not supporting the Second Succession War. Alaimo's plan was to increase spending on preservation of technology and support of local colonies. The appalling action of the station's destruction ran counter to Alaimo's plans, but Minsk-Davion's rhetoric and charisma swayed the populace. His militant focus riled up local factions due to a declining economy caused by the Succession Wars destroying many interstellar trade interests. The station's destruction was a symbol of the war's impact finally coming to their doorstep.

The resulting civil war destroyed many families, as ComStar shut down HPG service in protest until order was restored. Order came in the form of a Merchant Guild uprising, unofficially approved by ComStar. The uprising swiftly took over the Conclave chambers. Documents recovered just shortly after Gray Monday show that ComStar may have caused the recharge station's destruction, although their motives remain unclear. Regardless of the truth, the Merchant's Guild families married into many of the influential houses of Minette and have steadily controlled the planet's leadership since.

Some on Minette saw the wedding of Hanse Davion to Melissa Steiner as seen as a wonderful shift in the future of the Davion line. The wedding was celebrated for weeks, culminating in Melissa's birthday being a planetary holiday, unofficially declared a "truce day" for advocates of the old Minsk-Davion and Alaimo families. The Steiner-Davion union accomplished two goals: the increased military influence of the Federated Suns and the potential for preserving or recovery of *lostech* thanks to the combined efforts of both nations. As a result, both the Minsk-Davions and Alaimos suspend any activities on each other on this truce day; any violators found are quickly handled by both families.

While the Federated Commonwealth grew, trade expanded for Minette, allowing the planet's influence to expand farther into the

Periphery. Golden Age reformists saw this as the best time to infiltrate the higher echelons of the Merchant Guild and noble families, to create a benevolent era toward their neighbors. Contributions to the Green Star Corporation, formed in 3008 in Clam Falls, gave Merchant Guild families greater inroads toward controlling more of the Outback's services and influencing their governments. Green Star's services to the Outback and Federated Suns are not insignificant, handling multiple needs from construction, utilities, legal arbitration, and more. Though family lines like the Felsners claim top positions such as CEO to be an even hand among the feuding factions on the world, many families within the guild are placed in influential positions to satisfy the desires of controlling Outback needs.

The Jihad caused Minette to lose entire families, and the economy nearly collapsed on itself. The Blakist occupation of New Avalon spurred Minettian families and companies to wage shadow wars against the Planetary Speaker and her Conclave. Records from the Jihad indicate that over one-third of the companies within the Merchant Guild were either secretly controlled by the Word of Blake or were run by those whose interests coincided with the Blakists'. A new civil war erupted just as the populace was recovering from the FedCom Civil War years earlier. Cities were firebombed into ashes, entire corporations on Black Water Isle were destroyed as artificial islands collapsed; even the DropShip construction facilities were not spared. The previous purges of Varnay and Katherine Steiner-Davion supporters paled in comparison to the tragedies brought on whole houses who supported the Blakists secretly or openly. As the Jihad concluded, the planet's powerful guild empire was nearly crushed under the weight of its own corruption. Trade deals were lost, routes were left unprotected, and rampant piracy took over some outposts in the far reaches of the Federated Suns.

In 3085, Regent Yvonne Steiner-Davion's actions to create a Periphery March gave certain leaders of Minette apoplectic fits. To make matters worse, the Malagrotta Cooperative found evidence of various unfair contracts tied to Minette, souring relations with the new Duke Marsin as the Periphery March was formed. Minette's government once saw itself as a march capital in waiting, destined to be the next New Syrtis or Robinson, but the Jihad changed those plans after economic devastation nearly bankrupted the planet's economy. The nobility wondered if backing Yvonne was the best measure, and the attempt to use her inexperience to raise their own status failed, resulting in after the creation of a new march with June named as the march's capital.

Other systems near Minette have a saying about their behavior: "Exploitation and compassion—two sides of the same coin." In 3093 Minette proved how true that saying was by launching raids on local Periphery March systems such as Jesup and Hortense. Desperate for resources and a restoration of their power, the Conclave, unknown

to the Planetary Speaker, clandestinely hired less-than-reputable mercenaries to raid neighboring worlds under the guise of pirates, in order to discredit the Periphery March's ability to protect its people. The result to Minette was unthinkable, as the attacks were traced back to the system, and a biochemical missile attack targeted Black Water Isle in retaliation. Though the isle was assumed to have the lowest population on the planet, this retaliatory strike crippled the economy by killing the leadership of multiple powerful corporations at once. The strike also raised environmental concerns, as some of the medicinal- and chemical-waste companies headquartered there saw containment failures on their hazardous-material storage units. As of 3145, emergency-response crews and medical teams still are trying to clean up and restore Black Water Isle.

TERRAIN TABLES

To randomly determine the mapsheets for a battle set on this planet, choose the continent, then roll a D6 and select the map matching the result. The maps in this list can be found in the noted map set (MS) or map-compilation set (MC).

Camma

Note: May use Thin Snow modification (see p. 50, *Tactical Operations: Advanced Rules*).

- 1: Desert Hills (MS2, MC1)
- 2: BattleForce 2 (MS6, MC2)
- 3: Box Canyon (MS6, MC2)
- 4: Rolling Hills #1 (MS3, MC1)
- 5: Rolling Hills #2 (MS3, MC1)
- 6: City Grid Street Park #1 (MS4, MC1)

Sinatus

Note: May use Earthquake +1 modifiers (see p. 53, *Tactical Operations: Advanced Rules*).

- 1: City Residential (MS6, MC2)
- 2: Military Base #1 (MS7)
- 3: Military Base #2 (MS7)
- 4: Woodland (MS6, MC2)
- 5: Open Terrain #1 (MS5, MC2)
- 6: Wide River (MS6, MC2)

Black Water Isle

Note: May use 1D6 + 2 hexes for Hazardous Liquid Pools due to the intense industrial nature of the region (see p. 47, *Tactical Operations: Advanced Rules*).

- 1:** Archipelago #1 (MS7)
- 2:** Archipelago #2 (MS7)
- 3:** Coast #2 (MS7)
- 4:** River Delta #1 (MS4, MC1)
- 5:** River Delta #2 (MS4, MC1)
- 6:** City Skyscraper (Treat any clear level 0 as Depth 0 water)





TALES FROM THE CRACKED CANOPY: GIVING UP

JASON SCHMETZER

At the Cracked Canopy, a MechWarrior bar on the gaming world of Solaris VII, a Memory Wall displays mementos of glorious victories and bitter defeats, of honorable loyalties and venomous betrayals, of lifelong friendships and lost loves. Each enshrined object ensures that the past will not be forgotten and the future is something worth fighting for.

INTERNATIONAL ZONE
SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII
LYRAN ALLIANCE
17 SEPTEMBER 3083

Guy comes into the bar last week. Pretty old, pretty beat up. Sat by himself in the corner, tapping this little shard of metal against the table. Drank water, which is why I remember him. I was afraid he wouldn't tip. I went to run him off, finally, and he grabs my arm, just starts talking like he's some ancient oracle. Didn't look at me once the whole time. It's like the words just came out of him. It started like this:

"It's a liberating thing, giving up.

"You don't think it would be. You'd think it would mean you'd lay down and die. Let the dark come. Let the assholes win.

"Yeah.

"This ain't that story.

"There's another kind of giving up. The kind where what you give up is any chance of living through the next few hours. It's that whole 'you have come to the Legion to die and so we will send you where you can die' thing.

"It seems pretty stupid, until you're in it.

"This is that story."

**ROMULUS
OUTREACH
WORD OF BLAKE PROTECTORATE
19 MARCH 3068**

It was kind of dumb. I'd watched something like fourteen lancemates get killed or blown up. A couple of them just cracked, but that was the same as getting cacked. The Robes would get you if you slowed down.

Hell, the Robes would get you if you *didn't* slow down. They got Wang, and that crafty bastard never put a foot wrong. "Ham," he used to tell me, "they get you when you're not looking, even when you do everything right."

He was right. They did.

But that was yesterday. And Wang was the last one left.

Now it was just me and my *Marauder*.

I mean, it was Penrod's *Marauder*, but she wasn't using it no more after she stepped on that Robe mine a week ago when she went to the slit trench. She cried when she told me the security codes, but I knew it wasn't the pain or the fear.

She was just so angry she couldn't drive anymore.

I heard she got cacked in a raid on the camp two days ago. Shooting at Robes from her wheelchair.

I always did like her.

But since Wang went down and I got cut off from the rest of the company, it was just me. And I was pretty tired of it all. So at some point, I think it was near dawn, I sat in the *Marauder's* cockpit and watched the light crawl across the console, and decided.

"I'm done," I said.

I talk to myself. Especially when I'm alone.

Sue me.

Most of our troubles had been caused by a little two-bit mercenary band called the Hat Trick or the Bad Pack or something like that. I couldn't remember. I just called them the Fat Boys. They were a band of five 'Mechs with a Robe CO in a *Buccaneer*. The Robe never really fought. She just ordered the Fat Boys around.

We knew she was a she; we'd heard her on external speakers once.

That was the day Arredondo got cacked.

The Fat Boys were between me and the rest of the scratch company.

"If there even is a scratch company," I muttered. Maybe the Robes had wiped it out.

I wanted the Robe in the *Buccaneer*. I wanted to see her die before I died. I didn't really care what else happened.

So when the sun came up, I pushed the *Marauder's* throttle forward and thumbed the big Guardian ECM suite in the 'Mech's chest live. It was the first time I'd ever turned it on. Usually we were hiding, and turning on a big-ass jammer you could see from orbit was a bad idea.

Today I wanted to be found.

At one point I came up to the top of Hill 17A, where I should have been able to see the spires of the Hiring Hall in Harlech even from this far away. I couldn't, of course. They aren't there anymore. But I kept the *Marauder* there, looking the right direction, with the Guardian blasting, for a good fifteen minutes.

Then I made my way back down the hill and got ready.

It didn't take the Fat Boys and their minder long to show up.

The first ping was for the Boys' decrepit *Enforcer*. It was always banged up, but it didn't look like it had taken too many hits. It looked more like the moron driving it kept falling down. The knees and elbows were muddy. A branch stood out of the shoulder actuator. *Enforcers* didn't have hands, so there was nothing they could do to pull it out unless one of the other Boys helped.

I'd put myself on the far edge of a decent clearing in the woods. A few copses of trees in the middle still standing, but not a lot. I knew which way the Boys would come from. They always came from the same Robe mobile field base, and the Robe defenses around that baby were too strong to hit. But you show them a sniff, and they come running.

Like leading a pig by poking it on the nose.

The *Enforcer* stood just inside the edge of the larger tree line. Waiting, I guess. It wasn't like I was hiding. I wasn't in line of sight, but with the Guardian blasting I didn't really need to be.

A couple seconds later a second Fat Boys 'Mech appeared. This one was a chunky *Blackjack*, the old model with the dual 40 mm autocannons. It leveled those dinky guns across the field and waited, too.

"You need an invitation?" I asked the HUD. "Fine."

It only took a few steps to show the *Marauder's* trim nose to the Fat Boy 'Mechs. I knew I'd already been painted on their HUDs but now they had a line of sight. The *Blackjack* took a few steps forward and fired, both autocannons.

Both missed. The high-explosive shells shredded trees and branches off to my left. I snorted and adjusted the *Marauder's* gunnery controls. Each of the 'Mech's big forearms carried the heavy PPCs Penrod had loved so much. I'd have preferred extended-range models, but you use what you're given.

The *Blackjack* was right at the edge of extreme range. According to the manual these monster PPCs couldn't even shoot that far, but Penrod had taught me the trick of how to do it. I settled the crosshairs on the *Blackjack's* chest and squeezed both triggers. I held my breath as I did it, bracing for the heat.

The *Marauder* shuddered with recoil as the coruscating beams, as powerful as they were infinitesimal, flickered downrange. One took the *Blackjack* full in the chest, while the other hyperextended its narrow right-knee joint. The 'Mech spun and fell heavily. The *Enforcer*, idiotically, just stood there, watching.

"Keep watching," I gasped. The heat in my cockpit had exploded, but the *Marauder's* heat sinks were already cooling it down. The fluid in my cooling suit wasn't the freshest but it was doing its job. The sweat on my exposed wrists evaporated while I watched.

I had hit the *Blackjack* on purpose. It's like dealing with gangs you don't like. If you hit the guy no one else in the group likes, that makes him weaker. The group will abandon him, laugh at him, help you pound on him. But that doesn't get you in good with the group. Or make them want to chase you.

But if you hit one of the inner circle, that's different. They group up. Band together. They come after you. Because they can't let the group look weak.

The *Enforcer* was clearly the outcast. They couldn't even be bothered to pick the branch out of his actuator.

But maybe they gave a shit about the *Blackjack*.

The *Enforcer* wasn't helping, but I already knew the *Enforcer* didn't matter.

The *Blackjack* was still on the ground, trying to make a shattered knee actuator work. I watched the PPC recharge indicators out of the corner of my eye, creeping from red toward green, and held my crosshairs on the downed 'Mech.

"If I can get you again, I will," I told the *Blackjack*.

Right now was when Wang would have taken his *Wrath* forward to hit the downed 'Mech. If Wang was alive. Which he wasn't. So it fell to me, and this 'Mech was too damn slow to be doing that stuff. Better to keep my distance and swing the bigger stick from far away.

Maybe it would keep them away. Long enough for their Robe mommy to come out.

Maybe not. I sniffed. I already knew I wasn't getting out of this.

The *Blackjack* tried to get up and fell, crushing armor plates off its wounded leg. Sparks, bright enough to be seen in the soft morning air, shot from the joint. The PPC indicators in my HUD flickered green with full recharge.

"Your funeral," I said, and fired.

This time one of the PPCs missed, but the other glanced near the ground and ripped the *Blackjack's* leg off at the shin. I grinned inside my neurohelmet, ignoring the pain from the heat and my sore back.

"Gotcha," I told the *Blackjack*.

The *Enforcer* backed into the trees, out of sight.

Not one of the inner circle.

A shudder of movement off to the left resolved itself into a gangly *Lineholder*, another of the Fat Boys' 'Mechs. This was the 'Mech I'd named the whole bunch for, with its stupid little potbelly chin sticking out. It was the Boys' CO's 'Mech, we knew from intercepts. And from the fact that it was usually back with the Robe liaison officer, directing the other four 'Mechs where to go.

I looked at the *Blackjack*. Three 'Mechs now. That one wasn't going anywhere with only one leg.

But still no sign of the Robe *Buccaneer*.

The *Lineholder* seemed to regard me, then the *Blackjack*, then me again. It loosed a barrage of long-range missiles but the spread went wide. The MechWarrior had fired too fast or aimed too little.

I ignored him.

The PPCs recharged slowly.

The *Lineholder's* fire made me glance at the ammunition counters for the dual Streak SRM-6 launchers in the hunched-over *Marauder's* shoulders, but they both still burned scarlet zeros. Empty.

High-class rounds like those were in short supply. Had been for a long time.

Didn't mean I didn't want to run in there, put a dozen fat-bodied short-range missiles into the *Lineholder* to get the *Buccaneer's* attention.

But I had a plan.

I just needed to stick with it.

A fourth Fat Boys 'Mech appeared, a broad-shouldered *Hunchback*. This one I paid attention to. The big Kali Yama autocannon built into its shoulder was a real threat, not like the *Blackjack's* popguns had been. One or two shots from that beast would put me down for the count.

So of course the asshole just broke into a run right at me.

"Shit," I muttered. I wanted to back up, but there was only so far I could go before I'd lose sight of the charging 'Mech.

The heavy PPCs pinged.

I aimed for the *Hunchback* and fired. Given the range I could probably get two volleys off before that big bastard got close enough to hurt me. Nothing else appearing, that might be enough to dissuade him. These PPCs hit *hard*.

Other things appeared.

The *Lineholder* started moving forward, not very fast, just enough to make me look at it. Its arm waved, and the *Enforcer* appeared, moving more quickly but not fully running. Almost pacing the *Hunchback*.

And from the woods behind them a spindly legged *Spider* erupted into the air on jump jets, arms spread for balance, angling toward me. Which was all a lot.

A lot I didn't care about.

Because none of them were the *Buccaneer*.

I was going to kill that Robe before I went down.

I'd sworn it on the souls of my dead.

Both of my PPC shots hit home. One spent its energy impotently on the *Hunchback's* thigh. The other blasted armor from the left side of the 50-ton 'Mech's chest. Armor plates smoked and fell free, and the 'Mech staggered, but it kept stalking forward.

Three more steps.

Until the blowout panels in the 'Mech's back ripped off as the ammunition for its big Kali Yama cannon exploded. The PPC must have found a weak point in the left-torso armor. The 'Mech sprawled to the right, its left arm amputated at the shoulder by the explosion. Cellular ammunition storage equipment had kept it from catastrophically destroying itself, but the feedback shock the MechWarrior must have suffered made me wince.

The *Enforcer* stumbled as the MechWarrior pulled back on his throttle.

The *Lineholder* broke into a run. Something moved behind it.

A brilliant white *Buccaneer* stepped into the clearing.

"Finally," I said.

The 55-ton 'Mech stood there, glinting with condensation in the morning light, brandishing its hatchet. I sneered. "You don't scare me, bitch."

The *Spider* fell out of the sky, landed in a crouch, and immediately blasted off again. From its angle I knew the MechWarrior was trying to get behind me, trap me between itself and the two Fat Boys 'Mechs still charging forward.

I ignored it. Two medium lasers weren't going to decide this, and if the fool was fool enough to stand still behind me and burn at me with those little things, I'd get an angle with one of the PPCs and put it down.

A large laser beam from the *Lineholder* cut at the armor over the *Marauder's* right shin. It denuded about a third of the remaining protection there, but I ignored it. The *Enforcer's* LB 10-X autocannon coughed a round out, but all the submunitions spent themselves on the trees.

"Need to spend more time on gunnery practice," I said to the *Lineholder* in the HUD.

The *Enforcer* tripped and fell, slamming face-first into the ground.

"Or maybe that one needs to join the infantry," I added.

The PPCs recharged. I ignored the Fat Boys and laid the crosshairs on the *Buccaneer*. The reticle burned gold and I squeezed the triggers. Heat flashed, my wrists stung, but both shots hit home, smashing armor from both sides of the *Buccaneer's* chest.

"Hi there," I snarled.

The Robe loped into a slow run, moving obliquely across the field, keeping the range open. She clearly hoped to throw off my aim while the rest of the Fat Boys finished me off, but I didn't care.

The *Spider* came down behind me, lasers burning. Only one hit, scarring the underside of the *Marauder's* left arm. I ignored it.

The *Enforcer* pushed itself up off the ground, careful not to overstress the weapon barrels it was forced to use in place of hands. It was no threat just now.

The *Lineholder* hit me again, missiles and lasers both. More armor fell, but it was damage I could afford for now. I pushed my throttle forward, going to meet them. Or at least I wanted them to think that.

I was keeping the *Buccaneer* in range. The Robe MechWarrior saw me coming, though, and hit me with an extended-range large laser that ate at the armor over the *Marauder's* chest. I leaned into the damage, letting my neurohelmet and the DI computer keep the 'Mech upright. I watched—listened—for the PPC recharge.

Ding.

I fired.

Both shots hit again, one smack-center in the *Buccaneer's* chest, the other blasting the *Buccaneer's* hatchet out of its hand.

The Fat Boys hit me from all sides. Even the *Enforcer* got a shot in, burning at my knee with its laser. It had to stand stock-still to do it. Alarms blared to life as the damage started adding up, but I ignored it. Heat sinks struggled to cool the 'Mech; Penrod's ride had enough double heat sinks to do the work, but I was still pushing them hard.

There was an indicator for heat status somewhere in the HUD. I didn't care.

The *Buccaneer* turned and charged at me, too.

I guess they all decided it was time for this to end.

I grinned.

The *Spider* was on the ground, pacing me, waiting for its medium lasers to recharge so it could hit me again in the rear armor. It thought I was ignoring it. I started the *Marauder's* torso rotating on its ring, as if I were tracking the *Buccaneer*.

The PPCs recharged.

I spread the *Marauder's* arms wide. The left arm pointed back, dead at the *Spider*. I fired. The heavy PPC blew straight through the 30-ton 'Mech's chest and out the back. The 'Mech sat down hard, like a petulant baby, then fell over.

The two Fat Boys and the *Buccaneer* fired again before I could trigger the second PPC. Lasers burned at my armor, a large laser from each of them. Alarms screamed as the armor over my left leg failed, exposing the delicate bones and myomer muscles.

I clutched at the 75-ton 'Mech's controls, trying to keep it upright. The unfired PPC remained unfired; the other recharged.

The *Lineholder* raced in and swung its foot toward my 'Mech, hoping to bring me down. I leaned the 'Mech back and lifted the clawed foot. The *Lineholder* missed, lost its balance, and fell right beside me.

"Should have run away," I said, looking down.

The PPC *dinged*.

After I burned its leg armor off, I put the *Marauder's* clawed foot on the *Lineholder's* hip actuator and pressed down until it crunched. The leg actually popped loose.

The *Enforcer* lit its jump jets and angled up and away. It landed behind a copse of trees, out of sight. The coward was running away.

The *Buccaneer* hit me with that damn large laser again, this time adding a pair of mediums. Only the two medium lasers hit, burning ineffectively at my torso armor. I twisted the *Marauder* around to face her.

With my right thumb I toggled the Guardian off. My right ring finger toggled an open frequency.

"I'm going to kill you," I told the *Buccaneer*.

"Better mercs than you have tried," she said. More spat. If she was upset about her lost hatchet, she didn't show it.

The PPC indicators crawled upward, toward green. By now I knew the pace in heartbeats. Just a little longer.

If only I'd had SRM reloads.

But I didn't.

The Robe MechWarrior was canny. She knew her strengths and my weaknesses. She knew her bevy of lasers would do better under ninety meters than my heavy PPCs would; she knew she was faster, could probably run rings around me if I let her.

I ignored all that.

Those tactics were for people who wanted to live.

Instead, I stepped closer, bulky forearm weapons pods raised, and snarled as the chime sounded. I triggered both great guns, and both hit. This close, static discharge flickered across both 'Mechs, but the PPCs' damage was undiminished. Ravening power clawed at the *Buccaneer's* chest, probing for its delicate innards.

Her lasers did the same. More alarms than I could count blared at me as the *Marauder* dripped armor. I felt the leg knee actuator go, hobbling me. But I didn't care. I was barely sixty meters away.

The *Buccaneer* tried to reverse course.

I anticipated and was there.

She saw me coming, tried to reverse again. She fired.

I fired.

Laser light blinded me as one of her mediums flashed light across the *Marauder's* cockpit canopy. The thick transpex held but it overpowered my helmet filters. I was baking, and for a desperate instant I didn't know if it was heat from the PPCs or whether her laser had penetrated. The left PPC indicator went black and crosshatched; one of her weapons had damaged it.

I blinked away tears. The arm was still there.

The *Buccaneer* was staggering, its torso laid bare, arms windmilling for balance. I slammed the *Marauder's* throttle forward to its gate; the 'Mech lurched forward, damaged actuators screaming.

I raised the heavy left forearm housing and slammed it into the *Buccaneer's* left armpit. It broke the ragged pieces of armor tatters still

hanging there and went deeper, driven by the ten empty tons of the damaged PPC.

Light bloomed on the IR scanner.

I'd busted the extralight fusion engine's shielding.

I'd seen that before, when Wang got cacked. It was going to blow.

My hands moved without thought, reaching down and yanking the eject handle. I guess maybe I wanted to live a little.

There was wind, cold, and the light and wind, hot, hotter than the hottest a cockpit had ever been.

And then it was dark.

INTERNATIONAL ZONE
SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII
LYRAN ALLIANCE
17 SEPTEMBER 3083

"When I woke up, I was in the back bay of a Bandit hovercraft, with a bunch of infantry and some skeletons they told me were reeducation camp survivors. They said Clan Wolf was there to pull us out.

"No one could tell me about the *Buccaneer*.

"No one else there had even heard of the Fat Boys. Or any of the maybe real names I remembered.

"I slept a lot, then and on the DropShip. I don't know if I actually got her.

"I don't *know*, you understand.

"It eats at me.

"Even after all these years."

Then the guy got up and left the little piece of metal on the table, sitting on a fifty-stone note. I stared after him. The whole place was watching. When he was gone I picked up the piece of metal.

It was a toy *Buccaneer*, a little kid's toy. One of those kits from the Bad Old Evil Empire days, you know? It's that one right there, back on the wall. I put it up on that shelf and got back to work.

Story still sticks with me, you know?







CHAOS CAMPAIGN SCENARIO: FLIGHT OF THE FALCON

AARON CAHALL

For Victor Milán, with respect.

OvKhan,

As you predicted, I received an audience with Prefect Tara Campbell. And, as you predicted, she did not heed our counsel. Or, more charitably, perhaps she and her troops simply were not able to do so. Either way, the result is the same.

Aleksandr Hazen is dead. Malvina Hazen may yet live. In that "may," the fate of Skye, the Jade Falcons, and possibly more hangs in the balance.

I will remain here and see on which side the coin lands.

—Master Merchant Senna, New London, Skye, 16 August 3134

In the short view, the first battle of Skye was a brief glint of light for the steadfast defenders of the Republic of the Sphere amid the descending Dark Age. Clan Jade Falcon was driven from one of the Republic's crown jewels despite the absence of local prefecture line regiments. A charismatic *ristar* poised for higher command lay dead, and another lay gravely injured. The Falcons' *desant* fell just short of its goal, lacking the key world the Clan sought to complete its new nest. All of these facts were enough to give the Republic a moment's breath and a bit of hope that Devlin Stone's dream could, against all odds, stand strong.

In the long view, the Falcons' first assault on Skye was nothing less than the prelude to a nightmare.

Overlooked by many in the years after his fall, the death of Aleksandr Hazen changed everything. Though he was as committed to Clan dominance as any of Kerensky's children, Aleks Hazen at least respected human life and civilian innocence in a way his *sibkin* Malvina never could. Deprived of his leavening influence, the guttering flame of his "sister's" humanity was finally extinguished. The possibility of the pair rising to power together might have propelled the Jade Falcons to the same heights they reached under Malvina's rule alone. But his compassion could have acted as a check on Malvina's brutal Mongol Doctrine, and his mercy might have helped diminish some of the impact of Malvina's reign of terror. Without Aleksandr, nothing remained to hold back Malvina's darkness.

Insessores

The fall of seven Prefecture IX worlds in the first half of 3134 left no doubt about the eventual destination for the Jade Falcons' Turkina Keshik, Delta Galaxy, and Zeta Galaxy. Skye's defenses had been stripped nearly bare by the defection of large swaths of the Ninth Hastati Sentinels, Principes Guards, and Triarii Protectors to Jasek Kelswa-Steiner's Stormhammers, leaving only the Seventh Skye Militia and Duke Gregory Kelswa-Steiner's Ducal Guard to defend the world. On orders from Exarch Damien Redburn, Prefect Tara Campbell took up Skye's defense, slowly gathering her Highlanders from their other "firefighting" duties around the Republic. To them, she added a *de facto* militia unit she dubbed the Forlorn Hope, a collection of Skye's erstwhile citizenry inspired to take up arms and defend their home.

On the Falcons' approach to Skye, Malvina succeeded in convincing her fellow warriors to assault the world according to her doctrine, including the use of orbital bombardment. Aleksandr challenged the decision in a Trial of Refusal, and for the first and only time in his life, defeated his *sibkin* in single combat—ensuring the assault would unfold under Clan tradition. Meanwhile, concerned about Malvina's previous use of terror tactics to break stalemates during drawn-out conquests of Republic worlds, Campbell opted to defend the hill country west of the planetary capital of New London with all the forces at her disposal in one brief, decisive engagement.

Defense in Depth

Headstrong as ever, Malvina landed her Deltas ahead of the rest of the Falcons, only to lose nearly a full Trinary to a cleverly disguised Republic trap. A short time later, the Forlorn Hope was massacred in a frontal assault on the reeling Delta Galaxy, accomplishing little but inspiring Skye's remaining defenders with their sacrifice. Upon landing, Galaxy Commander Beckett Malthus allowed Aleks's Zeta Galaxy to take the lead in the push on New London, though the Falcons were harried by frequent roadside ambushes and artillery strikes.

The steady but speedy Falcon advance overwhelmed Countess Campbell's defensive plans; Skye defenders were simply bypassed when not outflanked or overrun by the mobile Falcon onslaught. As Zeta Galaxy finally bogged down in the Weston suburbs of New London, Tara and her Highlanders launched an ambush in force to blunt a flanking maneuver by Delta. In a fierce clash, Campbell felled Malvina's *Shrike*, but the badly injured Falcon commander was retrieved by her *sibkin*.

As the Turkina Keshik and Zeta Galaxy pushed on Weston Heights, Republic forces were moments from breaking when Anastasia Kerensky and her Steel Wolves made their presence in orbit known. Parleying with her hated opposite, Tara Campbell cut a deal to grant the Steel Wolves and Kerensky amnesty for their assaults on Northwind and Terra in exchange for their help. The Wolves' subsequent daring combat drop turned the tide against the Falcons, but Aleksandr Hazen refused Campbell's offer to withdraw.

Instead, for reasons that remain unclear, he led the Zetas in a furious charge against the onrushing Republic forces and Campbell personally. Whatever his reasons, Aleksandr Hazen's life ended at the edge of Countess Campbell's hatchet, which crashed through his cockpit as he reached the Republic defensive line. His fellow Zeta warriors viciously pushed back the Republic defenders, buying time for the retrieval of his body. Once his remains were secured, the Falcons lifted from Skye—their eventual return unquestioned by anyone.



TOUCHPOINT: FORLORN HOPES

This scenario can be played as a stand-alone game or incorporated into a longer campaign using the *Chaos Campaign* rules (available as a free download from <https://store.catalystgamelabs.com/products/battletech-chaos-campaign-succession-wars>).

For flexibility of play, this track contains rules for *Total Warfare* (TW), with *Alpha Strike: Commander's Edition* (AS or AS:CE) rules noted in parentheses, allowing the battle to be played with either rule set.

*After-Action Analysis: Weston Heights Assault
For TC/Eyes Only*

Countess,

At your request, we have evaluated the final moments of Galaxy Commander Aleksandr Hazen's life. In his Gyrfalcon, he almost certainly would have had the advantage against your Hatchetman if he had remained at range. We cannot easily explain why he chose to meet your charge alongside his warriors.

The best answer we can offer points to the heart of Clan culture. Galaxy Commander Hazen could not stay back while his warriors rushed to meet yours—if doing so was even something he consciously chose, and not an instinct at his core, like so many Clanners. The power of example also runs strong in Clan culture, and he may have hoped to inspire Falcon warriors to turn away from his sibkin's terror tactics by spending his life to create a counter-example of "proper" Clan honor.

Whatever his reasons, it is fair to say: Aleksandr Hazen died as a Clan warrior to the last.

SITUATION

WESTON HEIGHTS, SKYE

PREFECTURE IX, REPUBLIC OF THE SPHERE

15 AUGUST 3134

Unable to hold back Zeta Galaxy and the Turkina Keshik in the outskirts of Weston, the Republic defenders concentrated their remaining forces at Weston Heights, desperate to keep the Falcons away from New London proper and its civilian populace. Sensing that Skye's defense was at the breaking point, the Falcons rushed forward.

GAME SETUP

Recommended Terrain: Light Forest, Hills

The Defender arranges two maps with the long edges touching, then selects one side to be their home edge. The Attacker's home

edge is opposite. The Defender must deploy in two lines: a forward line consisting of up to 50 percent of their force, and a rear line consisting of the balance of their force. Rear-line units must be placed within 8 hexes (AS: 16") of the map edge; forward line units must be placed within 3 hexes (AS: 6") on either side of the partial hex where the two mapsheets join. The Attacker may deploy within 6 hexes (AS: 12") of their home edge.

Attacker

Recommended Forces: Zeta Galaxy and Turkina Keshik, Clan Jade Falcon

The Attacker consists of a reinforced, mixed company of BattleMechs, vehicles, and battle armor equal to 125 percent of the Defender's force. Up to 75 percent of the value of the Attacker's force can consist of BattleMechs.

Defender

Recommended Forces: Highlanders; Seventh Skye Militia; Skye Ducal Guard

The Defender consists of a mixed company; no more than 50 percent of the value of the Defender's force can consist of BattleMechs.

WARCHEST

Track Cost: 350 WP

Optional Bonuses

+150 Effective Artillery (Attacker Only): The Defender's artillery is particularly effective; the Defender has *Artillery Support* (see p. 77, *BattleMech Manual*) and uses the Target Number and Damage Value Groupings of their choice.

+100 The White Lily (Defender Only): The Attacker's force includes Galaxy Commander Aleksandr Hazen (Gunnery 2, Piloting 2; AS: Skill Rating 2) in his *Gyrfalcon 5, White Lily*. Hazen has the Blood Stalker and Marksman Special Pilot Abilities (see p. 70, *Campaign Operations*).

-200 Far from Home (Defender Only): Reduce the value of the Attacker's force to match that of the Defender.

OBJECTIVES

Hold Them Back (Defender Only): No more than 75 percent of the Attacker's force ends the game behind the deployment hexes of the Defender's forward line closest to the Defender's home edge. **[600]**

Protect the City (Defender Only): No more than 50 percent of the Attacker's force exits the map from the Defender's home edge. **[300]**

A New Nest (Attacker Only): The Attacker exits units from the Defender's home edge. **[10 per unit exited]**

Bleed the Republic (Attacker Only): Destroy more than 85 percent of the Defender's force, including any units which arrive under the *Unexpected Help* rule (see below). **[400]**

SPECIAL RULES

Unexpected Help

After Turn 3, Anastasia Kerensky and the Steel Wolves arrive above the battlefield and offer their assistance to the Republic. The Defender may choose to take a **-150** option. If they do, BattleMech units consisting of 25 percent of their starting force execute a combat drop onto the battlefield (see p. 79, *BattleMech Manual*, or p. 160, *AS:CE*); these units include Anastasia Kerensky (Gunnery 2, Piloting 3; AS: Skill Rating 2) in a *Ryoken II*.

Forced Withdrawal

Forced Withdrawal (see p. 258, *TW*, or p. 126, *AS:CE*) is not in effect for either side. However, if Aleksandr Hazen is included in the Attacker's force and his unit is destroyed, the Attacker's force becomes subject to Forced Withdrawal regardless of the condition of their units.

AFTERMATH

Aleksandr Hazen's death threw the Jade Falcons into retreat, but they remained in control of more than a half-dozen worlds around Prefecture IX. When Malvina awoke from her injuries on 21 August, she vowed to spare nothing and no one in her vengeance. The Falcons eventually returned to Skye in November 3134, driving the Republic from the world before the year's end.



Type: Gyrfalcon 5

Technology Base: Clan (Experimental)

Tonnage: 55

Role: Skirmisher

Battle Value: 2,151

Equipment**Mass**

Internal Structure:	Endo Steel	3
Engine:	275XL	8
Walking MP:	5	
Running MP:	8 (10)	
Jumping MP:	7*	
Heat Sinks (Laser):	10 [23]*	0
Gyro:		3
Cockpit:		3
Armor Factor (Ferro):	144	7.5
	<i>Internal Structure</i>	<i>Armor Value</i>
Head	3	9
Center Torso	18	21
Center Torso (rear)		6
R/L Torso	13	16
R/L Torso (rear)		5
R/L Arm	9	15
R/L Leg	13	18

Weapons**and Ammo****Location****Critical****Tonnage**

ER Large Laser	RA	1	4
Ultra AC/5	RA	3	7
Ammo (AC/5) 20	CT	1	1
Partial Wing (Clan)	RT/LT	3/3	3
MASC	LT	2	2
ER Large Laser	LA	1	4
Ultra AC/5	LA	3	7

Notes: *Partial Wing adds +2 Jump MP and -3 Heat per turn in Standard atmosphere (see pp. 104–105, *Tactical Operations: Advanced Units & Equipment*, for additional rules). Features the following Design Quirks: Distracting, Reinforced Legs.

**Download the free
record sheet for this 'Mech at:**

bg.battletech.com/shrapnel/





RPG ADVENTURE SEEDS: THE LOST DIVISION

ALEX KAEMPEN

The following three-part role-playing adventure can be used with either *A Time of War* or *MechWarrior: Destiny* rules. Each part features a background section and an adventure overview section that a gamemaster can use as the framework for short campaign.

PART 1: A FEDRAT, DRAC, AND TERRIE WALK INTO A BAR

ATREUS CITY, ATREUS
FREE WORLDS LEAGUE
22 JUNE 3149

Joe Nagy leaned back in his desk chair at SAFE headquarters and looked at the report. It had been a boring day filled with minor reports from his agents, so there had been nothing really of note—at least, not until this one came across his desk. *Lostech* was his department, and it was considered a joke, as was he. Nobody cared about *lostech* anymore, not unless it was 'Mechs. Besides, there were so few of those that military intelligence always got to them after the looters.

But this was different.

Agent Cöper was one of his best agents. He had never exaggerated a report or inflated a rumor. His track record of evidence was meticulous and so was this report. If there was truth to this report then it would be Cöper who found it, which meant it was time to kick this upstairs. But first he had to reread it, just to be sure:

Sir,

You tasked me with a wide variety of observational and investigative duties here on Talitha. Foremost of those was

identifying the threats that could upset the stability of the FWL, and I believe I have found one such threat.

Last night I met with a local who professed knowledge of the whereabouts of the 295th BattleMech Division. His claim implied that the official story was a lie and that these six regiments of Star League-era 'Mechs were, and are, properly stored and salvageable. As with most such stories, I took this with a mountain of salt. Nevertheless, his background information checked out, so I agreed to humor his meeting.

If nothing else, the meeting confirmed that I am not the only one to take him seriously. As soon as I entered the establishment he chose, I spotted a half dozen other spooks, including my local counterpart from Regulus. I would relay you more information, but almost as soon as I walked in, we were ambushed. I do not know who attacked us but they were numerous and well armed. My source escaped, but not all the other spooks were so lucky. For the moment, the Federated Suns, Regulus, and Lyran Commonwealth are down a source on Talitha.

Until I hear back I will do my utmost to secure the information. My source has confirmed his survival and I intend to meet him tonight and proceed to emergency extraction. I have already activated my local support and tapped my emergency funds. Expect further communications to comply to Section 104.54.

—Cöper

Joe closed the report and opened up another screen. The 295th BattleMech Division. At the time of Amaris's uprising, they were considered one of the best divisions in the whole Regular Army of the Star League Defense Force. They were the only division of XLIX Corps to survive the Liberation of Terra. By all accounts, had Amaris not happened, they may well have returned to being a Royal Division. And then they vanished. Supposedly, they had tried to join General Kerensky's Exodus but didn't make it in time. And that was where the story ended.

A century ago, ComStar claimed to have found them on a marginal world well beyond the Circinus Federation. There had been a lot of questions about that story, but ComStar's information was solid enough that nobody invested the resources to verify it. Joe was beginning to think that had been a mistake. If Cöper was right, and Joe was definitely leaning that way, then ComStar was hiding six regiments of Star League 'Mechs dozens, perhaps hundreds, of light-years from the official record. And now he had a chance to get his hands on them.

Glancing at another screen, Joe looked at the giant stain that was the Wolf Empire. Just twenty years ago the Inner Sphere had looked mostly like how it had looked for the seven previous centuries. Now

there was chaos and anarchy, death and destruction, everywhere. No one was safe anywhere. And with a mere thirty regiments, give or take a few, to protect them, there just weren't enough 'Mechs. But six whole regiments. Even Joe, who had no 'Mech training, practically salivated at the thought.

Asking himself the big question again, Joe *was* sure. He picked up the phone and began speaking.

ADVENTURE OVERVIEW

Recommended Group Size: 3–6 player characters

Recommended Group Type: Black Ops

Recommended Skill Levels: Regular–Veteran (Key Skill levels of 3–6)

Description: Your contact survived the ambush and has realized he is in deep trouble. He's reached out to you to get him off-planet. For now you have a few objectives: keep him alive, gain his trust, and get the information out of him. How you pursue those objectives is up to you.

Complications: A few obstacles for the players to tackle:

- **You've Got Friends:** There were other organizations on the planet your source initially contacted. You don't know if they were involved in the attempted assassination or if they were targets as well. If they realize he's chosen to give you the information, how are they going to take that news?
- **What Do You Want?:** Your source offered this information for a lot of money, money you were not authorized to pay. But now that his life seems to be in danger, are his desires willing to change? Or is he still set on getting his drastic payday?
- **Shadows in the Dark:** Whoever it was who launched the attack on you is still out there. They had enough information to wait until you were there so you can expect to be observed at some point. However, you have no idea how many people are opposing you. Are they an isolated group or are they part of a larger organization with significant resources?

Tips: This is your classic meet-and-greet: pull your team together in a seedy part of the city and let the adventure go from there. There is nothing to this that forces the players to choose a specific faction or specific route. The source will not give up his information on this mission, so the priority for the players must be to keep him alive.

PART 2: OUT OF THE FRYING PAN, INTO THE BLAST FURNACE

DARCIEFORD, TALITHA
FREE WORLDS LEAGUE
24 JUNE 3149

It was dark, but Colonel Abe Oglethorpe, Department of Military Intelligence of the Republic Armed Forces, still looked at the month-old orders:

ORDER 33901

Date: 21 May 3149

Subject: Observation and Neutralization: Chi Sigma 759

Classification: Top Secret: Eyes Only

Target Name: Steven Lin

Aliases: Lin Shǐ dì wén

Location: Darcieford, Talitha

Danger Level: Minimal

Importance: Extremely High

Background: Mr. Lin has been confirmed as having valid information which could pose a significant threat to the security of the Republic of the Sphere. Our last report suggested that Mr. Lin is making efforts to sell his information to the highest bidder. As you can understand, in our current situation the Republic cannot afford six regiments of 'Mechs falling into anyone's hands except our own. And with Operation Eruptio now underway, we do not have the resources to retrieve them. Therefore, this information *cannot* get out.

Orders: Find Lin. Verify the information. Secure all copies of the information, and eliminate the target. Any measures necessary to complete this mission are hereby authorized.

Signed,

Paladin Janella Lakewood
Department of Military Intelligence

Oglethorpe folded the orders up and returned them to his vest pocket. He pulled his monocular out of its belt pouch and looked at the apartment. The lights were still off, as they had been for the last two days. None of the tripwires or sensors had been tripped. By all accounts Mr. Lin had not been back here since the shootout. If he was smart, he would never return. But Oglethorpe was a betting man, and

the smart money said Mr. Lin needed to come back here, that the information, or at least part of it, was here.

He was right. A single ping in his earpiece told him one of the sensors had been tripped. He pulled his facemask down and motioned for his team to go.

ADVENTURE OVERVIEW

Recommended Group Size: 3-6 player characters

Recommended Group Type: Black Ops

Recommended Skill Levels: Regular-Veteran (Key Skill levels of 3-6)

Description: Now that your group has earned your source's trust, he is willing to sell you the information. However, he is fully aware that your interest lies not with him but with the information. So he will provide you the information but not the means to decrypt it until he is safely in your realm and paid.

Complications: A few obstacles for the players to tackle:

- **Here's Johnny:** The players may have escaped from the initial meet-and-greet, but they're hardly out of danger. The assailants clearly know who the source is, and they're unlikely to let him slip in and out to retrieve the information. So how do they navigate around when their person is quite well known? How well known is the source? How prepared are the assailants to tail him? How prepared is the team to respond to this?
- **The What in the Where?:** The source is not a stupid person. It's not likely that he hid the information in his residence or any other frequently visited place. He would have hidden it somewhere protected but discreet. Is that hiding spot at risk? Could it also have been compromised? Would retrieving it compromise the team's obscurity?
- **Trust, but Verify:** Even if the source retrieves the information, he's not going to make himself expendable. But without knowing that he's actually turned over the information, how trustworthy is he? Did he actually turn over the information? Is there a way the players can verify *any* of his information?

Tips: In this adventure the players need to remain focused. The source may trust the team *right now*, but he's not a fool. The players need to not only keep him alive but also ensure they maintain his loyalty. If they get only part of the information, or if they get all of it but not any encryption he might have used, then their mission is a loss.

PART 3: OH, SINNEMAN, WHERE YOU GONNA RUN TO?

TAGUS METROPOLIS, TALITHA
FREE WORLDS LEAGUE
30 JUNE 3149

Gwyn Lopez, Talitha Broadcasting Network: Good evening, I'm Gwyn Lopez reporting to you live from Talitha Planetary Security where Director Frank Baldwin is about to speak regarding the planetwide lockdown that was enacted two days ago. Details about the situation have been few but are expected to be provided in the next few minutes. And here we have Director Baldwin now.

[The camera pans around to face a podium. A tall, balding, man, roughly sixty years of age, walks up to the podium. He looks down then raises his face and looks sternly into the assembled mass of cameras.]

Frank Baldwin, Director of Talitha Planetary Security: Thank you all for being here. As you all know, two days ago all off-world travel was suspended. Checkpoints between major urban centers have been established, and a more thorough police presence has appeared in almost every community on this planet. We asked for your patience, and the citizens of Talitha have responded in exemplary fashion.

However, this has not been enough to solve this crisis. Therefore, I am here today to tell you the reasoning for these extreme measures and to ask for your help in tracking down the threat that we currently face.

[Baldwin turns to his left to face a large wall monitor. Currently displayed on that monitor are two faces. Baldwin points to them and resumes speaking.]

These two men are responsible for a mass shooting which happened eight days ago in Darcieford, in which six people were killed in a local restaurant. Two days later, as security forces moved in to apprehend these perpetrators, they engaged in a gunfight with the local forces. Four officers were killed and several more are in the hospital with severe injuries.

The person on the left is a resident of Talitha named Steven Lin. He may also go by Lin Shǐ dì wén. We are currently distributing via multiple methods as much information as we have on him. The key point, however, is that he has gained access to highly confidential Free Worlds League military information. This information would be extremely damaging to our national security should it be given to a foreign power. We currently believe Lin is attempting to sell it to a foreign agent and then defect.

Which brings us to the other perpetrator. Although we don't have a name, we believe he is Lin's foreign contact. We have yet to identify which state he is working for. From security footage of the restaurant shooting, we know this man is highly skilled with firearms and hand-to-hand combat.

[Baldwin turns back from the monitors and again looks straight into the cameras. His gray eyes narrow, and the lines on his face tighten. Everything about him conveys a great deal of seriousness.]

And that brings us to our lockdown. We cannot allow these men to leave the planet. We have strong reasons to suspect that the agent is the leader of a team, so there may be more foreign agents involved. These two men are considered armed and dangerous. Do not engage them. If you see them, call your local authorities. Good luck, and stay safe, Talitha.



ADVENTURE OVERVIEW

Recommended Group Size: 3–6 player characters

Recommended Group Type: Black Ops

Recommended Skill Levels: Regular–Veteran (Key Skill levels of 3–6)

Description: Now that you've retrieved the information, all that remains is to get off this planet. The only problem? Your assailants are a step ahead of you. They've already planted enough information with planetary security that you're now the primary target for law enforcement. The planet is on lockdown, so getting around it will be difficult.

Complications: A few obstacles for the players to tackle:

- **We Don't Need No Badges:** As the players navigate the planet, a variety of checkpoints have been set up on all major modes of transportation between the major urban centers. How do the players get through them?
- **Terries Don't Take a Dump without a Plan, Son:** Right now the team is being opposed by Talitha security forces. But their opponents are from the Republic. Will the Terries sit back and let Talitha do all the work? Do the Terries have a plan to swoop in at the last minute? Have the Terries infiltrated Talitha's security forces?
- **Going My Way?:** As the players knew from the start, there were other groups looking for this information as well. Given what the Republic did (or tried to do) to them, the players are probably not feeling the kindest towards the Republic. Since nobody is looking for them, they could offer a way around the planet and potentially even off-world. But can you trust them to not backstab you and steal the information and/or kidnap the source for themselves?

Tips: However this mission goes, the priority is to get the source, and his information, off-world. The focus of this part depends on the nature of the campaign: If playing a one-off campaign, then the players should accept that they are expendable for the information, and the campaign should be targeted towards the information and not the players. If playing as part of a larger campaign, then the focus will have to be on the survival of the players.





THE ROAD AHEAD

JOHN-DAVID KARNITZ

OUTSIDE EDO, TURTLE BAY

ALBIERO PREFECTURE, PESHT MILITARY DISTRICT

DRACONIS COMBINE

30 MARCH 3050

“Where do you think they are going?” Elemental Truelda asked, peering down from her perch on the right side of the hunched-over *Nova*’s jutting torso.

The arms of the machine, weighed down by the bulbous array of six medium lasers thickening each wrist, held steady. The pilot, a MechWarrior named Newell, of which Truelda’s primary association was the thin man’s haughtiness, rotated the OmniMech’s torso slightly to the left. The waist actuator ground slightly, unpleasantly, before spinning free. There, Truelda could track down the thin trace of civilians, which thickened every so often by a three- or four-wheeled jitney invariably overloaded with people and goods both, stumping down the gritty roadway. That angle gave her a better view of the people crouching and covering their faces while they passed, but it seemed unnecessary.

There was no honor, no glory, to be gained *here*. But on the road ahead...?

“The wrong way,” Point Commander Fowler replied distractedly from his position atop the stooped shoulders of the OmniMech as it loped south along the roadway toward the fighting that awaited them. He was probably using his suit’s displays to track the operation as it unfolded.

The long line of refugees streamed north, away from the smoke that lay on the southern horizon. There, a city’s outskirts were already beginning to burn because of the fighting that seethed between

elements of the invading 362nd Assault Cluster, the vaunted Silver Jaguars, and the defending Fourteenth Legion of Vega. Truelda's unit, a composite combined-arms force composed of configurable OmniMechs from Trinary Battle and battle-suited infantry from Binary Elemental, had finished mopping up the infantry around this planet's initial battleground, now kilometers behind them to the north.

There was less smoke there. The civilians heading north obviously did not know of the disaster that had befallen their erstwhile defenders that way.

The other three Elementals hanging from their positions on the torso of the jouncing, digitigrade walking tank chuckled over the Point's comm. Clad in armor that weighed nearly a thousand kilos and was proof against attacks that could open up an armored car like a tin can, Truelda and her fellow warriors feared nothing. Not that there was much to fear, not even on this world that, until a few hours before, had belonged to the Draconis Combine for hundreds of years.

Because now Clan Smoke Jaguar had arrived in the form of the Silver Jaguars, and the dominion of that debauched Inner Sphere nation was effectively over for good.

Yancey, a blond Elemental hidden from Truelda's view by the pilot's cockpit at the nose of the hulking machine's torso, spoke up. "Even for dirty *surats* like these Spheroid civilians, you would think—"

"You would think they would know that if they are passing *us*, there is nothing left to go to," Rander cut in, tittering from where she clung to her handhold and footrests below Yancey.

From below Truelda, Werren cleared his throat. "Maybe they have nowhere else to go."

Up ahead, a small village loomed in the late-morning mist. It was not much to see from afar. Probably not much to see up close, either, but that little town was not the reason Truelda and her fellows had come to this planet in particular, nor across the gulf of a nearly a thousand light-years to the Inner Sphere.

Truelda exhaled softly while she thought about that. The three less introspective members of the Point snorted at Werren's words but voiced no open derision. Elementals were literally bred for war in a way even the sneering Newell and his fellow MechWarriors were not. Through genetic engineering, they stood a half meter taller than the average non-Elemental male, and weighed at least twice, if not thrice, as much. Werren was the biggest warrior in the whole Binary, and he was good enough to know that his size alone was no guarantee of victory. Truelda herself was big even for a female Elemental, but she still had to look up at her Pointmate when they were in their stocking feet.

Because of Clan military doctrine and sociological perspectives, even the newest member of the forces that descended on the Inner Sphere for the long-awaited liberation from their misguided overlords was a combat veteran. Their mettle was tested by live-fire, force-on-

force engagements long before they were eligible to call themselves warriors.

Truelda and her comrades had seen more of that combat than most. On this world already to be sure, but also in dozens of skirmishes and battles—combat trials—beyond that. Judging by the smoke ahead and sparks arcing into the stained sky from tracer rounds and flares of rocket motors, it was not over yet. The rest of the invasion force had pushed on to continue the pursuit of their fleeing enemy as they ran to the imagined safety of the world's capital. The ad hoc Supernova of which Truelda was a part now moved forward to continue the Jaguars' inexorable advance. Based on the tempo of the operation thus far, this world would be under their paws before nightfall.

"I hope those *stravags* in First Trinary Assault leave something for us," Yancey continued, changing the direction of the dialogue.

"Too right," Rander agreed almost glumly. She was the oldest warrior of the Point by far, but there was still a glimmer of hope on her personal horizon. "My codex needs a bump, that is for sure."

Yancey, years younger but aggressive enough to have asserted himself as the leader of their battle-pair, barked a laugh. "I will give you a bump—"

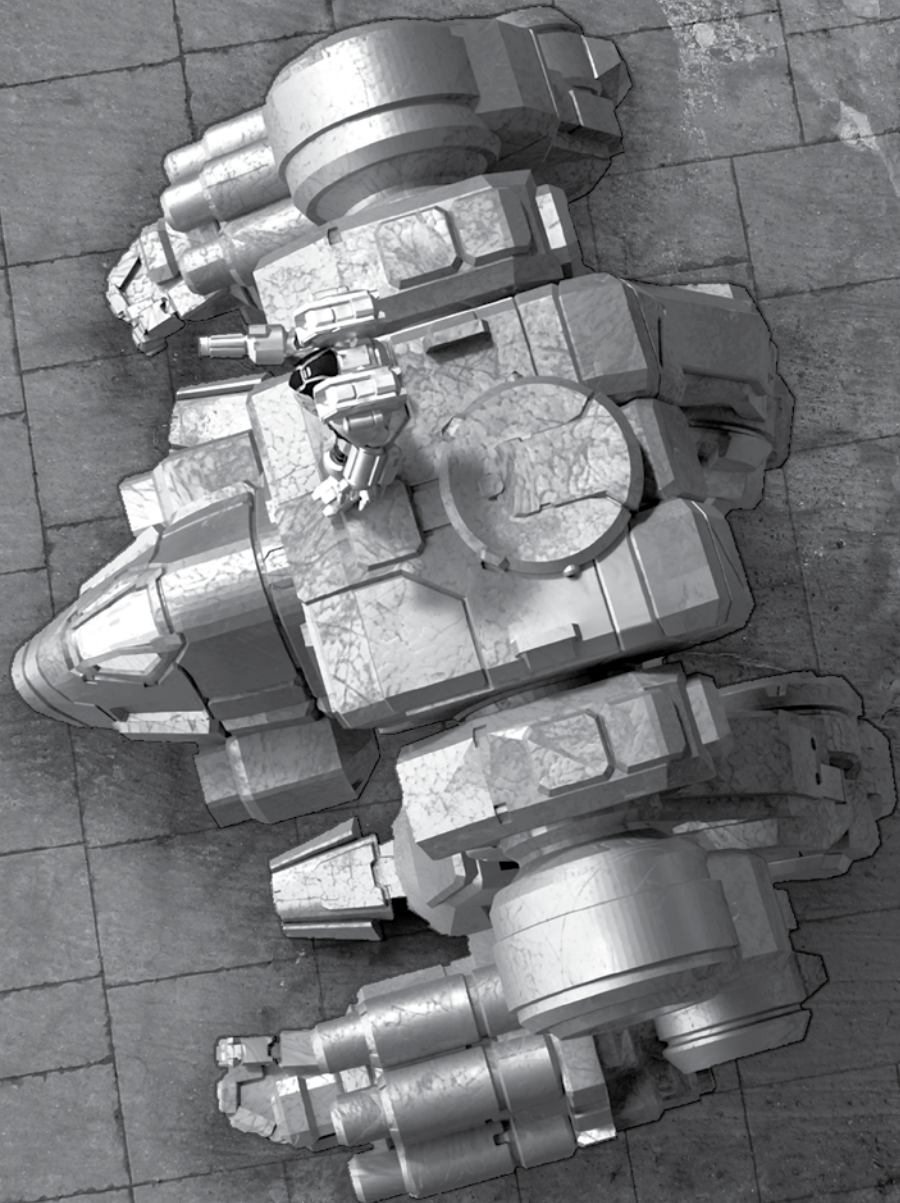
"Cool it," Fowler said with sudden firmness. "Point Two, prepare to dismount and sweep through the town on foot." He paused, perhaps waiting for orders on the Star- or even Trinary-level commo net. "We will dismount on order and push forward with Points One and Three while the Omnis provide support-by-fire. One will be on our left, and Three on our right. Slow is smooth, and smooth is fast. Stay sharp and watch your sectors."

"Aff, Point Commander," the infantry responded, more or less as one.

As always, Werren waited a beat to make sure before he let fly. And Truelda, for her part, was still watching the civs flatten on the road as the footfalls of her 50-ton ride crashed by beside them. One of them, a woman with long, coiled hair and a lustrously silken dress that was at odds with her present predicament, cried out. The thunder of the Omni's broad feet and Truelda's armor smothered the wordless bleat into silence, but the way the women clung the child nestled to her chest as she doubled over was clear enough.

What must they be thinking? Truelda wondered, but she did not know why.

She gathered herself into a crouch and thrust downward with her heels, engaging the jump jets set into her armored suit's thick lower legs. The rest of the Point did the same. The throaty roar of the thrusters filled her ears, and her stomach fluttered as it always did, but only for a moment before the suit blipped the jets to settle her to the gritty shoulder of the roadway as softly as a butterfly's caress.



She landed, as intended, on the right side of the Point's skirmish line, with Werren to her left. Point Commander Fowler landed in the middle of the road in a scatter of road grit, while puffs of dust marked Rander and Yancey's positions farther away. The heads-up display overlaying her *v*-shaped visor came alive from the lassitude it had fallen into on the march here. It began to catalog the faces and forms stretching away from her, but found no weapons, no overt threats, either worthy of her or otherwise. Truelda was young, but she knew well enough that a spear-point of fingertips could be as deadly as an autocannon...

She shook her head to clear it, and with it, the pain in her back and side; a phantom's prodding fingers that still gripped her from the past on the road toward the future.

"Aff, Star Commander," Fowler called out, responding to a query from the comms that Truelda and her Pointmates were not cut in to receive. "Point Two, spread it out. Five-meter intervals. True, Yancey, tie in with Points One and Three as we move. Shake it out."

"Aff, Point Commander," Truelda responded, using the viewer headlining the HUD to make visual contact with the trooper from Point Three.

The viewstrip above the visor's slit compressed a full 360 degrees into a single 160-degree panoramic. It took some getting used to, but Elementals as a whole spent more time in their gear than did MechWarriors or fighter pilots. It took her perhaps even less time to find Point Three's left-wing trooper on the strip than if she had physically turned to see him.

"Nothing to see here," Rander murmured in gentle dismay over the Point net.

"It is early yet," Yancey tittered.

Fowler grunted. "Quiet down."

The skirmish line moved out toward the buildings several hundred meters ahead, fronting the roadway to either side. The civilians were picking themselves up warily from where they had thrown themselves down. The woman with the coiled hair was now somewhere behind her. Gone but not quite forgotten. A clot of people sidled out of way, mewling in fear. A child dropped the article he had been holding and darted out of his mother's grasp to grab it before noticing the presence looming toward him.

The woman shrieked a warning, and the boy, certainly no older than five, though Truelda was in no position to judge a child's age since her frame of reference only allowed her to categorize people into those of fighting age and those who were not. He froze as Truelda approached on thumping feet, unsure or unable to decide whether to retreat to his mother's outstretched arms or to reach down for his prize.

These Spheroids, these *people*, respected the striding OmniMechs because they held a familiarity borne over centuries of use. But they

had a visceral terror of Elementals like Truelda when faced close up to the hulking, faceless monstrosities that looked like people and yet—to them—were not.

Truelda felt herself smile, but even she knew the boy could likely not see the gesture at all from his height. The rest of the child's family wailed as she strode toward him, frozen into a tableau that would have done Rubens proud. Truelda shifted her pace a beat and bent down as she passed the boy. The mechanical claw of her suit's left arm grasped the object on the ground, and she bent over to study it for the briefest of seconds. It was a stuffed tiger, well-worn, loved, with grit clinging to its dusted fur from where it had lain on the unfeeling ground.

The actuator cuff of her suit whirled in the sudden silence. The little boy barely passed the top of her suit's shin, and he stared at her unblinkingly, transfixed, as if seeing lightning for the first time: terrible to behold, but too striking to turn away. She handed him the toy but he did not move. His eyes were as brown as hers, but more almond shaped, and his teeth were the smallest things Truelda believed she had ever seen.

She shook the tiger slightly, and the boy blinked at last.

He reached out, gingerly, to take it from her.

"Get a move on, Truelda," Fowler barked over the Point net. "We have a war to win, remember."

"Too right!" Rander chortled raucously.

A thread of the animal's fur caught on the knuckle of the grasping claw when the boy finally made contact with it. He hesitated, then howled when it did not release as both of them expected. Truelda's own mouth opened in surprise, but then the boy was gone. His family dissolved and re-formed into a protective knot around the child as he disappeared into a thicket of arms and blubbing mouths. She pressed her lips into a grimace and flicked the battle claw to drop the toy to the ground. She turned to thump off to make up the time she had lost being a triple-damned fool.

"It is okay, True," Werren burred from the side on the perscomm as she came astride him. "But the Point Commander is right."

On the viewstrip, Truelda could see the boy detach himself from the clot of humanity heading away from the departing line of troops. He ran over to the discarded tiger and clutched it to his breast while he looked at her retreating form. One of the adults, a wizened male, batted it from his hands, sparing a venomous look at her armored back that was clear to see, even at this range and in the compressed screen. The boy began to cry.

He turned the child forcibly and led him to the family as they headed to the west. The cries ascended into a rising shriek that dissipated like smoke in the thin air as the distance lengthened. She blinked once, twice, and focused on the heads-up display. The regular lines and shapes of carets and readings re-centered her spirit.

"Watch your sectors," the Star Commander's voice said over the Point- and Star nets as the skirmish line reached the first line of buildings; the road took a sharp turn to her right so all that faced the Point on the road were the initial pair.

Constrained by the structures and curbs, the smattering of civilian vehicles remained on the road as they went through the town. A three-wheeled cyclo, weighted down with what was likely three times its intended maximum load, trundled toward them. It slowed when the monsters in the road and beyond appeared out of nowhere.

An icon sprang to life on the building to the left of the road. It was out of Truelda's personal sector, but she caught it in her peripheral vision. She opened her mouth to cry a warning, but Point Commander Fowler was already turning.

"Watch—" he started to say, stepping on Yancey and Rander's paired startlement.

A beam of coherent light, needlessly highlighted by the optics of her suit's visor, lanced out from a hole at ground level that had been hidden until this moment. It must have been removed earlier and then reset to be pushed out at need, Truelda realized.

The beam caught Fowler's left arm as he raised it to direct his Point, instead of spearing him in his center of mass like it had probably been intended to. The impact was inertia-less, but the sudden conversion of heat and energy translated to a bubble of destruction. The fog momentarily enveloped the massive man in his even more enormous armored suit, driving him to a knee.

Someone cursed over the Point net. It could have been Truelda herself.

Both buildings facing the Elementals strung out across the road erupted as if nests of lighted, glowing hornets. The quartet of windows overlooking the track puffed as man-portable shoulder launchers ejected short-range missiles a split second before the rocket motors coughed to life. From another mousehole at ground level, a machine gun screamed to life, firing on cyclic.

Her suit's vents snapped themselves shut when hostile icons blinked into existence, closing her off from the outside world. A stream of tracers arced out toward Fowler, staggering him drunkenly in a shower of sparks. A second beam from what was invariably a tripod-mounted laser snapped out again, but it did not connect, as the gunner was distracted by the wall of fire Yancey and Rander were suddenly putting out.

"Incoming, Wear!" Truelda yelled to Werren as the quartet of rockets howled in on them. "Go!"

She dug in her heels, and her suit leaped forward, the sudden rush of adrenaline insulating her from the rapid acceleration. The bigger man took another step forward to steady himself. Both missiles slammed him in the chest in a ball of light that would have hid him from Truelda's

view even if he had remained ahead of her. Off to the right, similar streams of fire sliced into Point Three as they faced the buildings curving out of her sight.

Truelda landed smoothly, but she had to canter forward because she had come in too hot. Her right arm, weighted down by the heavy barrel-cluster of her 12 mm Gatling, was already up and pointing by its own volition. Her index finger tightened and the weapon buzzsawed into wakefulness. A tracer was loaded every five rounds, each as thick as a normal-sized person's finger. At six thousand rounds per minute, the stream of fire looked like an incandescent hose lashing the façade off the building.

Both windows facing her disappeared under the stroke. Set between them, an air-conditioning unit wilted when she dropped her point of aim. Unexpectedly, it exploded in a black puff when her rounds punctured the refrigerant tank. A grenade from a launcher arced out toward her, almost slow enough to be seen as a speck against the slough of destruction backstopping it. She was stepping to her right when it punched her in her suit's gut.

The explosion staggered her and her HUD flared in protest. An icon of the diagnostic suite blinked and disappeared almost immediately when a backup system took over for the damaged receptor. She grunted against the shock that was more psychological than physical.

The automatic weapon on the building's left corner shifted its fire toward her. Using her left arm, she crooked that finger and the lighter semiautomatic weapon slung under her forearm cackled. Dust sprang up like a veil as her rounds danced around and into the small opening.

There was movement beside her. Werren stomped up beside her. He used his own heavy Gatling to open the hole wider. The battle-pair oriented themselves and ripple-fired the short-range missiles from the backpack launcher cresting their shoulders. The stubby rounds arced in toward the building and blew the whole end of the structure away in a pulsing roar. The roofline shifted at it began to sag toward them.

Off to the right, the OmniMech that had been transporting Point Three thudded forward but did not fire. Their own ride, the *Nova*, stepped gingerly over Fowler who had since regained his feet. The Point Commander hunched himself instinctively, but barely enough that even Truelda was not sure it was in reaction to the machine fifty times his own weight stepping literally over him. The stout Elemental fired past the line of civilians that had flattened themselves as the violence crashed to either side of them; his target was out of Truelda's line of sight.

The MechWarrior, Newell, fired first one, then another laser, from the right and left arms. The searing thrum of the capacitors discharging momentarily froze Truelda's soul, despite the sensory insulation her armored suit provided.

"They are running!" someone yelled triumphantly over the Supernova's shared comm.

"Do not lose them in the buildings!" another voice warned. "Keep an eye on them—!"

On the other side of the road, Yancey and Rander continued firing into the building to their front. There was no return fire; smoke already poured from half the windows. Unexpectedly, Yancey shifted his fire across the Point's front. Truelda cursed at a professional level a moment before she realized—

The cyclo in the road disappeared in a stutter of vaporizing body panels and luggage a moment before one of the rounds found the gas tank. The resulting explosion blew the front end off the little truck. The three people crammed into the cab jerked when the rounds found them, but only the two passengers lived long enough to burn to death. The handful of riders in the low-walled bed were thrown clear by the explosion, raining down to either side within a meter or two like burst sacks of flour.

Shrieks sounded briefly from the passenger compartment.

The gunner crowed triumphantly over the Point net.

There was a further spate of firing around the bend in the road, and then nothing.

"Battle elements, Battle Six," the net crackled in the bored, harried voice of the Supernova's commander. "Cease fire and continue to watch your sectors. Elemental Points Four and Five, sweep forward and clear the immediate buildings while Points Two and Three reconsolidate. Elemental One, hold and perform overwatch. Make it quick, warriors. Battle Six out."

"Point Two, secure your weapons and watch out for friendlies to our front," Fowler croaked over the Point net. "Seems like the tinmen lost the remainder of the rabble in the buildings up ahead."

"Dirty *surats*," Yancey spat, and his voice brightened a shade. "But we got ours, *quiaff*?"

Truelda halted beside Werren and made a quick visual check of his suit's mechanicals, making sure to look the bigger man in the face through his view slit. Bred for war or not, even Elementals were human—and surely the most important component of the suit that was itself merely a force multiplier. His eyes were bright and alert. Nodding, she moved off.

"Do you want us to clear the buildings, Point Commander?" Rander asked, to which Werren snorted audibly.

Truelda blinked over at the other female Elemental. Both of the buildings that had sprung the ambush were cloaked in low flames that were even now starting to lick from the windows. A dull secondary explosion from the one before Truelda and Werren blew out one of the remaining joists. The roof sagged with a muted *WHUMPF!* The resulting cascade of sparks, brightening the smoke-dimmed sunlight

slanting in from above, reminded her of the cone of fire enveloping the civilians aboard the jitney.

"Go for it," Truelda said levelly, turning to face the other battle-pair across the road. Her arms dropped akimbo in a rising challenge.

"Negative," Fowler snapped in irritation, turning to face Truelda. His suit was a blackened mess that still smoked from the burn along its left vambrace.

Then, in a different tone, "Aff, Star Commander. Break. Two, give me a status update and wait for follow-on orders. I will be back in a few. Truelda, make sure no one gets into trouble." Another pause; when he spoke again, the words came out with a curious edge. "Do you understand?"

"Aff, Point Commander," she replied thickly, swallowing the lump in her throat.

They made their reports. All things considered, the Point had gotten off lightly. Their suits had been scuffed, and they were down to half loads of their backpack-mounted missiles, but they were still functional. Well within operational parameters, at least.

"Two, stand easy," Truelda said over the Point net, to which Yancey blew a raspberry. "Let the civs past."

He and Rander were poking around the smoking building their fire had gutted, but the latter made no move to enter the structure. The civilians in the road had escaped the ambush mostly intact—other than the ones searched out by Yancey's fire. He pointedly ignored them while they gathered themselves and tried to hurry away from the scene.

Truelda bit her lower lip as she made her way to the burning jitney. The flames continued, but they had subsided to a dull licking. The forms in the torn compartment had shrunk into carbonized statues with matchstick arms crossed over what had been their faces in life. The half dozen casualties of those in the bed sprawled around the sides and rear of the nose-down vehicle like discarded rag dolls.

She thought about opening her suit's vents to flush it from the flood of adrenaline that had permeated her body, but decided against it. She had smelled death before, smelled burning flesh. The stench of voided or torn bowels. The wet iron reek of spilled blood. She did not need to do so now, here.

At her feet lay a small form, no larger than one of the rockets poking from the launcher over her shoulders. She blinked at it, uncomprehendingly. It took her a moment to realize that it was an infant, and that the pulsingly red gash across it was a tear across its buttocks. She felt bile rise in the back of her throat, which was a silly reaction...

On her own massive form, this wound would be something to be bandaged, nothing more. Nothing so small could survive such an injury—

And then it moved as it tried to roll over.

Truelda's heart stopped, and she reached down with less volition than her right arm had shown minutes before.

"Leave her, Truelda," Point Commander Fowler called out distractedly as he stumped past, back from his coordinations up ahead. "This is *war*, not a Trial of Position."

"But she is just a little girl!" Truelda yelled unexpectedly, even to her. "We cannot just leave her like this!"

Fowler continued on his way. The left forearm of his suit was scorched from the momentary caress of the laser that had initiated the ambush. The claw that capped the appendage worked slightly as if the man inside was flexing his own hand to ensure that it still worked.

The left earphone of Truelda's suit crackled suddenly. "All Battle elements, this is Battle Six," it intoned in the voice of the Supernova's commander. "Aircraft coming in from the north is friendly, I say again, friendly. It is carrying supplies and will evac the wounded. Star- and Point Commanders, get your requests to me immediately and any wounded to the aid point, time now. Execute, warriors! Battle Six out."

In the distance behind her, an Anhur vertical-lift aircraft was howling in to a short-run landing a few hundred meters off the road. The downdraft from its quad-mounted turbines, paired in fairings on each wing and rotating to an oblique angle to flare it to its landing, blew a curtain of dust away from it.

Truelda looked away, back to the infant on the ground. Instinctively, she hunched her massive, and massively armored, form over the tiny girl. Her breathing was labored, but she still breathed. The gash across her tiny posterior was bright with fresh blood. Cursing her suit, Truelda worked her own clawed manipulator under the child's prone form, using the mass of her cloven-hoofed foot to steady the girl while she worked. The linked muzzles of her Gatling's barrel-group had begun to cool, but not enough to touch the girl with.

Off to the side, Werren watched her work; she could feel her battle-pair's eyes on her. He stepped forward as if to help before stopping. Perhaps uncertainty gripped him. Perhaps he would rather she address whatever burdens she felt necessary to bear.

Truelda knew she had no time, that the little girl's time was running out with each beat of her little heart, a heart likely no larger than Truelda's knuckle. But she was a warrior of Clan Smoke Jaguar. She had to try.

The very thought stilled her mind, but not her body. For the first time, her mind and body were as one in a manner her training officers had never told her about. For the first time, both knew hell when they saw it firsthand.

Convinced that the little girl was as securely cradled as she could muster in her thrice-damned suit, Truelda thrust upward with legs as thick as tree trunks. Her suit whined against the strain of the last day's continuous operations, but its moan echoed that of the girl it now held.

Truelda turned and quickened her pace to a canter in the direction of the aircraft that was now keening with its turbines at idle.

The rear ramp was open. Above it, the stubby emitter of a pulse laser stuck out at an angle from its ball mount. A pair of Elementals, from another Star by the marking on their suits, toted out a cargo case that probably weighed half a ton. The crew chief, clad only in a simple smoke-gray jumpsuit, called out to the handful of warriors crouching or kneeling a short distance away. They rose, some haltingly, others as if they had been awaiting the summons for days. As some had.

Truelda got there as the last Elemental shuffled on board. Their suit was sparking from a hit that had sheared off the right lobe of the missile launcher just above the crown of their helmet shell. Probably from the clearing operation near the drop zone, almost certainly not from this last firefight.

Truelda strode up the ramp without a second thought.

The crew chief motioned her forward impatiently while he gabbled into the boom mike extending from his bulbous helmet. As she came abreast of him, the crewman stopped talking and reached out his arm to bar her way. She paused and rotated so he could see her face through the suit's visor.

"What are you doing?" he nearly shrieked, but he had to yell to hear be heard over the scream of the idling turbines and their own helmets. "You cannot bring *that* on board!"

Truelda blinked at him, anger washing out the normal human reaction to being yelled at or refused entry from where they wanted—needed—to go. She switched on her external speaker. "Why not?"

The crew chief's eyes widened while his mustache bunched like an angry caterpillar ready to launch itself into premature flight. "No civilians!" he roared, used to controlling his little lily pad in the lake—and damn the object of his vitriol even if she outmassed him in her skin by a factor of at least two. "Get that *out* of here!"

Truelda let out a breath she had not realized she was holding. She half turned to scan the dimly lit interior of the aircraft. A pair of unarmored warriors sat a few meters ahead of her. She took a couple of steps and deposited the little girl near them, where she would not be accidentally crushed underfoot by a careless trooper in a suit weighing several hundred kilos—or fall out one of the open side doors. They looked up at her in surprise.

"This little girl is staying on board," she intoned heavily. "When she gets to the rear, she will be brought to the medics, *quiaff?*"

The handful of wounded in the cargo bay nodded at her dumbly. She turned to leave. The crew chief's mouth started to work as she crossed him but no sound issued forth. She stopped and leaned forward, causing him to back up and bump his head on the coaming of the ramp.

"If anything falls out of this aircraft when it starts to fly away, I will find you," she whispered, allowing her speakers to carry what her voice alone could not do from within the suit. "It will not be hard, *quiaff?*"

The crew chief nodded. His Adam's apple worked in time with the bushy hair above his lips.

Truelda stamped down the ramp and continued walking as it began to whine upward. The engines increased their pitch as the pilot brought power to them. Truelda turned to meet the curtain of dust rushing towards her. The craft began to roll forward on its sturdy tires before lurching into the sky.

She watched it claw for the sky while vortices curled away in the smoke drifting into and through the air.

"Truelda!" Fowler called out over the Point net. "Come on," he chided, his voice tinny in her earphones. "We are to rearm before pulling out. Headed north. To the next town. And the city, of course." He paused. "This world will not liberate itself, *quiaff?*"

Truelda stood, watching the aircraft wing its way south to the landing zone with its cargo of wounded warriors—and one little girl, not yet old enough to talk. But brave enough not to scream or cry out. Behind her, smoke from the burning, blasted minitruck drifted across the road. The fires devouring the wreckage and its inhabitants crackled mournfully. The only sound in Truelda's armored suit was her steady breathing and the beating of her heart, ebbing as the medevac winged its way to a speck in the distance.

She turned and headed to rejoin her unit...

To continue the liberation.



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To help quickly and easily convey the timeline of the universe—and to allow a player to easily “plug in” a given novel or sourcebook—we’ve divided *BattleTech* into six major eras.



STAR LEAGUE (Present–2780)

Ian Cameron, ruler of the Terran Hegemony, concludes decades of tireless effort with the creation of the Star League, a political and military alliance between all Great Houses and the Hegemony. Star League armed forces immediately launch the Reunification War, forcing the Periphery realms to join. For the next two centuries, humanity experiences a golden age across the thousand light-years of human-occupied space known as the Inner Sphere. It also sees the creation of the most powerful military in human history.

(This era also covers the centuries before the founding of the Star League in 2571, most notably the Age of War.)



SUCCESSION WARS (2781–3049)

Every last member of First Lord Richard Cameron’s family is killed during a coup launched by Stefan Amaris. Following the thirteen-year war to unseat him, the rulers of each of the five Great Houses disband the Star League. General Aleksandr Kerensky departs with eighty percent of the Star League Defense Force beyond known space and the Inner Sphere collapses into centuries of warfare known as the Succession Wars that will eventually result in a massive loss of technology across most worlds.



CLAN INVASION **(3050–3061)**

A mysterious invading force strikes the coreward region of the Inner Sphere. The invaders, called the Clans, are descendants of Kerensky's SLDF troops, forged into a society dedicated to becoming the greatest fighting force in history. With vastly superior technology and warriors, the Clans conquer world after world. Eventually this outside threat will forge a new Star League, something hundreds of years of warfare failed to accomplish. In addition, the Clans will act as a catalyst for a technological renaissance.



CIVIL WAR **(3062–3067)**

The Clan threat is eventually lessened with the complete destruction of a Clan. With that massive external threat apparently neutralized, internal conflicts explode around the Inner Sphere. House Liao conquers its former Commonality, the St. Ives Compact; a rebellion of military units belonging to House Kurita sparks a war with their powerful border enemy, Clan Ghost Bear; the fabulously powerful Federated Commonwealth of House Steiner and House Davion collapses into five long years of bitter civil war.



JIHAD **(3067–3080)**

Following the Federated Commonwealth Civil War, the leaders of the Great Houses meet and disband the new Star League, declaring it a sham. The pseudo-religious Word of Blake—a splinter group of ComStar, the protectors and controllers of interstellar communication—launch the Jihad: an interstellar war that pits every faction against each other and even against themselves, as weapons of mass destruction are used for the first time in centuries while new and frightening technologies are also unleashed.



DARK AGE **(3081–3150)**

Under the guidance of Devlin Stone, the Republic of the Sphere is born at the heart of the Inner Sphere following the Jihad. One of the more extensive periods of peace begins to break out as the 32nd century dawns. The factions, to one degree or another, embrace disarmament, and the massive armies of the Succession Wars begin to fade. However, in 3132 eighty percent of interstellar communications collapses, throwing the universe into chaos. Wars erupt almost immediately, and the factions begin rebuilding their armies.

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3. *Ghost Hour (Rogue Academy, Book 2)* by Jennifer Brozek

OMNIBUSES

1. *The Gray Death Legion Trilogy* by William H. Keith, Jr.

NOVELLAS/SHORT STORIES

1. *Lion's Roar* by Steven Mohan, Jr.
2. *Sniper* by Jason Schmetzer
3. *Eclipse* by Jason Schmetzer
4. *Hector* by Jason Schmetzer
5. *The Frost Advances (Operation Ice Storm, Part 1)* by Jason Schmetzer
6. *The Winds of Spring (Operation Ice Storm, Part 2)* by Jason Schmetzer
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8. *The Fading Call of Glory (Ghost Bear's Lament, Part 2)* by Steven Mohan, Jr.
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11. *The Anvil* by Blaine Lee Pardoe
12. *A Splinter of Hope/The Anvil* (omnibus)
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19. *Fall Down Seven Times, Get Up Eight (Proliferation Cycle #4)* by Randall N. Bills
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21. *The Spider Dances (Proliferation Cycle #6)* by Jason Schmetzer
22. *Shell Games* by Jason Schmetzer
23. *Divided We Fall* by Blaine Lee Pardoe
24. *The Hunt for Jardine (Forgotten Worlds, Part One)* by Herbert A. Beas II

ANTHOLOGIES

1. *The Corps (BattleCorps Anthology, Volume 1)* edited by Loren L. Coleman
2. *First Strike (BattleCorps Anthology, Volume 2)* edited by Loren L. Coleman
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