

SHRAPNEL

ISSUE #4

THE OFFICIAL BATTLETECH MAGAZINE

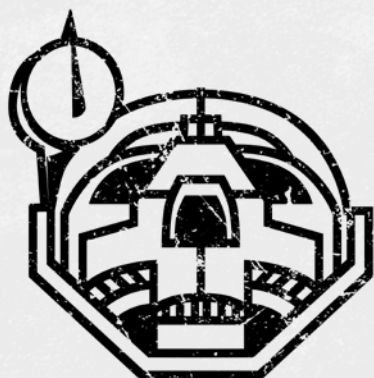


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ISSUE #4

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THE OFFICIAL BATTLETECH MAGAZINE

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COMMANDER'S CALL: FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK.....	4
Philip A. Lee	

SHORT STORIES

GRATITUDE REPAID.....	5
Charles Gideon	
THE BYE-BYE BRIGADE.....	16
Jason Schmetzer	
INVERTED.....	46
Giles Gammage	
ROADBLOCK.....	68
Faith McClosky	
SACKCLOTH AND SAND.....	81
David Razi	
TALES FROM THE CRACKED CANOPY:	
THE RED WRAITH.....	104
Harper Brand	
THE WEIGHT OF A NAME.....	125
Marc Follin	
ALL GOOD THINGS.....	145
James Lee	

ARTICLES

VOICES OF THE SPHERE: CRYOGENICS.....	14
Eric Salzman	
ADVICE FROM A SOCIAL GENERAL: HOW TO PARTY.....	63
Ken' Horner	
PPCS.....	76
Matthew Cross	
GHOST SHIPS GALORE: THE PRIDE OF NEW SAMARKAND.....	101
Stephen W. Toropov	

GAME FEATURES

TECHNICAL READOUT: UM-R90 SUBURBANMECH.....	41
Craig A. Reed, Jr.	
UNIT DIGEST: SEYCHELLES' STONEHEARTS.....	98
Michael J. Ciaravella	
CHAOS CAMPAIGN SCENARIO: SWORD OF SEDITION.....	118
Aaron Cahall	
MAKE 'MECHS MATTER:	
'MECH-LESS PLAY RULES AND RPG ADVENTURE.....	139
Joel Steverson	

COMMANDER'S CALL

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Listen up, MechWarriors! Let's get the bad news out of the way first: due to unforeseen personal circumstances, the conclusion to Michael Stackpole's "If Auld Acquaintance Be Forgot..." serial was not able to make it into this issue by press time. Rest assured, it will show up in the next issue, but in the meantime, if you can send Mike some good vibes, I'm sure he would appreciate support from the *BattleTech* community. It's also worth mentioning that fellow *BattleTech* author Jennifer Brozek, who penned the *Rogue Academy* trilogy, is also going through a rough time, so let's extend her some support as well. Hang in there, Mike and Jenn! We've all got your six!

Though Mike's absence will be felt, we've still got an action-packed issue full of the usual *Shrapnel* goodies. In addition to the usual battlefields in our short stories, prepare to visit some rarely seen corners of the *BattleTech* universe. Venture from the brutality of the Outer Reaches Rebellion, from a time before the age of the BattleMech, then experience heartbreak in the Word of Blake Protectorate before visiting a forgotten world in the Periphery.

Some of the stories in this issue also remind us that technicians, medics, and other support personnel are just as important—and just as brave—as MechWarriors, infantry, tankers, aerospace pilots, and naval crews.

We have a short story from *BattleTech* veteran Jason Schmetzer, documenting the birth of a new mercenary outfit. Then we have a Cracked Canopy tale from Harper Brand, whose first *BattleTech* story appeared in *Front Lines: BattleCorps Anthology Vol. 6*. Other stories in this issue include a naval tale from the FedCom Civil War; an Exiled-Wolf warrior's quest to compete for an unexpected Bloodname; and the Twenty-First Centauri Lancers struggling to coordinate with their Capellan allies during Operation Guerrero.

For game-related content, we've got several special items as well. Among them is a blast from the past: a new technical readout entry that reveals the real story behind the *SuburbanMech*, which first stomped off the pages of *BattleTechnology* magazine in 1992. Then we have an in-depth look at House Steiner culture, in the form of a guide to help young social generals navigate galas and other social engagements—because who you know is just as valuable as military intel. Newcomer Stephen Toropov brings us a look at a WarShip that mysteriously went missing during the Clan Invasion, and Joel Stevenson introduces us to new ways to effectively utilize 'Mechs in a roleplaying campaign. Rounding out the features are a technical article about PPCs from Matt Cross, with some awesome accompanying artwork by Mr. Cross himself (and the article features the character Alexander "Tear Tooth" Perry, named by *Clan Invasion* Kickstarter backer Jeff Perry); a unit digest for a mercenary unit from the iClan era; a look at cryogenic technology; and a scenario straight from the pages of the novel *Sword of Sedition*.

For this issue, I also want to extend a special shoutout to new author Giles Gammage for sticking with us over the years. We had some of his stories slated to publish when *BattleCorps* shut down in 2016, but now we're finally able to showcase his work here in the pages of *Shrapnel*.

It's also worth noting that this issue marks our largest crop of new authors so far—Charles Gideon, Giles Gammage, Faith McClosky, David Razi, Stephen Toropov, Marc Follin, and James Lee—so if you've got a story about big, stompy robots in you, may the voices in this issue inspire you to don your neurohelmet, put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard), and write!

Philip A. Lee, Managing Editor



GRATITUDE REPAID

CHARLES GIDEON

FOX-CLASS CORVETTE FCS KENTARES

NEW AVALON SYSTEM

CRUCIS MARCH, FEDERATED COMMONWEALTH

15 NOVEMBER 3066

Alarm klaxons blared and strobing red lights barely lit the passageways, but these were the furthest things from Koichi's mind as he weightlessly pulled himself down a handrail toward the primary bulkhead. The WarShip rolled around him, forcing him to adjust his balance and trajectory to avoid ramming his shoulder into a support beam. A lifetime of zero-G work made such adjustments second nature and nearly effortless, and this was helpful because he couldn't focus on anything but his racing thoughts.

The vice admiral requested me? Surely I am the lowest ranked person on the entire ship. I'm surprised he remembers my name. Koichi's thoughts drifted back to the repairs he had been pulled from to answer the summons. Realizing his mind had gone adrift, he lightly tapped the left breast pocket of his coveralls. Hearing the slight crinkle of the folded paper he kept there helped still his mind.

Koichi pulled himself into a tight ball to rotate to a feet-first orientation, then casually spread out his body until his feet lightly contacted the deck a meter from the comm panel in the bulkhead. The moment he felt the soles of his boots touch down, he flipped a switch on the small metal box attached to his belt. The control unit responded, sending electricity through the cables running down each leg of his coveralls and to the rubber-coated webbing he wore over his work boots. The electromagnets beneath the plastic instantly came to life, locking Koichi's feet in place on the ferrous decking. Of course, there were newer and more advanced methods to keep a

crewmember feet-down during deep-space operations, but he did not trust controls designed to activate and deactivate the magnets based on foot movement. When effecting repairs on a ship, the last thing he wanted to distract him was how he was moving his feet.

He took a slow breath in through his nose and ran his soot-covered hands through his straight, shoulder-length black hair before punching his ID code into the comm panel. The face that appeared on the screen was not a comms officer, as he had expected. It was the vice admiral himself, who was shouting something to another crewmember on the bridge. Koichi missed what was said because he was gobsmacked to have been connected directly to the man responsible for the entire WarShip.

The admiral's eyes noticed his comm was active and turned his attention to it. "Koichi, is it?" he inquired knowingly while adjusting in his chair to directly face the communications console. Even through the vidscreen, it was easy to see he was fit for his age, only the graying of his hair at the temples and permanent stress lines around his eyes giving away how many standard years he had seen.

"Yes, Admiral," Koichi said as he collected himself. He bowed his head slightly at being addressed and to break eye contact through the two-dimensional screen. In his experience, being the focus of higher-ups usually led to terrible consequences, and the steady look from the admiral's dark eyes made him feel uncomfortable. He silently hoped the camera didn't pick up the reddening of his cheeks.

"Time is short, but I'm told you're the right person for a job," the admiral said. "I understand you have a history of working with K-F drives?"

Koichi, head still slightly bowed, nodded wordlessly.

"There's a malfunction, and we're unable to release the safeties on the drive from the bridge. We don't know what's causing the issue, but I need you to assess the situation and release them directly at the primary."

Koichi's head snapped up, and he began to protest, "But..." was all that slipped past his lips before he took the request to its logical conclusion. With solemn understanding and an internal push of resolve, he removed the look of surprise from his face and replaced it with a thin-lipped seriousness. "*Hai*, Admiral. It will be done."

The admiral's expression softened, and it seemed he was going to say more, but a burst of activity on the bridge pulled his attention away. "Dammit!" he shouted to an unseen bridge officer. "They're moving to intercept, prepare to—" The screen flickered as the connection was severed.

For a long second, Koichi stood looking at the blank screen. Then, remembering himself, he again patted his pocket and took a deep breath. After deactivating his magnetic boots, he floated toward the door to the inner compartment that housed the Kearny-Fuchida drive and its primary terminal.

A massive man, painfully familiar to Koichi, came out of the door he had intended to take deeper into the ship. Koichi had the instant urge to change course. He wasn't physically intimidated by Skip, but the man had made it obvious he did not care for having a Draconis Combine native aboard. He would often string together derogatory phrases in some ignorantly imaginative manner and always just loud enough to reach Koichi's ear. He was also apt to go on at length about being the twelfth generation of his family born and raised in the Draconis March, as if to justify his hatred for all things Kuritan solely with genetics.

The urgency of the mission prodded Koichi on, and he returned to moving hand over hand toward the doorway. Just as he was about to pass Skip, a single whooping buzz interrupted the battle alarm klaxons. Reflexively, everyone in the compartment activated their boots and grabbed onto handholds, locking themselves in place. Koichi scanned the work site, ensuring no tools had been left unsecured to become unexpected missiles.

Exactly three seconds later, the ship began to turn, causing the wall of the compartment to become the new down. The work crews braced against the g-forces. The intensity in the shift of inertia was not the worst they had experienced during the battle over the previous hours, and with looks ranging from worry to annoyance, they waited for the all clear before returning to their work.

"I've done some checking on you, snake," grumbled Skip.

Koichi had nearly forgotten about him as he had shifted his focus to the other workers. When he turned toward the heavysset man, he realized Skip was staring into him as if his eyes were lasers boring a hole straight through Koichi's head. Koichi said nothing.

"Apparently you were some sort of JumpShip repair prodigy," Skip continued, now that he had the attention of his desired audience. "That was enough to get you into aerospace training, and then you washed out of the DCMS in nearly record time." His eyes explored Koichi's face, hoping to elicit a reaction to his past. Getting nothing, Skip swung harder with his next line of thinking. "What's a K-F tech, who isn't even good enough to stay in the Drac military, doing in Davion space making WarShips?" he bellowed, building steam and drawing the attention of the others in the compartment. "And why would that same sorry bastard then decide to sign on with Prince Victor's forces when they claimed this ship for the war effort? Smells like some sort of idiotic ISF plot to me!"

Koichi couldn't contain himself any longer, and a scoff ran through him. He dropped the Swedenese accent he had affected since entering Federated Commonwealth space, and with his natural Japanese intonation unrestrained, sneered back. "'Idiotic' is right."

Skip's neck and jaw tensed at the slight and the belittling of his allegations, and he turned a shade of maroon. He flexed his massive hand into a fist and opened his mouth to give Koichi a dressing down,

if not something more severe. But the all-clear whistle interrupted whatever he had planned.

The comfort of returning microgravity allowed Koichi to relax his tensed muscles. He drifted out of Skip's reach to discourage things from escalating to a physical scrap. Instead of the battle-stations klaxon returning, an announcement blasted over the loudspeakers, ordering everyone to abandon ship and to double the standard number of people to each lifeboat. Koichi had heard enough horror stories to know that exceeding the recommended number of occupants in a lifeboat was often good intentions outweighing good sense, but with the number of friendly craft in the area, no one was likely to be adrift for more than a few hours. It would be an uncomfortable, and likely malodorous, few hours, but survival often doesn't take comfort into account.

Confusion moved through the work crews like the ripples over a jump sail caused by a solar flare. They were in the middle of repairing damage from previous skirmishing, but there hadn't been another salvo fired or taken. Evacuating the ship at this point didn't make sense, but no one was going to question such an ominous, unexpected order. Without further delay, the workers made their way toward the nearest designated evacuation point to secure a space on a lifeboat, leaving work and tools where they lay, but Koichi and Skip remained.

"We'll settle this later, Drac," Skip snarled as he released his boots from the walkway and started off after the others. As he passed, he gave Koichi a solid shoulder check, which sent the smaller man bouncing off the wall, and without looking back, left the compartment.

With that, everyone had gone, everyone but Koichi. He still had a task to complete.

As he entered the center spine of the WarShip, he floated past a few other crew members who paid him no attention as they hurried past, anxious to locate a lifeboat. Anchoring himself in front of the master terminal, Koichi quickly scanned through systems, making sure there were no issues that would prevent him from engaging the overrides from his location. Finding none, he typed commands into the console at a fevered pace. The systems he was accessing were rather straightforward, but the steps required to override the safeties, which were hard baked into the software, were intentionally complicated and time consuming.

There were two levels of safeties built into the systems of a Kearny-Fuchida drive's controls. The first prevented the drive from engaging if other gravitational forces were detected nearby. The second inhibited the massive engine, designed to bend and warp spacetime itself, from charging if there was a reason the drive wouldn't be able to take its leap across light-years of distance. One safety to prevent misjumps, and the other precluding the wear and tear placed on the engine from needless charging.

Koichi chose to first address the regulators blocking the device from charging. Those restrictions were the easier of the two to nullify, and it would take time for the drive to draw up the power necessary before it could attempt a jump. Koichi was counting on this additional time to allow him to handle the remaining lockouts. He became so enraptured in the puzzle of software commands and the elegance of the programming, he forgot what lay at their completion. He also failed to notice that he was no longer alone.

"You filthy sonovasnake!" Skip barked from behind. "I knew you were up to something! Only a fool or someone who's up to no good doesn't follow the order to abandon ship!"

Koichi glanced over his shoulder to see Skip glaring at him from across the compartment, about ten meters away. Turning back to the command terminal, Koichi estimated he had about three more lines of commands to input, and the task would be complete. It would be done before Skip could interfere, and Koichi could explain after.

Several soft ripples of vibration ran through the decking and up through the soles of Koichi's boots. At first he feared they were taking enemy fire, the capital weapons on the enemy ships undoing the repairs he and the others had painstakingly worked on throughout their shift. The tremors were minor, and he realized in the back of his mind that it was likely the launching lifeboats disturbing the ship, but he continued to tap the keys. He finished inputting the last line of commands and was reaching for the final key. That one last keystroke would put the commands into effect, giving the bridge full access to the Kearny-Fuchida drive controls. Just then, he registered that the lifeboats were away. *No turning back.*

Koichi's moment of hesitation was the precise amount of time it took for the ferro-steel spanner to soundlessly arc through the air and impact with the back of his skull.

Stars cascaded across Koichi's vision, and he tried to blink them away to make sense of where he was. His lungs burned as he tried to open his mouth to take a deep breath. Only he realize he couldn't. A thick arm tightly encircled his neck from behind, and a brawny shoulder pressed hard into the back of his head. Skip's voice entered his awareness, his mouth only millimeters from Koichi's ear.

"I knew it the first time I saw you, you gutless snake," Skip hissed through gritted teeth. "I knew if I kept my eye on you long enough, you'd slip up, and here you are trying to sabotage us in the middle of battle."

Ironically, it was the persistent growl of Skip's voice and his off-the-mark insult that gave Koichi's addled mind something to anchor to. He was leaning away from the terminal, feet still attached to the floor, with his head enveloped in the bulky man's arms. At this angle he had no leverage to pull himself away, if overpowering Skip, who easily outmassed him by one and a half times, was even possible to

begin with. Ahead, Koichi saw the terminal monitor, the cursor flashing at the end of the last line of commands he had typed, still awaiting the final key press to execute. Stretching his arm out, Koichi willed his hand to find the terminal, but it was nearly a meter away.

Skip continued to speak, but Koichi couldn't make it out over the drumming of his own pulse in his ears. His focus on the terminal began to blur, turning red and then black around the edges. As his body slackened, he felt the paper in his pocket crumple between his chest and Skip's elbow.

Koichi's eyes snapped open, and in desperation he flung his left arm back while simultaneously deactivating his boots with his right hand. His left forearm connected solidly with Skip's groin and gave him propulsion away from the choke hold. Reacting to the blow, Skip reflexively bent at the waist. The sudden movement and tenuous hold Skip still had on Koichi's head imparted a slow spin to Koichi's body as he broke free of Skip's grasp, somersaulting him across the compartment.

Tumbling through the air, Koichi didn't have a chance to get his bearings before slamming shoulders-first into the far wall. Any air he'd been able to get into his raw lungs was blasted from his chest. Through pure instinct he secured his feet to the wall before drifting toward the center of the room where Skip was recovering from the hit he had taken.

"That was a dirty shot. Shoulda expected it, I guess, coming from you." Skip smiled at his own joke and looked to the computer interface. "Let's take a look at what you were up to."

Koichi knew that nothing he could say would abate Skip's suspicions, and trying to convince him to contact the bridge before doing anything else was too great a risk. With a few moments at the controls, Skip could undo most of Koichi's commands.

With a practiced swing of his arms, Skip propelled himself into a hover toward the computer. His eyes trained on the screen, intent on identifying what the interloper had been doing when he had entered the room.

Without any apparent recourse, Koichi decided it was up to him to stop Skip if there was to be any chance of him completing the admiral's orders. He pulled himself into a ball against the metal bulkhead. The muscles in his legs screamed for oxygen, but he pushed it from his mind. He had to. Skip was closing on the terminal, and at any moment he would discern what the entered codes were meant to do and would surely interpret Koichi's intentions as nefarious.

Koichi pushed off the wall with every bit of strength he could summon and launched himself at Skip like a human-sized rocket. He stretched a fist in front of himself in an awkward attempt at a flying punch. A moment after his boots left the metal wall and he had no chance to adjust his course significantly, he realized he had fallen into

a trap. Skip stopped his forward momentum and activated his boots. With fists raised, he stood ready to welcome Koichi.

In a moment of wishful thinking, Koichi thought how helpful a course on zero-G combat, or even one of the several martial arts he had heard of, would've been. As his momentum brought him to Skip, his attack turned into nothing but ineffective flailing. His punches bounced harmlessly off the bigger man's arms and shoulders.

As inertia carried Koichi past, Skip grabbed his belt and redirected him into a loop, then slammed his back into the deck. With a few fluid motions, Skip pinned Koichi between his feet and locked Koichi's arms to his sides. He bent one leg to pin Koichi's chest, crushing his ribs. Releasing the grip on Koichi's belt, Skip instead grabbed his collar and rained down blow after blow into Koichi's face.

Every punch sent an electric buzz through Koichi's body, and caused every square centimeter of his skin to tingle. Struggling proved useless against Skip's greater mass and anchoring. There was no telling how many strikes Koichi had taken, but the few moments of brutality felt like an eternity of punishment. When the fist finally stopped, he opened his eyes as best he could through the swelling. Skip straightened some, taking the pressure off Koichi's chest, but still maintained his hold.

"Think I'll save the officers some time and hold your trial and sentencing for sabotage right now," Skip huffed. The exertion of battering Koichi had apparently run through his energy reserves. Skip reached to his tool belt and withdrew a heavy spanner, measuring a half meter in length.

The execution was interrupted when the maneuvering siren screeched, breaking Skip from his single-mindedness. He took a moment to look around the empty compartment, and then down at Koichi. With a smirk and shrug he pulled his arm above him, readying a blow that would crush Koichi's skull in a single swing.

Koichi didn't have the strength to break Skip's grip on his collar, and his mind raced trying to find a solution. As Skip's arm began to move, leading the wrench in an arc that would connect with his head, Koichi activated his boots. He kicked his legs forward until the magnets attached to his feet caught the spanner mid-swing. The jarring force threw Skip off balance and broke his grasp. It also pulled Koichi out from under him.

Koichi immediately launched himself away, once again finding a foothold on the far bulkhead. In a rage, Skip wound up to throw the spanner, but the WarShip's fusion thrusters fired. This instantly added over twice the standard mass to everything on the ship. The tool haplessly fell from Skip's fingers and slammed into the floor. Koichi hung inverted directly above Skip, whose attempted throw had left him oddly contorted when the engines fired. Unable to resist the sudden Gs, Skip eased himself to the deck, flat on his back.

"So, which are you, Skip?" Koichi spat from torn and bleeding lips. "You said only a fool or a troublemaker didn't heed a call to abandon ship."

His taunt did not hold long. For the second time in as many minutes, his vision began to fade to red. He became acutely aware he was in a perfect posture to red-out from all the blood pooling in his beaten head. Fighting against the g-forces, he bent at the waist, using his hands to try to climb his own legs. Attempting anything to get his head above his heart.

As the strain increased, he felt the tendons and ligaments stretching in his ankles and knees, giving the distinct sensation he was about to be torn to pieces. He glanced over his shoulder once more to confirm Skip's position, braced his jaw, and deactivated his boots. As he streaked across the meters separating the overhead and the deck, Koichi managed a half flip, more through luck than skill. His shins hit first as he crashed into Skip's supine form. The sound of cracking bones and mutual shouts of pain filled the room.

Koichi rolled to the side and surveyed the broken form of the man next to him. Skip was gasping. Breathing in 2.5 Gs on its own could be difficult, but with a crushed rib cage, it became impossible. Anguish washed over Koichi as he realized Skip's suffering was his own doing, but his duty to the admiral remained.

With monumental effort, Koichi rolled himself onto his stomach and dragged himself and his lifeless legs toward the terminal. Every repetition of stretching his arms forward and pulling the dead weight of his body sent stabbing pain through him. He was so overcome by agony and so fixated on his sheer refusal to succumb to its control that he was surprised when he found himself at the base of the terminal, unsure how he had covered the distance. He used one hand to grab the edge of the command console and the other pushed against the deck. With strength he had never known, Koichi lifted himself just enough to see the terminal's screen.

The K-F drive was charging, and several warnings scrolled across the screen indicating three K-F drive signatures, along with several background gravitational fields, were too close to perform a safe jump. Koichi instantly assessed the warnings. The gravity from the planetary bodies would surely be enough to cause a misjump that would twist the *Kentares* on an atomic level as it ripped its way through the fabric of reality.

The nearby K-F drive signatures were a different matter. One of the first things Koichi had learned when he first studied K-F drives was the anchoring effect they have on each other. If a ship were to try jumping with other K-F drives in close proximity, the field generated would attempt to pull all the nearby K-F drives through the hole in space, preventing the jump. Instead, all the ships caught in the field would be torn apart from inside as their K-F drives were pulled toward the jump point by forces no material could withstand.

With one last flash of movement, Koichi struck the EXECUTE key. The screen showed that all safeties were disengaged, and he crashed back to the ground. The admiral was now free to use the WarShip's K-F drive like a proximity bomb on an unimaginable scale.

The ship-wide intercom system hummed to life, booming the admiral's voice through every corner of the WarShip: "TO THOSE OF YOU WHO REMAIN ABOARD, THANK YOU. IT IS TRULY AN HONOR TO SEE THIS WAR THROUGH WITH EACH OF YOU, BUT AS IT STANDS, PRINCE VICTOR WILL LOSE BEFORE SETTING FOOT ON NEW AVALON."

Koichi, now flat on his back, opened the zipper of his breast pocket and carefully removed the paper he kept there. With trembling fingers, he unfolded the hardcopy. The grime and blood on his hands smudged the paper as his eyes danced over the familiar aspects of the document. Over the years he had memorized every millimeter.

The admiral continued to speak, his voice reverberating in the empty compartment: "IT IS UP TO US TO TIP THE SCALES. WE KNEW WHEN WE SET OUT THAT THERE WAS ONLY ONE POSSIBLE OUTCOME; WE WEREN'T COMING HOME UNTIL OUR FAMILIES COULD LIVE FREE OF KATHERINE'S MACHINATIONS. I AM SORRY WE WILL NOT SEE THE JOY ON THEIR FACES WHEN THEY LEARN OF OUR VICTORY."

Koichi studied the paper's Star League letterhead, the message thanking him for his service to Operation Bulldog as a civilian maintaining the massive JumpShip fleet, and the signature at the bottom. *First Prince Victor Steiner-Davion*.

He wanted to articulate to someone, anyone, how he had been unceremoniously discharged from the DCMS after it was discovered he suffered from transit disorientation syndrome while en route to training. How he had been treated as little more than *burakumin* after such a humiliation. None of that mattered, he reminded himself. What mattered was that the commander of the Star League Defense Force had not only acknowledged his abilities, but thanked him.

"IF WE FAIL IN OUR DUTY," the admiral continued, "THERE WILL BE NO FREEDOM, NO PEACE IN OUR HOMES. OUR LIVES ARE THE CURRENCY REQUIRED TO BUY THESE FOR A TRILLION OTHERS. I SPEAK FOR EACH OF US, OUR FAMILIES, AND THE WHOLE FEDERATED COMMONWEALTH WHEN I SAY—"

The gift of purpose Koichi received from the gesture could never be repaid, and it proved Victor to be a thoughtful leader and an honorable man. A man worth fighting for.

The intercom speakers popped, indicating a change in comm settings.

"GOD SAVE THE PRINCE."

A man worth dying for.

As the K-F drive activated, Koichi's perception stretched into a sense of omnipresence...



VOICES OF THE SPHERE: CRYOGENICS

ERIC SALZMAN

OPINIONS AND COMMENTARY FROM AROUND THE INNER SPHERE: JANUARY 3151

We all recall the famous scene in the classic camp holofilm *MechAssault VII: Cold War*, where the hero fights his way into the vaults beneath Rim Worlds Republic Outpost #666 and witnesses the genetically enhanced clone of Stefan Amaris bursting out of his cryogenic stasis tube, perfectly preserved and ready to destroy the Inner Sphere. In a case of life imitating art, rumors have emerged from former Republic worlds that Exarch Devlin Stone underwent more than a decade of cryogenic suspension before returning to oversee Terra's defense. Such an event, if true, necessitates a discussion of this rare technology and its potential impact on the Inner Sphere.

Cryogenic stasis matured in the 2600s, sustaining terminally ill patients until they could be cured, aging only a day for each year that passed. The Star League's elites often maintained personal capsules in case of accident or illness. Deep Periphery explorer ships used them to minimize supply consumption, extending mission range. Some extreme groups even sealed themselves into reinforced geothermal-powered "time capsule" bunkers, hoping to see the far future. These "time traveler cults" were rare, as patients in stasis longer than a year are at ever-increasing risk of degenerative disorders and death the longer they stay under. Very few people have been suspended past ten years, and only a handful of "time travelers" who emerged during the Succession Wars lived more than a few months after awakening.

During the Succession Wars, many nobles, lacking the technical resources to ensure their safe use, donated stasis capsules to their governments. House Davion consolidated its supply under the AFFS's Medical Corps, which uses them to transport wounded soldiers to

worlds with advanced medical facilities. More infamously, the Capellan Confederation used its stasis capsules to transport captives abducted from neighboring realms.

Given the rumored return of Stone, we reached out to people around the Inner Sphere for their take on stasis technology.

Justin Sortek, Argyle (Federated Suns): I wouldn't be here speaking to you if the Medical Corps hadn't used cryo to save my grandfather's life. It's a shame about the hallucinations, though...

Li Bao, Lattice (Capellan Confederation): An extremely versatile technology, with endless applications, guided by the arm of the state.

Anastasia Pantazis, Canopus IV (Magistracy of Canopus): Older units and shoddy PolyTech models can cause brain damage and organ failure. That's why you should upgrade to the latest model, produced right here on Canopus. Visit our showroom, or check out our demonstration units the next time a pleasure circus visits your system.

Calder Farmaor, Tharkad (Lyrn Commonwealth): False imprisonment, that's what it was! I went under to see mankind's glorious future, and ended up as a museum exhibit for decades. If not for a power surge tripping the revival cycle, I'd still be the featured attraction in Snord's Medical Mysteries wing!

Iolo Snord, Clinton (Wolf Empire): Ingrate! When Alexandria Snord's archaeological team cracked the bunker on New Dallas, all the other units were offline, occupants dead. Not to mention the poison atmosphere. We saved him! Cryo tech is more trouble than it's worth.

Rico Menendez, Devil's Rock (Wolf Empire): Yeah, Stone came back. Told us he had a strategy to save the Republic. Look at the flag flying over the Rhodes Foundry, and tell me how well that worked. Cryo-pod musta froze his brain.





THE BYE-BYE BRIGADE

JASON SCHMETZER

GALAPORT

GALATEA

LYRAN COMMONWEALTH

2 JANUARY 3024

Baia Medrano's first experience of Galatea was the heat. Bad enough her first day on the Mercenary's Star was a Friday, but why did it have to be so goddamn hot? She held one hand up to shade her eyes as she stood on the sidewalk outside the passenger terminal. The ruck hanging off one shoulder was already soaking her battledress with sweat.

"Balmy," said Faseeha Sefu, from behind her.

Baia turned and glared at the technician. Sefu was a year or two younger than Baia's twenty-eight standard years, and had short, dyed-green hair. She wore it long over her left side to cover her ear, mutilated when a Liao cannon shell had hit the repair gantry she'd been working on. The scars were still fresh and pink.

Baia swallowed. Beten Kaitos still felt fresh. To all of them.

Not everyone's scars were on the outside.

"You say that everywhere," said Stefan Green. He and Simona Bilek stepped outside together. The pair of mechanics still wore the green working coveralls of Davion mechanics, but with the insignia removed. The darker-colored fabric, where the sun hadn't bleached it, showed where the Davion Guards shoulder blaze had been.

"Only when it's true," Sefu insisted.

Norma Johnson came out next, walking stiffly and ignoring the young man chattering at her side. Johnson met Baia's eyes, glared, then looked away. Next to her, Travis Asad just kept talking.

"—and I read it, on the way down. There's a real live Wolf's Dragoons recruiting officer here in Galaport. Full time."

Baia grinned. Asad would never change, and each of them had been stuck with him at one point or another on the three-month journey to Galatea from Beten Kaitos.

The last person out, Finna Azeem, just ignored them all and stepped next to Baia. "This is how Davy support staff fill their time, then?" Her accent was still strange to Baia's ears, and the tattooed Marik eagle on her forehead still caught the eye, but she fit in pretty well. They'd picked her up on one of the recharge legs near Terra.

Baia turned her back on the sun and made a noise to get everyone's attention.

"Listen—" she started, but Sefu snorted and cut her off.

"Shut it, Captain," the technician said. "We're here, aren't we?"

"Yes," Baia said, "and that means you have a choice. As Travis already apparently knows, there are plenty of prospects here. You don't have to follow me."

Simona Bilek rolled her eyes. "Give it up, Captain. We all signed up for the Bye-Bye Brigade." All the others nodded agreement.

"That is not what we're calling this," Baia said. Her sister had let Baia's childhood nickname slip during one HV message from home. Just one time. And now it seemed like ComStar itself was spreading the news.

"Since we're not officially formed yet, and thus aren't under military discipline," Green said, "let me be blunt, Captain. Sir. Ma'am. Whatever." He waited for the others to chuckle before he drove on. "You're stuck with us. We're here. We're doing this."

Baia looked at each of the others, one at a time. Each of them looked determined. Finally she shrugged. "Okay, but I gave you a chance. Remember that." She glanced over her shoulder. "I guess we get a cab into the city?"

"Shotgun!" Norma Johnson called, stepping away from young Asad.

Baia chuckled.



In the 31st century, war was constant. The five nations of the Inner Sphere had been fighting over scraps for centuries, trading worlds and lives for victory or advantage that never mattered a year or two later. House Davion's Federated Suns, where Baia Medrano and her friends had come from, was one of those realms. Its Armed Forces of the Federated Suns claimed the reputation of most elite of the Inner Sphere militaries, but so did every other collected soldiery.

Each of the Great House militaries supplemented their forces with mercenaries, and those mercenaries ran the gamut from five-regiment outfits like McCarron's Armored Cavalry and Wolf's Dragoons to squads of infantry with assault rifles and bad attitudes. Most of

those mercenaries came here, to the so-called Mercenary's Star of Galatea, to find work.

War was a mercenary's work, and work was always available.

As she sat down in the rented office, nose twitching at the dust or Galatea's unfamiliar pollen, maybe the dander of the weird-looking rat-cat-lizard thing three doors down the hallway, Baia played those words around in her head. Grand words, like they'd been written by a copywriter somewhere.

She wiped her fingertip across the desktop; it came away brown-black with dust.

She hoped it was dust.

"Super noble," she muttered.

The console built into the desk booted up, at least. That was something. Baia bent her head and squinted at the cracked display. A welcome message played. Then a sprite popped up with a flashing ComStar Mercenary Review Board logo. She tapped it. A bored-looking ComStar adept—or maybe an actor in ComStar robes, who really knew? appeared.

"Congratulations on registering your new mercenary command with the Mercenary Review Board," the adept said. His voice was tinny and the speaker cut out about every three seconds.

"By the will of the Blessed Blake, you have been accepted for provisional screening by the MRB," the adept continued, but Baia tapped the SKIP icon.

"By the will of the almighty C-bill, you mean," she muttered. Finna Azeem had done the registration earlier this morning and arranged the office space. The fee had taken a chunk out of their already-meager war chest.

War chest. Baia chuckled. *We're a ten-minute-old mercenary unit without a name, and we have a war chest.*

The first night in Galaport had been a blur. All she really remembered was flashing lights, strange food, and the burning frustration of being told her 'Mech wouldn't be unloaded from the DropShip until Monday. Because the union didn't work on the weekend except for "war rates" and she wasn't paying that extortion.

The MRB acolyte had also told them to come back Monday.

They'd reserved the office sight-unseen on Sunday.

They couldn't get in until Monday.

Baia closed her eyes and massaged her temples.

Thank god it's Monday.

Her eyes blinked open. "I didn't just think that."

"Think what?" asked Travis Asad from the door. The young man leaned on the doorframe, noteputer under his arm, grinning at her. "CO's already talking to herself," he said. "Never a good sign."

"Says who?" Baia asked.

"Sergeant major in my first company," Asad said. "She used to tell us, 'You hear the CO talking to themselves, you run find an NCO first thing.'"

"Good advice," Baia said. "What do you need?"

Asad stepped inside and sat down in one of the two chairs facing Baia's desk. The room immediately felt a meter smaller. The chair creaked ominously when Asad sat, but if he was afraid the extruded plastic was going to collapse, he didn't show it.

"We have 11,412 applicants," Asad said.

"We have what?"

"Applicants. A lot of them." He grinned. "Apparently the ad I put up over the weekend worked."

"Ad."

"Yes."

"We don't even have a name."

"We need to fix that," Finna Azeem said from the doorway. Baia beckoned her inside, where she sat in the other chair. Unlike Asad, she immediately leaped back up and leaned against the wall, instead.

"Fix what?"

"The name."

"Apparently not," Baia said. She gestured with her chin at Asad. "According to Travis, we have about a division of recruits."

Azeem frowned, which made the Marik eagle on her forehead flutter its wings. "How do we have recruits when we don't have a name?"

"I put an ad on the local net," Asad said proudly.

Azeem shook her head. "You didn't." When Asad frowned, she brought out her own noteputer and tapped it active. "Which net?" Travis told her, and she tapped some keys. "Oh, I see. Delete them all."

"What? Why?"

Azeem looked at Baia, who nodded. "Watch this," she told Travis. A few taps later, she showed him her noteputer's face. "An ad like this, right?"

"Mine was a little better," Asad said diffidently.

"Right. Watch." She tapped a key. Baia assumed it was SUBMIT. She waited a moment. Then she looked down, shook her head, and held it up where Travis could see. "How many applications?"

Asad leaned over, and frowned. "11,382."

Baia chuckled. "Bots?"

"Some," Azeem said, "but in this market I'd bet most of them are just blacklisters." She tapped some commands, held up the screen to show a flashing red DELETE button, and then pressed it.

Blacklisters were soldiers who'd been fired by their previous employers. Or those too disreputable, too ragged, to get hired. There was nothing to keep them from looking for work, of course. Except their reputations. And those recruiters who knew better than to hire them.

Which, apparently, wasn't Travis Asad. But it would be a teachable moment for the former aircraft gunner.

"I wrote it just like an ad I saw from Hansen's Roughriders," Asad said. He almost looked like he was pouting.

"It's not the ad," Finna told him. "It's the market."

"So what do we do?" Baia asked. "Cause we need to hire."

"We make connections." Finna met her stare evenly. "We have to get out and meet some people. Make some contacts, earn some trust, and get recommendations on trustworthy people who need work, who might fit."

Baia regarded her. Finna Azeem had sought her out in the lounge on the JumpShip's grav deck during a recharge lull. Fat, armored DropShips carried people and material to and from distant jump points in space, where dainty, spindle-hulled JumpShips carried them from system to system with long periods, days and weeks, of time spent motionless, recharging their jump drives.

Baia had been staring out into space when Finna had sat down and asked, out of the blue, about the real story of Beten Kaitos. And several hours—and drinks—later, told Baia how she'd gotten the story out of a DropShip crewman, and set it all up to tell Baia that she, Finna, would be a great hire for her fledgling, nameless mercenary unit.

So far she was earning her wages.

And Baia's trust.

"How do we do that?" Travis Asad said. He was looking at his noteputer as if it had betrayed him.

Finna looked Baia in the eye. "We start with people we know."

Baia didn't groan, but she wanted to.

"Who do we know on Galatea?" Travis asked, completely missing the byplay between the two women.

Now Baia did groan. She stood up. "Travis, sit down here. There's a series of welcome videos from the MRB. Watch them and tell me later if there's anything you think I need to know." She looked at Finna. "You and I are going to talk."



Baia's glare at Finna Azeem rolled off the ex-Free Worlder like water off a rock. She caught Baia looking at her and shrugged. "What? You said we'd talk. We talked. No one ever said you were going to win."

"I'm the CO," Baia protested.

"You can be the CO when we have a name," Azeem said. "Now stop stalling. We're going in." She suited action to words, stepping up the steps into the hall without looking back.

Baia took a deep breath. "Damn it," she whispered, and followed.

The gathering they were entering was a meeting of the AFS Veteran's Association in Galaport. It was the first—and last—such gathering Baia ever wanted to be a part of. She was about to enter a

room full of Davion uniforms and unit flashes, all of which would likely trigger memories she didn't really want to think about.

But Finna was right. They were new on the ground and they didn't know the lay of the land. They needed a guide. Baia just hoped she could get in, find one or two former Davion officers she could stand, and get out.

The door was unguarded, but inside the convention-hall style building were a series of doors. All but two were closed; one was marked OFFICER and the other ENLISTED. Men and women in senior NCO uniforms stood outside each door. The woman outside the O club—because that's what it was, Baia realized—was in the enlisted dress uniform with a shoulder flash for the Davion Brigade of Guards.

Her branch—MechWarrior—was clear by the spurs on her boots. Baia lifted the heel of her left foot unconsciously, suddenly aware that she hadn't worn hers. Spurs were dress-uniform, and she was in undress greens. She wasn't putting the damn gold half-cuirass on if she could avoid it.

"Let's go," Baia said sullenly. She led them toward the O club.

The woman—she was a sergeant major, Baia saw—held up her hand politely. "Sorry, ladies," she said, "but this room is reserved for veterans of the AFFS."

Baia held out her ID. "Leftenant Baia Medrano," she said. "Davion Brigade of Guards." She paused. "Retired."

The sergeant major's eyes narrowed minutely. Baia knew what was going through her mind. On a planet like this, every poor slob that could put together a green outfit probably tried to get into events like this. The sergeant major took Baia's ID and slid it into a noteputer she pulled from behind her back. She looked at the screen, up at Baia, and then back down.

"This says you're still on active duty, ma'am," the sergeant major said, lifting the noteputer slightly.

"Then your records are out of date," Baia said. "I put in my papers on Beten Kaitos four months ago."

"Beten Kaitos," the sergeant major repeated.

"I said what I said."

Baia's ID slid free of the noteputer, but the sergeant major didn't hand it back. "Which battalion did you serve in, ma'am?" Baia told her. "Then you knew Major Kim."

"I knew *Captain* Kim," Baia said. "C Company commander, Albion, class of '19. Drove a *Centurion*. Insisted on painting it pink every chance he got when we went out of parade colors."

The sergeant major held out her ID. "My cousin, ma'am," she admitted. "Sergeant Major Eleanor Kim."

"Pleasure to meet you, Sarn't Major."

Kim looked at Finna Azeem. "And you, ma'am?"

"She's my guest," Baia said.

"I figured, from the tattoo," Kim said. She gestured them through. "Enjoy your evening, ladies."

"Old home week?" Finna asked, sotto voce.

"Shut up," Baia whispered.

Inside the room the hall was large, with small circular tables filling two-thirds of the volume to the left. On the right was a row of buffet tables separated by a large bar in the center, staffed with bartenders in civilian dress. Caterers hovered behind the tables of food, watching food levels, ready to whisk away any empty containers.

"Wow," Finna said. "This is how the other half lives, hey?"

To Baia's immense relief, only about a third of those present were in dress greens with the golden half-sunburst. About half the remainder were in undress greens, with the other half split between civilian clothes and what could only be a *mélange* of mercenary "uniforms." She had been terrified she'd be caught out like this was an academy inspection.

"Let's go," she told Finna.

They drifted toward the food first, getting into the back of a short line that looked like it had formed from those who'd entered before them. In front of them was an older man in undress greens with a sergeant's scars on his shoulder. He stood hunched over, holding his plate, staring at the food.

Baia glanced at him, thought about asking how he'd gotten in the officers' club, but decided against it.

"So how's this work?" Finna asked. If she was nervous standing in a room full of Davion soldiers wearing a tattoo in the shape of the Free Worlds League eagle, she didn't show it.

"We'll find out together."

"It's all cliques," the man in front of them said. He half turned. "First time?"

Baia nodded noncommittally.

"Food's good. But good luck getting much more than that. Everyone clusters in groups, usually regimental. If you're not in the group, you're not in." He shrugged. "But it's a meal." He turned back toward the table.

"Regimental," Finna muttered.

"Yeah," the sergeant said, over his shoulder. "Where'd you serve?"

"Brigade of Guards," Baia said, not really paying attention. Her mind was flashing back to regimental reviews, to fitness reports, to the bloody fields on Beten Kaitos after the last Liao raid had come through.

"Oh," the sergeant said. He didn't turn. "You'll do fine, then." He stepped away a half pace, not really any farther than he had been, but Baia took the cue and gave him his distance.

"See? I told you," Finna said.

"You don't know these people," Baia told her.

Neither of them spoke as they filled their plates and found an empty table near the edge of the room, where they could stand with

their backs to the wall and eye the room as they ate. Finna picked at her food, eyeing the veterans nearest her.

"How many of these do you think are looking for work?"

Baia breathed in and held it, thinking. "Has to be most of them, right? Except those on-planet between contracts and the idlers who just like to come to these things and relive the glory days."

"Perfect."

Baia chuckled. "Still no name, remember?"

"Thought I told you to take care of that?"

"Ms. Medrano?"

Baia looked past Finna to where an older man in dress greens stood. He had major's insignia on his epaulets, but that didn't jibe with Baia's memory of the man. "Captain Price?" She stepped around the table and held out her hand; she'd had to resist the hardwired urge to salute.

"I thought that was you," Price said. He was a tall man, over two meters, with gangly arms and legs that somehow projected a sense of wiry strength rather than awkwardness. "And it was major before I got out," he said, grinning.

"Well-deserved," Baia said, and meant it. She gestured to Finna. "Finna Azeem, this is one of my former instructors at the academy, Major Alden Price."

While the two shook hands, Baia struggled to get her emotions under control. Of all the people she'd expected to—or feared—meeting tonight, an instructor from Albion was not one of them.

She remembered Price as firm but fair. He'd been her instructor in second-form BattleMech tactics, and also the elective she'd taken in the theory of leadership. They hadn't been especially close, but Price fell into that group of people Baia wouldn't want to disappoint.

"So you can tell us all the bad stories, then, Major?" Finna said, grinning at Baia.

"Alden, please," he said. "I only wore this to get through the door."

"I never expected to find you on Galatea," Baia blurted. She grimaced immediately after the words came out. "I'm sorry..."

Price waved the apology away. "It's nothing," he said. "I was thinking much the same of you." He grinned ruefully at her. "You disappeared after graduation, if memory serves." He leaned in close. "One of the covert task forces, the rumor was?"

"Neither confirm nor deny," Baia said, winking.

"I guess my recommendation worked, then," Price added, straightening. He glanced between her and Finna. "And then the Brigade of Guards?"

"You seem to know a lot more about me than I do about you," Baia said. She wasn't uncomfortable, but neither was she flattered. She didn't think she'd made that much of an impression on Price at Albion, and he'd trained literally thousands of young officers.

"Some people stand out in the memory," Price said. He looked at Finna. "So. The Mercenary's Star?"

"We're forming a new mercenary unit," Finna said, a bit too loudly.

"Indeed." Price looked at Baia. "Tired of the AFFS?"

"Bad memories" was all she said.

"Indeed," he repeated. "And what is this new regiment to be called?"

"Hardly a regiment," Baia said, but Finna talked over her.

"We're still hammering out the name."

Baia steeled herself. *Don't say it don't say it don't say it*, she thought.

"An important choice," Price agreed. His patrician bearing was taking Baia back to her school days. Price's voice had always been so level, so calm, no matter whether he was lecturing or giving praise, or more often, eviscerating an unlucky cadet's answer to a tactical problem. He glanced at Baia and must have seen something in her face, because he didn't say whatever he'd intended. She saw him mentally shift gears.

"How long have you been on-world?"

"Since Friday," Finna said.

"Friday," Price repeated. "Working fast, aren't you?" He moved his hand in a small gesture that somehow encompassed the whole room. "Looking for recruits?"

"Eventually," Baia said. "For now...getting the lay of the land."

"I think you call that a recce?" Finna said, grinning.

"Indeed." Price looked as though he were going to say more, but another officer bumped into him from behind.

"Sorry," the man slurred, twisting to grasp Price's arm. He was wearing black-and-gray battledress with an empty holster and some kind of houndstooth insignia. His eyes flicked across the group. He frowned at Finna, but when he looked at Baia, his expression changed.

"Baby Medrano!" he shouted.

"That's not my name, Vincenzo." Baia frowned and crossed her arms. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Mario Vincenzo had been a form behind her at Albion, and she'd have put even money he'd have been flunked out of the academy for honor code violations before he graduated. The man was a snake.

She had been forced to have him in her cadet lance for a single semester; that had been the longest semester of her entire educational career. He was a decent enough MechWarrior, but he took orders like a child, and he had a much higher opinion of himself than anyone she'd ever met. Rumor was, only his mother's money had kept him in the academy.

"I run my own company," he said, obviously a few drinks in. He tapped the insignia on his chest. "Harry's Hellhounds."

"Who's Harry?"

"Harry's dead," Vincenzo said. He looked at Finna, ignoring Price for a moment. "Who's the Mary?"

Mary was slang for Marik, the ruling family of the Free Worlds League in the same way the Davions ruled the Federated Suns. If Finna was put out by the name, she didn't show it. She merely held out her hand. "Finna Azeem."

Vincenzo just stared at the hand.

"Charmed," Finna said, withdrawing her hand.

"You've had perhaps enough to drink, Mr. Vincenzo?" Alden Price put in. He waited until Vincenzo looked up at him—he was quite a bit taller—and then looked pointedly down at the hand Vincenzo still had clamped on his arm.

"Price," Vincenzo said, suddenly. "What the hell are you doing here?" He let go of the other man, but leaned against their table instead. "Isn't there a paper you can grade somewhere?"

"Catching up with former students, apparently," he said.

Vincenzo frowned. He looked back at Baia. "Baby..." he said, grinning, as if he hadn't heard her.

"I told you—" she started, but he talked over her.

"Heard you got the shit shot out of you on Beten Kaitos," Vincenzo said. He'd always been swarthy, but now his face was flushed with drink or stress or both. His grin was right on the edge of lurid. "Heard you ran off after, too."

Who... She clamped that thought down hard. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Ha!" He leered at the others. "She was just like this back in school. So proper. Always barking orders." When he looked back at her the luridness was gone, replaced with loathing. "I always hated that."

"It was good seeing you, Vincenzo," she lied, half turning back to their table.

"It was probably all that fancy shit you were always pulling in exercises," he went on. He looked at Price as if seeking a response, but the older man just returned his stare. "What'd you do, Baby? Send your troops out to get killed because you were scared?"

Baia bit her lip, then turned. "We're not in Albion anymore, Vincenzo. So get lost."

He rolled his eyes. "Or what, Baby?"

"We're done talking." She turned her back on him. Not even Mario Vincenzo could be too dense to read that, not in a room full of Davion officers.

"Had to get back and play with your dolls, was that it?"

Baia ground her teeth together.

"Probably what happened on Ziliang, too."

Baia spun. "What do you know about Ziliang?"

No one should've known about Ziliang. The records were sealed. Covert-ops records were always sealed. He'd have to be a field marshal to get access to those...

"Your first mission, right? Got your whole lance killed?"

"Shut up." She looked around, furious. *He couldn't know about that!*

"You probably hid." Vincenzo leered.

"Stop talking," Baia ground out. Cold sweat broke out between her shoulder blades.

"I'll bet the board of inquiry thought you were working for the Louies—"

She slapped him. Hard, open handed. It came from deep inside her, with the full force of her shoulder. Vincenzo spun away, hands flailing, and bounced off the nearby table before he fell.

"Baia," Price said, touching her shoulder, but she brushed his hand away. She stepped around him, ears roaring, eyes seeing red. In the back of her mind she heard Rollins' screaming as the Liao *Vindicator* crushed his cockpit... She'd had that nightmare as recently as a week ago.

"Shut up," she whispered.

Vincenzo turned over, back on his elbows, sputtering.

She lifted her foot and kicked him, hard, in the stomach. He doubled over on his side and vomited, yellow-clear fluid, then lay there retching. She drew her foot back again, ready to kick him so hard in the balls his kids would scream in pain.

"Medrano!" Price's voice broke through. It was command voice, just like he'd taught at the academy. "Stop!"

She blinked. Remembered where she was.

Finna was staring at her, slack-jawed. The nearer officers were staring at her, some with disapproval and some with outright pleasure. Vincenzo must've been known here.

She looked at Major Price. "Sir," she said, defaulting back to her academy mode of address. "It has been a pleasure to see you, but I have a prior engagement."

Courtesy took over. Price inclined his head. "Of course, Ms. Medrano." Both of them ignored Vincenzo retching at their feet. He dipped a hand up his sleeve and held out a small card. "I look forward to our next meeting."

She took it, then looked at Finna Azeem and jerked her head toward the door.

"Another time," she said, and walked purposefully for the door.



Outside, Finna grabbed her arm before they were four steps down the sidewalk. "What the hell was that?"

"We're not talking about it," Baia said. She was starting to tremble, from the adrenaline. She stalked a few more steps and then stopped, putting her palms on a building and trying to control her breathing.

"What was he talking about, Ziliang?" Finna asked quietly.

"I can't tell you about that," she said, still looking at the ground. She twisted her head to look Finna in the eye. "Not won't. *Can't*, okay?"

Finna held up her hands, nodding. She started rubbing them together, looking around at the others on the sidewalk. Then she chuckled.

"What?" Baia asked. She tasted metal in her throat, but she was getting the trembling under control.

"We wanted to make an impression," she said, grinning.

"Not that one," Baia said. She straightened.

"You never know."



Baia was in her office, reviewing the few serious applications she'd received, when Finna Azeem and Travis Asad knocked and came inside. She flicked the screen off and leaned back, eyebrows raised.

"Now we know," Finna said, handing her a noteputer.

Baia took the 'puter. Then she frowned and read it again. She looked up at the pair and brandished the message. "This is a joke."

"Nope."

"A duel."

"Yes."

"Is that even legal here?"

Finna snorted. "This is Galatea. Almost everything is legal here. Even if it's illegal."

"It's just like a Solaris duel," Travis put in. The young man was grinning. Baia glared at him until he stopped.

"What if I say no?"

Travis's smile died. Finna shook her head. "You can't."

"I'm the CO. I can do whatever I want."

"No, I mean you *can't*. If you decline, you send the wrong message to the market."

"The market."

"The mercenary recruit market." Finna held out her hand for the noteputer and, once Baia relinquished it, tapped until another screen came up. She proffered it back, but Baia shook her head.

"Just tell me." She indicated the flimsy chairs.

"There's a vid of you slapping him," Finna said. When Baia raised her eyebrows, Finna nodded. "It was on the nets within an hour. And commentary in all the Davion boards. Looks about seventy-thirty in your favor, too." She glanced at Travis. "Apparently a lot of people share your opinion of this guy."

Baia shook her head.

"Can you take him?" Travis asked.

Baia stared at him incredulously. "What?"

"Bookmakers have you up three-to-two," Finna put in.

"What?!"

"Local Davion office leaked a bunch of your service record," Finna admitted. "It's all over the nets." She grinned. "They're really excited about your *Rifleman*."

"Oh for—" Baia groaned. "You're saying I'm news." She frowned. "That I made the news, rather. By slapping an asshole at a party."

"Better," Finna said slyly. "You're *gossip*."

"Gossip is better," said Travis with the certainty of the innocent.

"I'll let you know," she told them. "Was their anything else?"

Both stood, but Finna waved the noteputer. "You can't let this sit too long," she warned.

"I won't." She gestured them out, then looked down at her desktop again. She leaned forward, put her elbows on the desk, and clutched at both sides of her head.

"Mario Vincenzo," she spat. "Of all the problems."

A duel. With Mario Vincenzo.

She wasn't afraid of him. She'd been in enough fights to know she could probably take him. He hadn't been that good a MechWarrior at Albion, and she had a hard time imagining he'd gotten much better in the intervening years. She had.

She'd had to learn in a tough school.

But the idea of fighting someone because she'd humiliated him... Sure, it happened every day on hundreds of worlds across the Inner Sphere, but that was other people.

She'd never in her life expected to fight a duel.

It wasn't in her background. Growing up on Friesland hadn't prepared her for people who took insults that personally.

And to do it for *publicity*, which was what Finna was proposing...

A knock sounded on her doorframe. "Finna, not the time," she said without looking up.

Someone cleared their throat. More precisely, a man did. She let go of her head and looked.

Alden Price stood in her doorway.

Baia burst to her feet. "Sir?!" She stepped around the desk. "Please, come in. Sit down."

Price did so, settling his long overcoat around his knees as he sat back and crossed one leg over the other. Baia went back around the desk and sat down, her hands clasped on the desktop.

The absurdity of it struck her, and she giggled. She hated when she giggled, but she couldn't help it.

"Yes, our roles feel reversed at the moment," Price said with a kindly grin.

"What can I do for you today, sir?" she asked.

"I've come to ask you one or two questions," he said. "Whether there are one or two has to do with your answer to the first." His words took Baia back to the academy; this was the same way he conducted holotable exercises.

"Ask."

"You will accept Mr. Vincenzo's challenge," Price said.

"That's not a question," Baia said, frowning. "And I haven't decided."

"I'm aware of what I said," Price said tightly. "You will accept the challenge. That is not in question." He brushed invisible lint off his knee, then met her stare levelly. "My question is this: Why will you accept it?"

"I haven't decided to accept it," Baia insisted.

Price raised one eyebrow.

"Fine. Hypothetically?"

"If you wish."

She spread her hands flat on her desk, fingers splayed, and stared at them, thinking. "It would have nothing to do with me, with any concept of honor or pride," she said.

"He would brand you a coward if you refuse," Price noted. There was no inflection in his words, just the tone of a professor teasing out a student's full range of thinking.

"So what? I know I'm not a coward. All the people I respect know I'm not a coward. And the people who would listen to someone like Mario Vincenzo..." She laughed bitterly. "Who cares what morons think?"

"Go on," Price said, after a moment.

"And I don't want him dead. He's a waste of flesh, yes, but if I spent my time trying to correct the flaws in natural selection, well... Life's too short."

"You did attack him."

"He provoked me."

"Still..."

Baia raised her eyes. "Mr. Price. You know how I was trained. If I wanted him dead, he'd be dead."

Price smiled faintly. "I do, indeed." He nodded a bit. "Go on."

"We've eliminated revenge and pride," she said. "Plus homicidal mania." She picked up her right hand and looked at her nails. "Finna and Travis think I should do it. Because it's become gossip."

"Travis...?"

"Asad. Former VTOL door gunner. Wants to be a recruiter. He's a good kid."

"Ah."

"Apparently I've become big news in the Davion expat community," Baia said. When Price said nothing, she shrugged. "It could be good publicity."

"Publicity."

"If it bleeds it leads'?"

"So you won't fight for honor or revenge, but you will fight for ratings?"

Baia held up a finger. "I'll fight for both of those things, honor or revenge. But not petty revenge on a nuisance like Mario Vincenzo."

"So for press?"

Baia frowned. "For *reputation*."

Price said nothing.

"I came to Galatea to found a mercenary unit," she went on. "Because soldiering is all I know, and I'm good at it." She paused, to see if Price would interject, but he sat motionless. "Because I know no other way to make a difference," she went on. "If beating the crap out of Mario Vincenzo gets me the platform I need to recruit the soldiers I need to do that, then I guess he becomes just one more mission."

"Is that why you're here?" Price asked, softly. "To make a difference?"

"Yes."

"You weren't making a difference in the AFFS?" He opened his mouth, closed it, then glanced around the room. "I know where you went after the academy, Baia. I know who recruited you. Persons at that level do not choose missions without importance."

Baia swallowed. "I did some good work there," she said. "And I did more with the Brigade of Guards." She licked her lips. "But I'm done doing the work of people who would put idiots like Mario Vincenzo in positions of power."

"You expect that level of control in your contracts?" Price asked. The skepticism in his voice was patent.

"No," she admitted. "But at least as a mercenary I can control what contracts I take." She clasped her suddenly sweaty palms and clenched them together.

"So you will accept the challenge," Price said again.

This time she nodded without hesitation. "I will." She laughed. "It still feels absurd. But it could work. And it's my choice." She smiled widely. "And that's why I'm here, right? To make my own choices?"

"It appears so," Price said. He brushed his knee off again and settled his hands in his lap.

"Did I earn your second question?" Baia asked.

"You did."

When he didn't immediately ask, she chuckled. "And?"

"Might you have a place for an old, retired instructor in your new mercenary unit?"

Baia rocked back in her chair. "Sir—"

But Price held up a hand. "If you accept, I shall shortly be calling *you* that."

"You were my instructor!" She blinked, both hands spreading on the desk. "You have me by both rank and date of rank!"

"I am retired," Price said, "so rank is immaterial." He smiled kindly. "And as for having been your instructor...you were an excellent student,

Baia. And your record since has been, as you said, impeccable. Every teacher desires to see their student succeed, and you have done so." He looked down. "I have been a soldier and a teacher, true. But I think you will need both, with a new regiment."

"I've got one 'Mech and a half dozen support staff," Baia protested. "I'm a long way from a regiment."

"Then I will double your strength in 'Mechs," Price said. "My *Wolverine* is dusty, but functional. And it's mine." A hint of pride entered his voice. "I took it in battle when I was your age."

Baia stared at him. "Why?"

"Because I also would like to make a difference," Price said. "I thought I was—knew I was—as a teacher, yes. But as one ages, one wishes to put a more direct mark on things."

Baia shook her head. "I need to ask the others... We're not formally organized yet, you see." Price inclined his head. "But I don't think they'll object." She stood and held out her hand. "Welcome to the regiment, XO!"

Price stood and accepted her hand. "If the XO may make a suggestion?"

Baia chuckled. "Always."

"Two, actually. First, we need an NCO, a senior one. Combat branch. Someone who can bring us good enlisted recruits. A tanker or infantryman."

"Agreed."

Price smiled. "Second..." He trailed off.

"Spit it out, XO," Baia said, in her best command voice.

"This regiment needs a name."



A few minutes later, Bala tried not to laugh when Travis Asad took out his wallet and slid a few C-bills to Finna Azeem while the rest of the crew introduced themselves to Alden Price.

"I knew it right away," Finna said, stepping closer and pocketing her money.

"Surprised Travis took your bet."

"He's learning, but he's young," Finna said, grinning.

"About that challenge?"

"Yes?"

"We're going say yes."

Finna grinned even wider. "I know." Then she pitched her voice. "Travis? The other bet. Pay up."

The young man groaned and reached for his wallet.

Baia snorted and stared at Finna.

"What?" the recruiter asked. "I gave him really good odds!"



Baia stood in the 'Mech hangar, looking up at her *Rifleman* in its gantry framework. It was still painted in the black-and-white nighttime slash camouflage it had worn on Beten Kaitos. All that was missing were the Davion sunburst and the unit identifiers for her company of the Brigade of Guards.

Faseeha Sefu stepped closer. Her green hair hung to cover her ear. Baia realized the last time she'd piloted this 'Mech in combat was the same day Faseeha had gotten her ear blown off.

"She's ready," Sefu said.

"Nothing broken in transit? She was cold for a long while."

"We did a full systems test." Sefu grinned at her from beneath her bangs. "Norma said you'd ask, so we anticipated."

"She was right."

Baia let the silence hang for a moment, looking at the new unit insignia painted on the *Rifleman*'s chest. "What's the word on the name?"

Sefu chuckled. "It sounds fancy enough to work," she said. "But most of us are sticking with the Bye-Bye Brigade."

Baia shook her head. She'd let Alden Price—Leftenant Price, as he was now, in the unit's table of organization and equipment, its TO&E—lead that conversation after she'd decided his suggestion was best.

The black-and-gray scheme was broken by a brilliant white upthrust sword—the same sword from the Davion national ensign—set on a rectangular gray background. It was eye-catching, even on a 'Mech as distinctive as a *Rifleman*.

As of this morning, they were the Legion of the White Sword.

Captain Baia Medrano, commanding. That's what it said in the records of the Mercenary Review Board.

That's who had accepted the challenge of Leftenant Mario Vincenzo of Harry's Hellhounds. Turned out Harry really was dead, but the Hellhounds hadn't worked out who was in charge, so there was no captain. Baia had laughed when she learned that.

"We had some press earlier, getting pictures," Sefu said. "Mr. Price said it was okay."

"Pictures?"

Sefu grinned. "No one's ever seen a 'Mech like this one before."

Baia looked up at her machine with pride. "That's because she's the only one." She let herself revel in that for a second, then glanced at the technician. "You gave them the prepared story?"

"Yep. Leftover prototype from the four-delta testing, sold for scrap."

"Good."

According to its registration, Baia's 'Mech was an RFL-4DA1 *Rifleman*. Four-deltas were popular AFFS *Rifleman* refits, variants off the base chassis with Donal PPCs replacing the usual autocannons, now that the AFFS had authorized the refit program. Those machines

were heat-hogs, with both PPCs and large lasers and too few heat sinks and armor to use them well.

Baia's -4DA1 carried only the two PPCs and no other weapons. It traded the leftover mass from the large lasers for more armor and almost enough heat sinks to count for armor all by itself. AFFS testers had decided the danger of an opponent getting in too close for the PPCs to be easily effective was too great to sacrifice the large lasers. Which was how the four-delta had won out.

It would take a wizard with PPCs to make the four-delta-alpha-one work.

Baia grinned as she remembered her test drive.

She was that wizard.

Surprising opponents who expected thin armor and autocannons had worked out very well for her. The fact that Gray Noton had used the same sense of surprise and mystery on Solaris had only fueled the confusion.

"Any word from Vincenzo or the Hellhounds?"

"Not that I've heard."

Baia sighed. "Then I better get started." She touched Sefu on the shoulder, nodded, and walked toward the gantry stairs to ascend the eleven meters to the *Rifleman's* cockpit.



The duel was being fought in the Hangdorf Proving Grounds, a desolate stretch of desert outside of Galaport. Baia marched her *Rifleman* out the ten or so kilometers it was, getting used to the 'Mechs' sway again. The controls were worn and familiar.

She was half afraid there'd be a clutch of spectators, as if this were a Solaris fight, but there wasn't. There were only the seconds, Alden Price for her and an unnamed Hellhound for Vincenzo. His *Grasshopper* was painted flat-black, with a grinning skull on the cockpit assembly.

Price's *Wolverine* was still painted olive drab with no markings; there hadn't been time to repaint his machine as well. But his transponder had pinged *Legion* when she checked. It thrilled her a little. The others had been right: a name made it feel more real.

A ComStar adept had agreed to act as referee. He stood outside a ground car, holding a handset keyed to the common frequency they'd agree on before coming out here.

"Captain Medrano, Leftenant Vincenzo, please, at this last remove, can you not resolve your differences without violence?" The adept's voice was bored; he knew they weren't going to back down. It was all a form, but form had function behind it. A legal duel had a structure.

"No" was all Baia said.

"Bitch is going down," Vincenzo chimed in. "You hear that, Baby Doll? You're going down."

"Very well," the adept said. He touched a control on his noteputer. A nav point pinged into Baia's display. "Take your positions."

She started the *Rifleman* walking; Vincenzo's starting point was about 700 meters away from hers.

A chirp, for a discreet channel. "You're ready, Captain?" Price asked.

Baia clenched and relaxed her fingers. Her cooling vest flushed fresh coolant against her skin, making her shiver and raising goosebumps on her arms and thighs. "No problem."

"I will see you on the other side," Price said, and toggled the channel closed. His *Wolverine* moved to stand next to the Hellhound *Assassin* that had come with Vincenzo.

Baia reached her nav before Vincenzo did his. She spent the time watching how his *Grasshopper* moved. You could tell a lot about how good a MechWarrior someone was by how their 'Mech moved. The powerful DI computer did most of the work keeping the 'Mech upright and moving, but it fed off inputs from the bulky neurohelmet to help balance the massive, spinning gyro that kept a 'Mech upright.

Vincenzo's machine moved as if a machine were driving; no languid grace or little tics of movement that would show he was in tune with his machine. That was a point in her favor.

Baia swallowed. She needed points.

Her *Rifleman* surrendered ten tons to the *Grasshopper*, and those tons were critical. *Grasshoppers* had a bevy of medium lasers for close-in work, and the jump jets and maneuverability necessary to get in close to use them. Her PPCs were powerful weapons, but at less than ninety meters they suffered. Baia was used to compensating, but if she let the larger, heavier 'Mech get in close, she'd be giving Vincenzo an advantage.

Vincenzo reached his nav and turned.

A tone sounded. "When you hear the order 'commence,' you may move and fire," the ComStar adept sent.

A few heartbeats passed in silence.

"Commence."

Vincenzo stalked forward steadily, immediately. Baia brought the *Rifleman*'s namesake arms up, drawing a bead on his 'Mech, but he was still outside of normal PPC range. The range counter on her HUD began tracking down. She guided the *Rifleman* forward as well. She didn't want Vincenzo to feel like she was running away.

An alarm blared at her as tracking systems painted her 'Mech; the *Grasshopper*'s head disappeared in missile exhaust as Vincenzo triggered a quintet of long-range missiles at her. The LRMs angled up and then down, but all five missed, exploding harmlessly in puffs of black smoke in the sand off to her left.

"First miss is yours," she muttered.

The range counter fell; 600 meters now. Baia adjusted her aim, holding her speed steady. Her Donals were accurate at around 540

meters; she knew how to tease more range out of them than that, but she didn't think Vincenzo would rate that much effort.

His 'Mech was more powerful, yes.

But she was fighting the man, too.

The man was a toad.

Five hundred and forty meters. Vincenzo fired another brace of missiles but Baia's crosshairs burned gold with target lock. She squeezed both triggers.

Blue-white artificial lighting connected the two 'Mechs for an infinitesimal moment, and then the *Grasshopper* was rocking back and falling to the ground. Three of the LRMs Vincenzo had fired pocked the armor over her *Rifleman's* left shin, but that was inconsequential compared to the damage she'd done him.

PPCs were the hellish weapons that made 'Mechs like the *Warhammer* and *Marauder* so feared on the battlefield; MechWarriors told stories of people just backing off and letting the massive, three-PPC-armed *Awesome* just take what it wanted. A particle projection cannon accelerated a gout of ions to near light speed; the damage was both energetic and kinetic.

They hit like a ton of bricks.

As she'd just reminded Mario Vincenzo. He'd been strutting in, overconfident, still projecting his image of her onto reality. He wasn't afraid of Baby Doll Medrano, as he called her.

Baia's grin would have looked familiar to a shark.

"Bye-bye," she whispered. She couldn't help it.

PPCs weren't without cost, though. Baia gasped for air. The refit that had given her the PPCs had also given her the heat sinks to use them efficiently, but it took almost the whole recharge cycle for the *Rifleman's* heat sinks to get the heat debt under control. Those were long seconds, every time. Her cockpit was like an oven.

Vincenzo, to his credit, brought his *Grasshopper* quickly, if clumsily, to its feet. He tripped on his first attempt, but caught the 70-ton 'Mech on its elbow. He crushed the armor plates there, but rose to his feet on the second attempt. Still, it took him precious time.

Baia's PPC pinged ready.

She hit him again. Both barrels. And both hit. Again.

Her instructors at Albion had told her she had a natural flair for 'Mech gunnery, and a succession of dedicated senior NCOs had nurtured her talents ever since. She'd become a wizard with PPCs due to her reliance on the weapons. By the time she got to Beten Kaitos, everyone in her company knew the lieutenant hit what she aimed at.

The paired bolts blew the *Grasshopper* off balance, but Vincenzo brought the 'Mech back into battery almost immediately. For a heartbeat he seemed to stand there, glaring at her. Then the 'Mech leaned into a sprint right at her.

"Yeah," Baia gasped in the heat in her cockpit, "that's about all you can do, isn't it?"

She reversed the *Rifleman's* throttle, starting it walking backward, to hold the range open. There wasn't much else she could do either.

While her PPCs recharged, Baia took a moment to eyeball the ground behind her, making sure there weren't any serious obstacles she needed to know about. Then she put her attention back on the *Grasshopper*. In a run, Vincenzo was half again as fast as she was backward, so the range was coming down, passing 500 meters already.

Baia frowned. At 450, Vincenzo could add his centerline large laser to the mix. She didn't have the armor to let him just peck at her with that gun.

But she'd already scored serious hits. Four almost-unanswered PPC strikes, which had cost him about two and half tons of armor protection. The *Rifleman's* computer told her she'd weakened his right leg and all of his front torso facings; one or two more strikes in any of those areas were likely to penetrate.

A harsh ruby beam flickered past her, breaking her out of her reverie. The range counter was down to 440 meters.

The Donals pinged ready again.

Baia fired.

'Mech combat for her was simple, especially when it was one-on-one like this. Her 'Mech only had so many options: run away, advance, or in both cases, swing the big PPC hammers. Victory for her came from staying alive long enough for her PPCs to eat through her opponent's armor.

So far, she always had.

Vincenzo, for all he was a toad and a lackluster MechWarrior, was still an Albion graduate. He'd earned the same spurs she had. And he'd lived this long as a mercenary. He knew if he got in close, it became a very different match.

"Come on," Baia grumbled. The *Rifleman's* Garret D2j targeting and tracking system painted increased damage on both the *Grasshopper's* arms.

Four hundred meters.

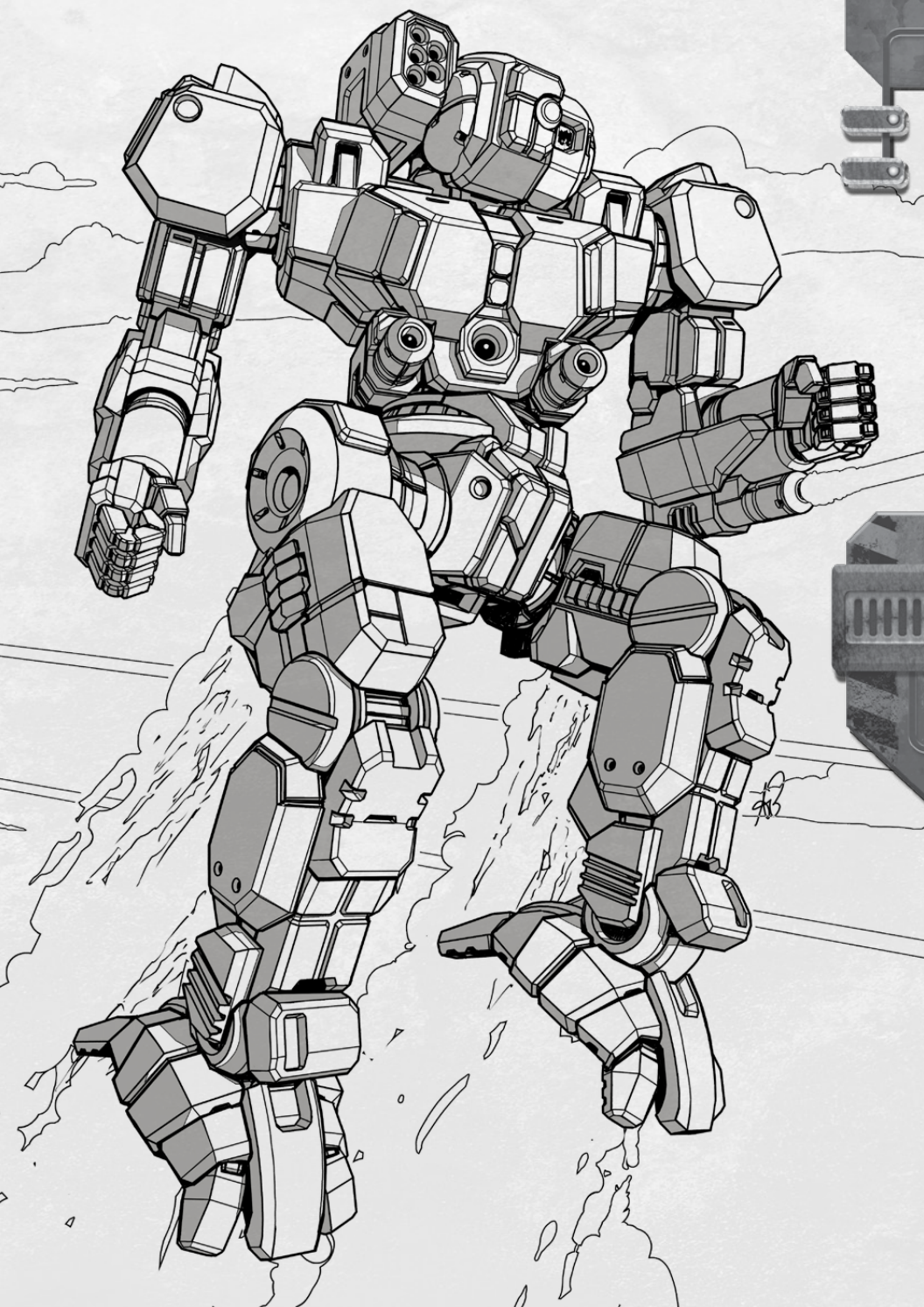
Vincenzo's large laser took her center in the chest a moment later, obliterating the Legion insignia there. The ravenous beam ate at the protection over the *Rifleman's* heart, but failed to penetrate. The companion missiles exploded between the *Rifleman's* clawed feet.

The air around her 'Mech shimmered with heat distortion as her heat sinks labored to draw down the waste heat, but she ignored it. Baia was hot, terribly hot, but she knew she could trust her 'Mech's heat systems. There'd been a lot of battles to earn each other's trust.

Under 300 meters, Vincenzo could add four more lasers to the mix.

Baia *really* didn't want that to happen.

The PPCs pinged. She fired. Then, "Damn it!"



One of her shots missed; she'd rushed it. The shot that struck true couldn't be better, taking the *Grasshopper* full in the chest, but it wasn't enough to slow the charging 'Mech down. Vincenzo's return large-laser shot burned at the protection along her right-arm PPC. The recharge indicator for that weapon flickered, but kept climbing.

"Here I come, Baby Doll!" Vincenzo shouted on the open frequency.

"Here I am, shit-heel," Baia snapped back.

Three hundred meters.

Baia gritted her teeth, sweaty fingers inside gloves already half clenched on her triggers. Willing the PPCs to recharge even a half instant faster.

Vincenzo fired, five lasers in all. The big centerline weapon chewed at the armor over her right thigh, but only two of the mediums hit. Both struck her in the left torso, eating at the armor there, but it held, barely.

The PPCs pinged. Baia adjusted her aim, but a moment before she fired the *Grasshopper* leaped into the air, its Leviathan Lifter jump jets throwing it off the ground and toward her. She jerked the gunnery controls back, bringing the *Rifleman*'s arm-barrels up. Her lips skinned back from her teeth in a sneer.

"This is a *Rifleman*, dipshit." The Garret D2j was built to attack aircraft; a slow-moving 'Mech in the air was no problem. And at this range, Baia Medrano's aim was almost preternatural.

Both Donals fired together, and both beams converged on the *Grasshopper*'s right leg, blasting what remained of its armor protection away. The 'Mech yawed in flight, struggling even as it came down for a heavy landing. The right leg lurched on the loose sand when it hit; sparks and flame shot from its ankle actuators.

But it came down barely 180 meters away.

Hobbled or not, the *Grasshopper* was still dangerous. All five lasers flashed again, and all five hit. Alarms blared as the large laser stripped the last of the armor from her leg, while the mediums peeled back almost all the protection across her chest. There wasn't even enough armor remaining for the techs to repaint the Legion insignia.

The *Grasshopper* straightened and limped forward. The head-mounted LRM launcher flipped its covers open and blasted five missiles right into the armor over her left arm. Baia clutched at her controls, gasping in the heat, but kept the *Rifleman* on its feet.

Vincenzo staggered forward another ninety meters, half dragging his lame foot behind him.

"You're dead, bitch," he growled on the comm.

The *Grasshopper* leaped into the air again. Blue-white jets washed across the *Rifleman*'s head and shoulders as the 70-ton machine barely missed her before landing behind her. The *Rifleman*'s arm-barrels tracked it the whole way, up and up to straight up—and then down to face the rear.

Baia snarled. So many people forgot a *Rifleman* could flip its arms over.

Gray Noton showed them in so many fights.

They never learned.

The *Grasshopper* came down hard, struggling with its damaged foot. Vincenzo hit her with three of his four medium lasers. The weapons cut through the *Rifleman*'s thin rear torso armor and popped two of her precious heat sinks. One of the beams nicked her fusion engine shielding. The heat in her cockpit exploded.

The PPCs fired, both of them, at the same moment.

One of them grazed the *Grasshopper*'s head assembly, snarling the armor there but failing to penetrate the cockpit. Mario Vincenzo lived, though in that moment Baia Medrano wished he hadn't.

The second PPC dug deep into the denuded protection across the *Grasshopper*'s chest, breaking through and flinging charged ions into the 'Mech's interior workings.

Some of those ions found the reloads for his LRM 5. Those unfired missiles deflagrated as the PPC fire warmed the fuel past the point of combustion. The *Grasshopper*'s entire chest exploded with runaway chains of explosions.

Most 'Mechs have their ejection system set to blow the MechWarrior free in case of ammunition explosion. It's a safety feature, and over the centuries it had saved the life of uncounted MechWarriors. Vincenzo's system triggered his ejection system.

Right into the snarled armor which her PPC had melted into place, explosive bolts or no.

Gasping in the heat, arms shaking from fear and adrenalin, Baia Medrano watched the pilotless wreck of a 'Mech fall.



Baia still tasted metal when she swallowed, but she sat in her office dutifully reading the records of the flood of applicants the Legion had earned since her duel two days earlier. She looked up at a tap on the doorframe.

"Captain?" Alden Price asked.

"Come in. Sit," she told him. "What's the word from Faseeha and Norma?"

"We'll break even," Price said. "What we took from the wreck of Vincenzo's *Grasshopper* will cover what it takes to get your *Rifleman* back into shape." He shrugged. "Ms. Johnson said there may be enough left over for a good dinner."

He toggled his noteputer live, checked something, and then sniffed. "I am also to tell you the astech hiring program is getting off the ground, and that they've already had a dozen applications for the 'Mech technician positions Ms. Azeem posted.

Baia grinned. "And the Hellhounds? Any bad blood?"

The gossip around her and Vincenzo had shifted sharply after her victory; rumors of how terrible a human Vincenzo had been, and rumor after rumor about how well he fit in with Harry's Hellhounds, Harry, deceased. She was concerned that would blow back on the Legion. A lot of people would see her as the cause of it.

She saw it that way.

"They have been in touch," Price said, tugging at his earlobe. "I wouldn't call it bad blood, however." When she turned her palms up, he grinned. "They've applied to join us. En masse."

Baia blinked. "You're joking."

Price shook his head. "Apparently they're not interested in finding a new Harry."

Baia sat back in her chair. "Do we take them?"

"Some," Price said. "We can pick and choose—the ball is entirely in our court. There is probably some wheat among the chaff." He sniffed. "The rest we blacklist."

Baia thought about it, but couldn't argue. "Fair enough. See to it." She grinned as she said it. It was nice to have an XO to dump this sort of thing on.

"One other thing," Price said, a moment later. "ComStar forwarded a query. An employer has requested a first meeting."

"An employer." She frowned, then her eyes widened. "A contract?"

"So it would seem."

"Wow." She never in a million years expected someone to come for them in their first contract. "Any idea what it is?"

"The message was sparse of details." He tapped his knee. "Shall we take the meeting?"

"No harm in a meeting, right?" Baia asked. When he nodded, she returned the gesture. "Set it up, would you?"

"Of course." He stood and stepped to the door. "One last thing."

"Yes?"

"Sergeant Major Kim is here for her interview," Price said with a knowing smile. "She brought her records, of course. I think she would be a splendid choice for a senior NCO."

"I knew her cousin," Baia said distractedly.

"I'll send her in," Price said. He stepped out, but Baia called him back.

"The contract. Do we know who the sponsor is?"

"We do."

Baia waited. "And?"

Price looked her dead in the eye. "Duke Hassid Ricol."



UM-R90 SUBURBANMECH

Mass: 30 tons

Chassis: Phoenix UM-R Special

Power Plant: DAV 90

Cruising Speed: 32 kph

Maximum Speed: 54 kph

Jump Jets: Phoenix J55

Jump Capacity: 90 meters

Armor: Phoenix Cuirass

Armament:

1 Hammerstorm HEC Firestorm Particle Projection Cannon

2 Hammerstorm Mjolnir-5 Medium Lasers

1 Hammerstorm Mjolnir-3 Small Laser

Manufacturer: Phoenix Heavy Industries

Primary Factory: Ashkum

Communications System: Hammerstorm Huginn Mk VIII

Targeting and Tracking System: Hammerstorm Muninn Mk VI

The *SuburbanMech* has been described as a “overcaffeinated *UrbanMech*.” Faster than its progenitor, this ‘Mech packs a heavy punch, and its all-energy weapons loadout keeps it in the fight longer and without the worry of an ammunition explosion. Originally part of a shadow war between Hanse Davion and Michael Hasek-Davion, the *SuburbanMech* has come into its own and can make an enemy pay a heavy price in an urban setting.

Capabilities

There are two *SuburbanMech* types: those purpose-built by Phoenix Heavy industries (PHI) and Hammerstorm Electronics Corporation (HEC), and *UrbanMechs* refitted to *SuburbanMech* standards. Functionally, both are the same, with only differences being in weapons and electronic systems used.

SuburbanMechs look like *UrbanMechs* by design. With a top speed twenty kilometers per hour better than the *UrbanMech*, the *SuburbanMech* can keep up with assault ‘Mechs. The extra jumping distance gives the *SuburbanMech* added range and the ability to strike from an unexpected direction.

With the Federated Suns’ focus on autocannons, the Firestorm PPC is an unusual main weapon choice, but it has a longer range than an Emperor-B autocannon, and no ammo concerns allow the MechWarrior to stay in the fight longer. The twin Mjolnir-5s and single Mjolnir-3 are designed to cover the dead space inside the Firestorm’s minimum range, though firing all the weapons at once will overwhelm the model’s thirteen heat sinks.

Deployment

In 3012, Hanse Davion assumed command of the Capellan March military command and discovered the march's supply system was a mess. He noticed that units loyal to Duke Michael Hasek-Davion were well-supplied, while other AFFS units were not. Suspicious, Hanse came up with a plan to distract Hasek-Davion. The first step was to call for an *UrbanMech* replacement.

The winning design was submitted by PHI and HEC, both newcomers to BattleMech construction. Based on the *UrbanMech*, the new model was christened the *SuburbanMech*. What remained under wraps was that both PHI and HEC had engineered the 'Mech with the help of Hanse's staff.

Hasek-Davion, seeing Hanse's actions as a threat to him, ordered the *SuburbanMech* project sabotaged. His agents caused engineered delays in material shipments and generated unrest among PHI's workers. The delays reduced PHI's *SuburbanMech* output to a trickle.

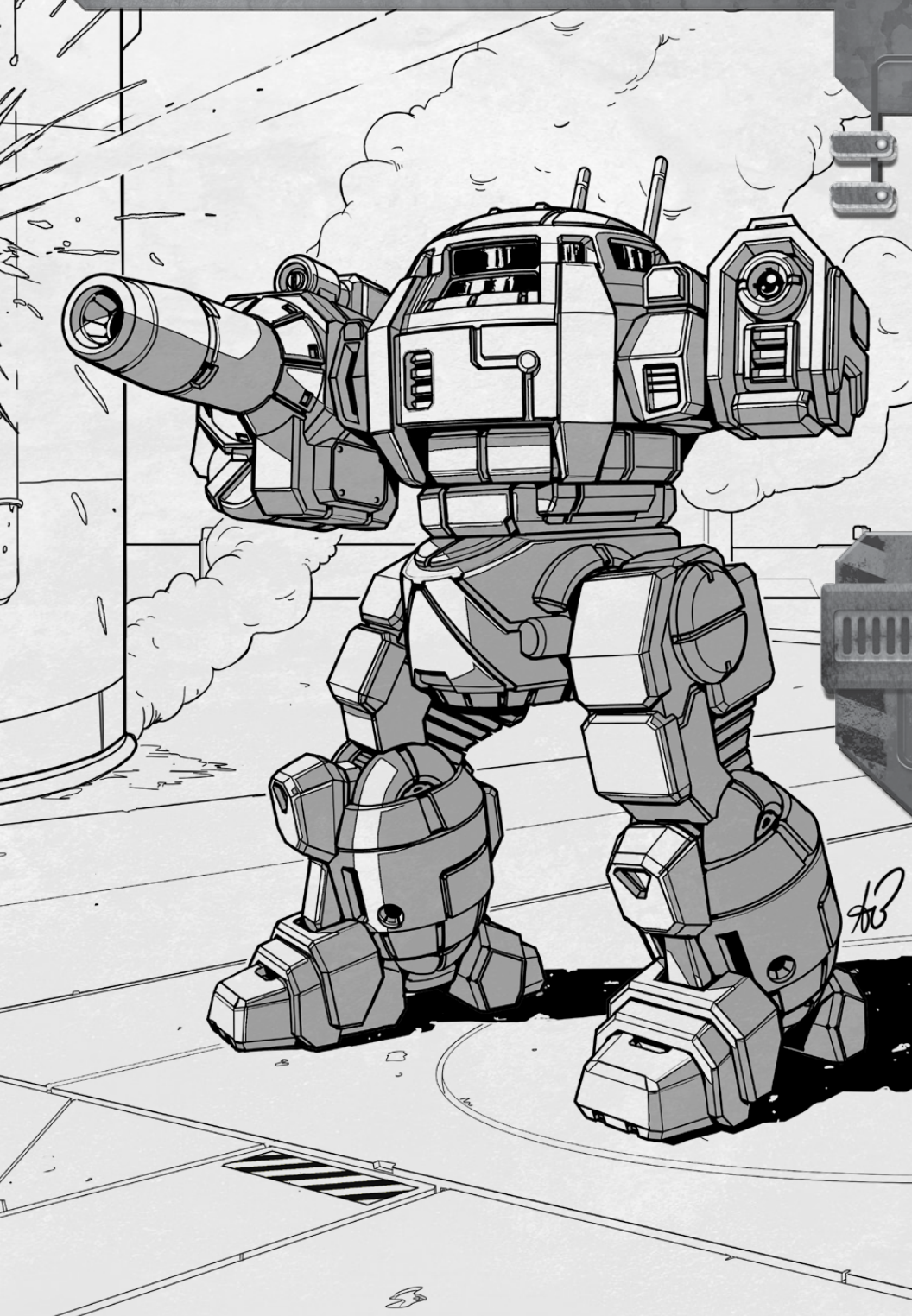
Unknown to Hasek-Davion, both MIIO and DMI were monitoring the campaign. While Hanse had enough to implicate Hasek-Davion, he couldn't prove the duke's complicity. Instead, Hanse used the distraction to quietly unravel the supply problems and put procedures in place to keep it from happening again. He also started leaving items out of the duke's military reports.

Finally, Hasek-Davion had the *SuburbanMech*'s plans stolen, and passed them to several corporations in the Capellan March. Instead of building new 'Mechs, these corporations took existing *UrbanMechs* and refitted them as *SuburbanMechs*. This allowed them to produce the 'Mech cheaper and faster than PHI could, and ironically, spread the model throughout the march.

An example of the *SuburbanMech*'s combat abilities was a pirate raid on Stein's Folly in 3022. While the bulk of the militia was pulled away from the capital, pirates slipped into the city, intending to rob the planetary bank. Facing off against them was two *UrbanMechs*, two *SuburbanMechs*, and militia infantry. The defenders gave ground slowly, the *SuburbanMechs* using their extra mobility to cover their slower comrades. When both *UrbanMechs* pulled back to reload, the *SuburbanMechs* held the line, using their mobility to leap on top of buildings and snipe at the pirates. They slowed the enemy advance long enough for a militia lance, along with the returning *UrbanMechs*, to drive the enemy back. The pirates retreated three blocks short of their objective.

Variants

Before the Clan Invasion, the UM-R100 was a proposed upgrade. This variant was twice as fast as the original *UrbanMech*, had more armor, a Hammerstorm II extended-range PPC, and double heat sinks. The high cost and the Clan Invasion shelved the project before it could reach production.



Notable 'Mechs and MechWarriors

Sergeants Gina and Gregory Macadam: These fraternal twins held the line on Stein's Folly. Their combat teamwork is flawless, each easily anticipating the other's actions. Gina is the more outgoing, while Gregory is quiet and reserved. They will often talk to each other in a language only they can understand.

Type: **UM-R90 SuburbanMech**

Technology Base: Inner Sphere

Tonnage: 30

Battle Value: 773

Role: Ambusher

Equipment

		Mass
Internal Structure:	Standard	3
Engine:	90	3
Walking MP:	3	
Running MP:	5	
Jumping MP:	3	
Heat Sinks:	13	3
Gyro:		1
Cockpit:		3
Armor Factor:	96	6
	<i>Internal Structure</i>	<i>Armor Value</i>
Head	3	9
Center Torso	10	11
Center Torso (rear)		8
R/L Torso	7	8
R/L Torso (rear)		4
R/L Arm	5	10
R/L Leg	7	12

Weapons

and Ammo	Location	Critical	Tonnage
PPC	RA	3	7
Medium Laser (2)	LT	2	2
Small Laser	LA	1	.5
Jump Jets	CT	1	.5
Jump Jets	RT	1	.5
Jump Jets	LT	1	.5

Notes: Design Quirks: Narrow/Low Profile, Extended Torso Twist

Download the free
record sheet for this 'Mech at:

bg.battletech.com/shrapnel/



Type: **UM-R100 SuburbanMech**

Technology Base: Inner Sphere

Tonnage: 30

Battle Value: 915

Role: Sniper

Equipment

		Mass
Internal Structure:	Standard	3
Engine:	120	4
Walking MP:	4	
Running MP:	6	
Jumping MP:	4	
Heat Sinks:	10 (20)	0
Gyro:		2
Cockpit:		3
Armor Factor:	104	6.5
	<i>Internal Structure</i>	<i>Armor Value</i>
Head	3	9
Center Torso	10	11
Center Torso (rear)		8
R/L Torso	7	10
R/L Torso (rear)		4
R/L Arm	5	10
R/L Leg	7	14

Weapons

and Ammo	Location	Critical	Tonnage
ER PPC	RA	3	7
Medium Lasers (2)	LT	2	2
Small Laser	LA	1	.5
Jump Jets	CT	2	1
Jump Jet	RT	1	.5
Jump Jet	LT	1	.5

Notes: Design Quirks: Narrow/Low Profile, Extended Torso Twist

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INVERTED

GILES GAMMAGE

OUTSIDE JEFFERSON CITY

FREEDOM VI

TERRAN ALLIANCE/OUTER REACHES REBELLION (CONTESTED)

30 JUNE 2236

Everything was inverted.

The world was upside down. The ground was up, the sky was down. He was sitting on his head. Head and neck at an odd angle, jammed against the crumpled roof of the armored car, which had become the floor. A harness kept him hanging in the seat. Gravity, at least, was still playing by the rules.

The windscreen was frosted with cracks, webbing outward from a number of holes punched clean through it.

"That must have hurt." He nodded toward the window and nudged the driver, also hanging upside down by his restraints. The driver's body wobbled sideways under the elbowing, but his eyes remain fixed blankly on the broken glass, and his face was waterfalled in black, dried blood. There was a decent-sized pool of it directly beneath the man's head.

"Yeah," the first man said to himself. "Definitely hurt."

He tried the door and was unsurprised when it remained obstinately closed. Luckily, someone had thoughtfully blown all the glass out of the side window. All he had to do was release his harness and—*Ow, shit, yeah, okay, forgot about gravity... That maybe wasn't the best idea, but at least I'm out of the chair*—and crawl out the resulting hole.

This took a while, as he kept getting snagged on jagged fragments of glass jutting from the window rim. Finally, scratched and bloodied yet triumphant, he managed to crawl free. To celebrate his freedom, he was noisily sick down the side of the armored car.

He propped his back against the car's side and looked about, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Greasy black smoke billowed across a divided four-lane highway. Through the haze, he saw he was in the middle of a massacre. His upside-down armored car lay near the forward edge of a kill zone packed with dozens of burning and blackened vehicles, everything from carbonized buses sitting on melted tires to sleek little hovercars still burning merrily to tankers, cargo haulers, flatbed trailers, even tiny four-wheeled ATVs. Bodies, too. Charcoal stick-figures inside the vehicles, bullet-ridden corpses outside.

"What a mess," he said to the dead driver. The driver stared directly ahead. "Struck speechless, I see. I'm as dumbfounded as you are, my friend."

"Hello?" A voice sounded through the smoke.

He wondered if he should answer. It might be another survivor, even a rescuer. On the other hand, seeing as this was a massacre, it might just as well be someone checking to make sure there were no survivors.

"Anybody? Hello?"

Without any help, it was altogether possible he would die here. He had no idea where he was, no idea if there was any food or water in any of the vehicles, no idea how bad his own injuries were. A quick death or a slow one. Not much of a choice.

"Hello," he tried to say, but it came out more as a strangled, choking cough. He tried again and got as far as a slurred "Hellur!"

Footsteps approached through the smoke. A single pair, which was cause for hope. The ambushers would probably have left more than one person behind if they wanted to execute survivors.

The footsteps and voice became a shadow, growing larger, gaining definition, revealing itself to be a woman, short-haired, grim-faced, wearing hiking boots, canvas pants and a flannel shirt, her features hidden behind a bandanna tied over her mouth and nose. She cradled a shotgun in her hands, a double-barreled, break-action civilian model, but more than enough firepower to splatter what was left of him across the asphalt.

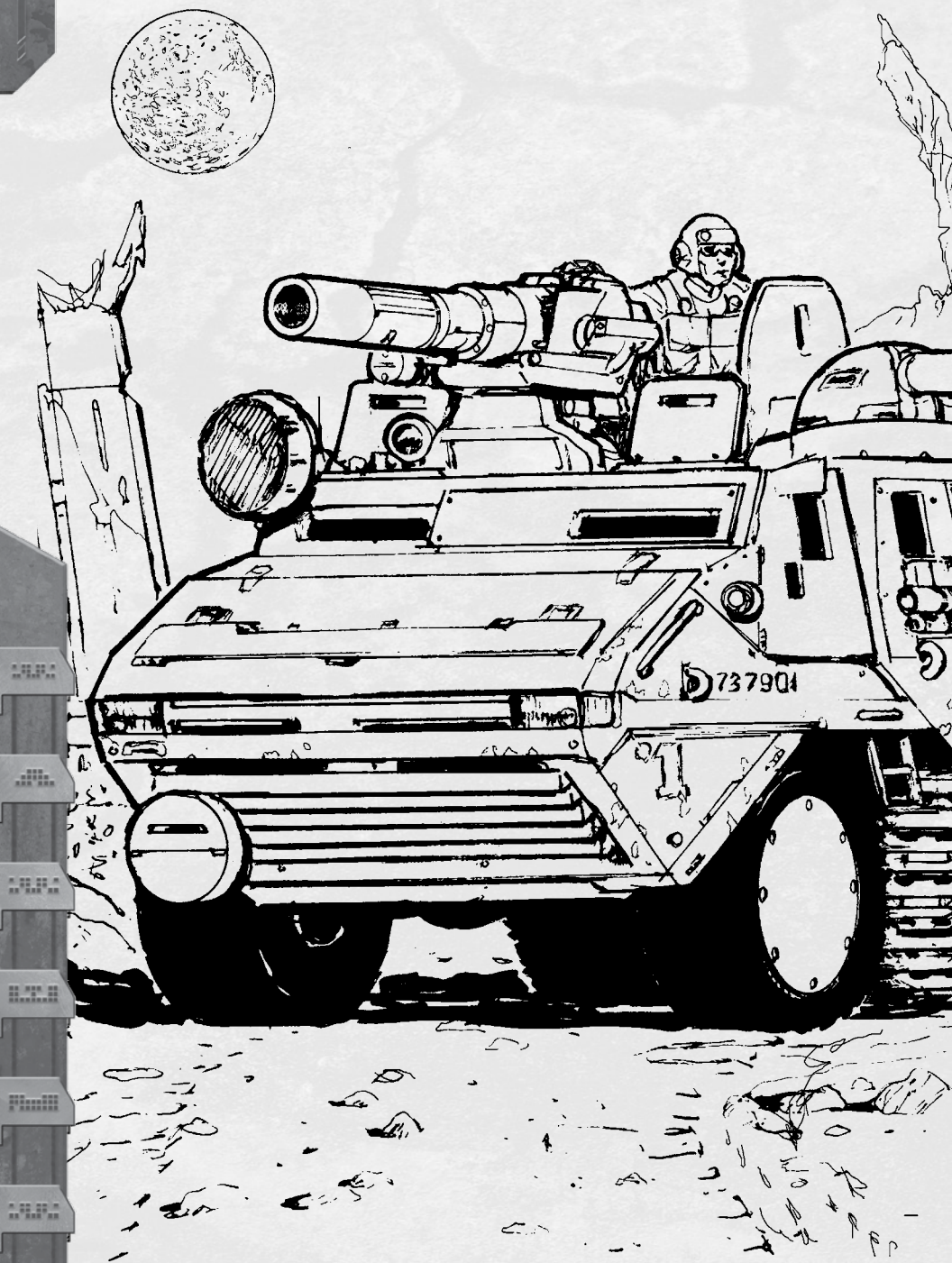
He tried to smile and wave nonthreateningly, but didn't have the strength to raise his hand higher than a few centimeters off the ground. His sickly smile probably wasn't that reassuring, either, come to think of it.

The woman stopped a few paces away, shotgun pointed just below his outstretched feet. "Which side?"

"Side?"

"Side. Alliance? Freedom? You know, *side*."

He frowned. The woman was talking gibberish. "No, I don't know. I have no idea what you're talking about."



She stared at him in disbelief. Looked pointedly around at the burning vehicles, then back at him. "If you will excuse my Colonial French, horseshit. Explain all this, then."

He tried to shrug, managed a slight shoulder twitch. "I don't remember."

"How convenient." She squatted, peering into his eyes. "Let's start with your name."

He shook his head, wished he hadn't. Felt he was about to be sick again. "No, don't remember that, either." Then leaned sideways and really did throw up again. His stomach was empty now, so it was mostly just yellowish bile.

She watched, impassive, and made no move to help. "You're wearing a uniform."

"Well spotted," he said when his stomach had finally given up, more out of exhaustion than anything else. He was indeed wearing a uniform, she had him dead to rights there. It was a kind of splattered green and olive hip-length smock. He ran his hands over the shoulders, breast, and cuffs, but could find no unit, rank, or other insignia. "I'm as clueless as you, believe me. I was like this when I found me."

She didn't smile, just chewed her lip thoughtfully. "Could be PTA," she muttered.

"Is that good?"

"No."

"Ah. Didn't think so."

She cocked her head and continued to study him like the pinned specimen of some exotic yet sadly extinct species of insect.

"Look," he said, "you obviously don't trust me, and from the state of this place, can't say I blame you. Just leave me some water and let's call it even, shall we?"

She blew out a long breath, then reached a decision. Slung her shotgun over a shoulder, moved forward, pulled him to his feet, got one of his arms around her shoulder, supported him under the opposite arm. "Lucky for you, I'm a doctor."

"Yeah, that shotgun looks very medicinal."

"My jeep is this way," she said, half dragging him along as he tried to remember how to walk. "Come on, let's go. We only came out when we saw the smoke and wanted to look for survivors. Looks like you're it. Better get out of here in case whoever did this comes back for a second look."

"Fair enough," he said, not entirely liking the sound of "we."
"After you."

"Flo. Flo Vannier."

"Flow? Is that another quiz? Airflow? Something to do with fluid dynamics?"

"It's my name."

"Ah. A pleasure. Or would be, under other circumstances. You'll forgive me if I don't reciprocate. I seem to have misplaced my name."

"Call you X for now."

"Sounds good." X chuckled weakly. "I'll go with the Flo. Ha ha. Ow."

The jeep turned out to be a compact rectangle of metal with oversized rubber tires and an open top. A bearded, well-muscled man in mirrored sunglasses and a backward cap waited by the front fender. The man had a large duffel bag slung over one shoulder, and the barrels of various guns poked out of the top. He nodded to the woman.

"Who's he?"

"X, this is Hank Dupont, Hank, this is X," the woman said. "Says he can't remember his name."

X waved weakly.

"Convenient," said Hank.

"That's what I said. Could be amnesia. Either way, he's the only survivor."

"That uniform is Fourth Para-Cav."

"Don't I know it." Flo led X to the jeep, untangled herself from his arm and manhandled him, unresisting, into the rear seat, then propped him more or less vertical. "Doesn't mean anything, though. President Dupont's boys've been taking uniforms off the Para-Cav for weeks, and he's got no insignia. Could be a rebel. Could be a deserter."

"Could be." Hank shrugged. "Could be they took off their flashes to give their bosses plausible deniability—make sure the media don't catch them killing civilians. Could be trouble. Could leave him here."

"Hey, that's what I said," said X, sliding slowly but gently sideways, until his torso lay horizontal on the jeep's rear seats.

"I'm a *doctor*, Hank," Flo said, getting behind the wheel. "At the very least, as human beings, we owe it to him, and ourselves, to get him out of here and make sure he's okay. Beyond that, we'll let the council decide."

Hank nodded, grudgingly, and vaulted into the passenger seat without bothering to open the door. The engine coughed, caught, and the jeep climbed an embankment bordering the highway, scooted down the far side, and found a narrow dirt path through fields of burnt-orange grass, nearly as high as the jeep was.

The long grass cast zebra shadows across the road, creating a pattern of rapid-fire sun-shadow-sun-shadow, like someone was trying to send him a message in Morse code using venetian blinds. The sun was high but orange-red, and looked the wrong size. That probably meant he wasn't from this planet. X figured he'd keep that realization to himself.

Over the growl of the engine and the rattle of pebbles and dirt under the wheels, X heard distant thunder that rolled and echoed across the plain. Funny, there were no clouds. A memory tickled. No, not thunder. "Hey, that's artillery," he said, to nobody in particular.

Flo said nothing, but Hank grunted, twisted in his seat to look back at X. "We're about fifty klicks from Jefferson City," he said. "Jefferson City, you know? Ring any bells?"

"Maybe, but I think that's just tinnitus."

"The Terran Alliance Fourth Para-Cavalry Division has the whole city encircled and under siege. Rumor is they've been killing anyone who tries to escape, militia or civilian." He tilted his sunglasses, looked at X over the top of the rims. "But you wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

The jeep bumped and bounced. X was glad his stomach was already empty. He watched himself in the reflection in Hank's sunglasses, a battered, blood-smeared, and dirt-stained figure, and figured Hank wasn't really expecting an answer. He just met Hank's gaze until the other man got tired of this contest, muttered something under his breath, and turned around in his seat again.

The gargantuan grass thinned and faltered, eventually replaced with regimented ranks of human-high corn, still the same dark autumn colors as the grass, broken here and there by a farmstead. Tough gray-stone buildings, with narrow windows and surrounded by low walls. Those gave way to plainer houses, closer together, some made of cheap prefab plastic, others more handcrafted affairs of the same gray stone as the farms, or else rich ocher wood. A few faces stared at the jeep going by, then hurriedly disappeared inside again.

Flo parked in front of a plain, squarish lump of a building. Five other vehicles were parked in front—a pair of small civilian ground cars, a larger luxury model, a vehicle painted in white and blue with POLICE printed down the side, and finally a pickup truck nearly as massive as X's armored car had been.

"This is our stop, Mystery Man," said Hank, clambering down with his bag of assorted weaponry. "Come on, the rest of the council will want to cross-examine you."

"Ah, jeez, I'd love to, really I would—" X began to protest but Flo ignored him and opened the rear door, hauled X upright and dragged him from the back seat. He stood, swaying, and surprised himself by staying upright. Flo began to propel him towards the door. "—well okay you talked me into it, maybe just a quick meet 'n' greet, make nice with the locals as it were."

The inside of the building was as utilitarian as the outside. The walls were plain, white, and unadorned. In the main room, evidently the town council's meeting room, there was a semicircle of five padded chairs facing several rows of simple steel-piping and plastic benches.

Four of the chairs were occupied. A gray-haired man with a short beard sat in the first; then a thin, twitchy man with an equally thin mustache; a powerfully built woman bedecked in rings, necklaces, and large earrings; and finally a squarish, stern-faced man in a dark blue quasi-military uniform.

Hank walked past the benches, nodded to the other four, dumped his bag with a clatter by the empty chair, and casually slumped into it.

Flo led X to the front row of benches, eased him into a sitting position, and sat down beside him.

"Well?" asked the man in uniform, ice-blue eyes shifting from Hank to X and back again.

"Well, Terry, it was pretty grim," said Hank. "Looks like the Alliance ambushed a civilian refugee convoy, massacred everyone. This guy was the only survivor."

"You looted those guns?" The officer pointed at the bag at Hank's feet.

Hank shrugged. "Finders keepers."

"I'll take those."

"Just try it." Hank grinned. His smile was very white, his teeth very straight, and his eyes contained not even the tiniest fraction of genuine warmth.

"Whatever is happening in Jefferson, we still have law and order in this town—"

"Enough, Terry," the woman cut in. She smiled apologetically at X. "I'm sorry, this must be a terrible time for you. Some introductions first. We are the town councilors. My name is Kelly Saint-Yves. I run the hardware store, as well as our branch of the Freedom Bank. Grandpa there is Julian Marchant, our general goods dealer. Next to him is Malcolm Leroy, our schoolteacher. On the other side is Sheriff Terry Kaplan, and you've already met Flo Vannier and Hank Dupont. Please understand, this is the first time any of the fighting has come so close. We aren't here to blame you or judge you, but we are concerned. We just want to understand what happened."

X looked around the faces of the councilors. Hank seemed bored, knowing the non-answer that was coming; Terry and Malcolm, the teacher, suspicious and hostile; Kelly and Julian, cautiously neutral.

X shrugged helplessly. "Wish I could tell you," he said. "All I know is I woke up in the middle of the road feeling like a rhino-titan had kicked me in the skull."

Kelly frowned, looked at Flo.

"He could be telling the truth," the doctor said. "In extreme cases, head trauma *can* result in amnesia. Hard to say without a scan, and the only place with the proper equipment is Jefferson City."

Hank laughed at that, dry and humorless.

"We should hold him in the station," said Terry. "If he's a deserter, the Alliance is going to come looking for him."

"And if and when they show up, you're just going to hand him over?" Hank sneered.

"This man is clearly a combatant. I cannot and will not have such a dangerous individual loose in my county. He must be interned until the proper authorities—"

"Oh, *what* proper authorities?" Kelly sighed, exasperated. Clearly this was a discussion these five had had many times before. "The vigilantes who unilaterally declared independence, or the soldiers who came to enforce unity at the point of the gun? Terry, there is no government anymore, no higher authority. We're it. We're all there is. No outside force is going to come in and solve our problems for us."

"You have another suggestion, Kelly?" Malcolm asked. His voice was quiet, barely above a whisper. "He could be a war criminal for all we know. A thief, rapist, or murderer."

Kelly did not answer immediately. She ran jeweled fingers through her blond hair. Under the cover of the gesture, X caught her exchanging quick glances with Hank. Hank gave a tiny nod. Kelly lowered her hand and said: "Innocent until proven guilty. I think this poor man has suffered enough."

"We're all guilty of something." Malcolm shrugged.

"We should let him stay," Kelly continued, louder now, "perhaps under the care of Dr. Vannier, until his memory recovers or he is well enough to travel, and then he can make his own decision."

"Agreed," Hank said immediately.

Malcolm was frowning, Terry shaking his head. Even Vannier sputtered, "Hey, wait now, just a—"

"What do you say, Julian?" Malcolm asked.

Julian glanced irritably at Malcolm, waved a dismissive hand. "I'm on my third wife, I've got five kids, each one worse'n the last, and I got enough to occupy me without worrying about some no-name stranger from nowhere," he said. "Vannier wants to look after him, that's fine by me. I couldn't care less. I'm not on any side."

"No side is the same as the Terran Alliance's side," Hank said quietly. "Let's be clear folks, the Alliance will come, one day or another. And we'll have to pick a side, or one'll get picked for us."

"Is that what the guns are for?" Terry snapped. "You're planning on raising an army?"

Hank smiled, arms folded across his wide chest, and shrugged.

"Idiot. You'll get us all killed."

"I might just make sure some of us stay alive," Hank shot back, got to his feet, collecting the duffel bag. "Anyway, the council's decided, three to two. He stays." He ambled over to X, patted him on the shoulder. "Come on, I'll walk you to the doc's place."

From the corner of his eye, X saw Vannier shooting Hank looks of pure, unadulterated venom. X smiled weakly. "Lady, gentlemen, it was nice to almost be here." He wobbled to his feet and followed Hank back out the doors, Vannier trailing behind them.

It was cool outside, the red disk of the system's star just touching the horizon, bleeding its pastel shades into the sky. From the surrounding cornfields came the creaking cries of insects. X breathed deeply and,

for an instant, almost relaxed. Then came the rolling echo of artillery fire. Distant flashes flickered across the horizon.

"Been like that for two weeks, nonstop," Hank said, catching X's gaze. "Strange thing is, I'm almost used to it by now. Hardly remember what a quiet night is like."

"Why'd you stick up for me?" X asked. "I got the impression you didn't trust me."

"Oh, anything to stick it to TK, that damn Alliance ass-kisser," Hank said good-naturedly. He patted the duffel bag. "He's right. I *am* planning on raising a militia. Times are changing. The game is changing. Doesn't matter if Dupont or the Alliance win. If a platoon comes through here and wants everything we have, we'll starve just the same, whether they're Alliance or not. There's only one law now, one way we keep what's ours. Could be I could use a guy who knows how to handle a gun."

Hank started walking up the road, not checking to see if the other two were following. Just assuming. X glanced at Flo. She rolled her eyes and tapped the side of her temple, then started after Hank. X mentally shrugged, jogged to catch up. He was starting to wonder if he wasn't the only one suffering from brain damage in this town.

"You trust me to handle a gun?" he asked Hank.

Hank turned to look at him, pushed up his sunglasses, and winked, not slowing down. "We'll see about that." He stopped in front of a house that was, to X's eyes, no different from any of the others on the street, about three blocks from the town hall. "Here we are, the infirmary."

"It's my house, Hank," Vannier said. "You just volunteered *my* house."

"What I said." Hank nodded, unconcerned. "Think it over, Mystery Man. Might be able to make it worth your while to stay here. Better than whatever is waiting for you back there, at any rate."

"We don't even know if I remember how to shoot a gun," X pointed out.

Hank reached into the bag, pulled out a compact, matte-black bullpup assault rifle and held it up. "Know what this is? Don't think, just say it."

"Terran Arms XM30 carbine," X said.

Hank nodded, returned the rifle, fished around and came out with an automatic pistol with a tactical light under the barrel and a molded pistol grip. "Think you could fire this?"

"No," X said. "That's a PM231 Terran Alliance officer's pistol. The grip is keyed to the owner's handprint. Nobody else can use it."

Hank cocked an eyebrow. "Your memory seems fine to me."

"Episodic memory is different from semantic," Vannier cut in. "Trauma can affect one without harming the others. Now, if you two boys have finished bonding over bits of murderous hardware?" She tipped her head meaningfully toward her front door.

"Of course." Hank smiled and tossed the pistol toward X, who caught it reflexively in midair. "If it doesn't fire, there's no harm in letting you keep it then. A little souvenir, to help you think about what I said." With a wave, he turned and headed back toward the town hall.

"Manipulative little..." Vannier muttered, rummaging in her pockets for her key fob. She pressed the small square of plastic against the front door's reader, and it swung open. She reached out and held the frame. "Come on, let's have a look at you, for all the good it'll do."

X stuffed the pistol into one of his smock's pockets, bowed, and made an *after-you* gesture. Vannier didn't move. Sighing, he went in first.

The first floor was evidently her reception, waiting, and examining room rolled into one. She parked him on a stool, shone lights in his eyes, got him to follow her finger about his field of vision, read an eye chart, repeat lists of numbers and random words.

Finally, she sat back and shook her head. "Well, I'd say you probably have a mild concussion, but it's hardly the worst I've ever seen," she said. "You really don't remember anything?"

"Sorry," X said. "Besides, maybe it's for the best. Whatever decisions the old me made led to me lying half-dead in the middle of a massacre. Maybe a fresh start is just what I need."

She nodded once, not entirely convinced. "Could be psychological, rather than physical trauma," she conceded. "Still, it'd be sad if all you remembered was how to kill people."

"Does seem to be my most marketable skill, though."

"More's the pity," she sighed, standing. "Hate to say it, but I think Kelly and Hank are right. Whoever wins, they'll win because they were stronger, tougher, more ruthless. And then where will we all be? 'Might makes right' isn't a genie that'll quietly go back into its bottle. Won't matter who you are, only that you're the one holding the gun."

She sighed again and was silent for a long time, and X knew better than to try to fill the silence. Finally, she waved up the stairs.

"Anyway, you're in the spare room. I'll show you. I sleep light, with the shotgun under my bed, and believe in shooting first, asking questions later, so stay the hell out of my room. Got it?"

He saluted. "Yes, sir."

She gave him an odd look. "That's the Alliance salute," she said. Then led him up the stairs.

The room was more of a shrine. On the walls were 2D images of Flo and an older man, with a thick mustache and gray hair brushed straight back. There were clothes in the closet, big enough to fit him, all in the hard-wearing denim, canvas, and flannel that seemed to pass for traditional tribal garb in this town. Flo closed the door without a word, and he heard her footsteps beat away down the hall.

X stripped down to an undershirt and shorts, folded the uniform, slid it under the bed. Out of sight, out of mind. He looked at the pistol

Hank had given him, feeling the deadly weight of it. Put it on the bedside table within easy reach. Thought about moving a dresser in front of the door, decided he was being paranoid. Lay on the bed, unable to sleep, staring at nothing, imagining concentric circles of stars into being out of the shadows on the ceiling. Listening to the man-made thunder.

He should feel lucky, X figured. There weren't many people who were given a chance at a clean slate. It was a tempting thought—stay here, forget whatever he'd been before. Only, he wasn't sure what else he *could* be, other than a soldier. Starting over wasn't much of an attraction if you had to start from nothing.

As his eyelids began to droop, he heard the new sound. Like great, steady wingbeats. Faint at first, barely louder than the crash and boom of the artillery, but growing slowly louder.

X rolled out of bed, pressed himself against the wall by the window and leaned out slightly, just enough to get a good look at the sky. A pair of dark dots were moving against the pre-dawn gray. The deep throbbing sound was much clearer now, distinctly the sound of VTOL rotors chopping the air. Lights were going on in some of the other houses, people tumbling out of bed.

X grabbed a shirt (too small) from the closet, yanked on a pair of jeans (too long, he rolled up the cuffs). While he was bending down, the bedroom door flew open. X looked across the room to the bedside table and the gun—too far, too far. It might as well be on Mars. He tensed. Then breathed a sigh of relief when Flo's head stuck around the edge of the door.

She looked at his clothes, her mouth twisted, like she'd tasted something unpleasant. "Stay here," she barked. "Stay out of sight." The door slammed shut again.

"Yeah, good idea," X quietly told the door. "I'll just. Ah. Stay here then. Great. Fine." He retrieved the pistol and crouched down on the far side of the bed, pistol aimed at the doorknob. Then remembered it had a palm-coded grip, and he wouldn't be able to fire it anyway. "Fine. Great."

The throbbing changed to a distinct mechanical chatter, rising to crescendo as the two VTOLs passed almost directly overhead, softened a little, and held steady. They'd be deploying their squads now. X could picture it in his mind. Men leaping, descending on jump pack thrusters. A bristling hedgehog of weaponry pointed outwards, then bursting apart as they raced to seize objectives.

There was shouting outside. Confusion. Bellowed orders, muffled by the walls and windows. No gunshots though, which was a hopeful sign. A hiss-crackle of a PA system being switched on. A staticky voice started talking: *"All citizens evacuate immediately to the town hall. Repeat, all citizens evacuate immediately to the town hall."*

In his hiding spot wedged behind the bed, X's eyes narrowed as he listened. Despite the static, he recognized that voice: the sheriff, Terry Kaplan. Well, that explained the sudden appearance of the cavalry.

More voices now, from below. Flo, angry, tense, snarling, and one, no, two others, flat but unyielding, repeating the same few words over and over. X closed his eyes and rested his forehead against the cool barrel of the gun. The woman was going to get herself killed. Should he let her? Maybe he was looking at this the wrong way though. He'd been worried about starting over from the bottom, a soldier with no useful skills. But if war came to the town, that changed things.

And he was standing, moving, easing the door gently open, padding down the landing, crouching and peering down at the hallway downstairs. Flo, her back to him, shotgun held crosswise across her chest, blocking the hallway. Two men beyond her, one in the doorway, the other just outside. Both of them big fans of black—black boots paired with black pants, black shirts, topped with a black helmet and black face masks covering their noses and mouths. XM30s, like the one Hank had shown him, held at the ready.

"I'm not going anywhere," Flo was saying.

"Put down the firearm, ma'am. Put it down now."

X flicked the pistol's laser sight on. From the top of the stairs, he aimed at the first soldier's forehead. Put a little red dot right between his eyes.

"Lady said she's not leaving," X said.

The two men started, looked up. The one he was targeted blinked in the glare of the laser sight. Flo shot X a quick look over her shoulder, unreadable, alloyed rage and relief, then quickly snapped her attention back.

"Put your guns on the ground, slowly, raise your hands, get on your knees," X ordered.

The first soldier started to lower his gun. The second snorted. "Idiot, it's an officer's pistol, he can't shoot," he said. And brought his carbine up.

X squeezed the trigger on instinct. The pistol bucked in his hands, once, twice. Thunderclaps of sound, deafeningly loud in the narrow hallway. The soldier, clutching feebly at his throat, falling backward. The other was reversing his grip on his carbine, then he was kicked back, blown out the doorway, chest blossoming in red petals. Flo stood with her shotgun leveled. She cracked it open and let two casings fall out.

X stared at the gun in his hand. Huh. Maybe the rebels hot-wired it, bypassed the security lock. Or—no, best not to think about it. He went cautiously down the steps, taking them one at a time, keeping his pistol trained between the two corpses.

Flo suddenly dropped her shotgun, let it clatter to the ground, knelt by the first man. She tore off her shirt, tried to use it to stanch the

blood flowing from his throat. X reached the bottom of the stairs and laid a hand on her shoulder. Angrily she shrugged it off.

"Your damn fault," she hissed. "I told you to stay put."

"We have to go," X said. "More will be coming and they aren't going to be picky about who is or isn't to blame here."

There was a roar from the back of the house. X looked up, saw a shadow beyond the back door. Threw himself sideways, slamming a shoulder into Flo, carrying her with him out of the hallway and into the examining room.

The back door splintered and blew off its hinges, spraying the hallway with a hail of glass shards and dagger-bladed wood. From the haze outside someone started firing a carbine, a long rolling burst. Bullets screamed over their heads, punched holes in the walls, showered them in powdered plaster, blew out the windows.

A pause. X started crawling, angling for a side window. Another burst. Medicine cabinets shattered, spilling avalanches of pills, syringes, swabs, and small bottles that smashed open on the floor.

Then the crack of a single shot, and the carbine fell silent.

X lay still for a long moment. He motioned for Flo to stay where she was, then he rose to a crouch, pistol held before him, and edged back toward the hallway.

Hank Dupont stood there, a hunting rifle in his hands, a black-clad figure at his feet. The horizon behind him was lit from end to end in flame, great sheets of smoke rolling across the plains.

"Figured they'd come for you," Dupont said grimly. "Flo here? She okay? I'm going to roast Kaplan on a spit when I catch him."

"What's happening?"

"Para-Cav. They've set fire to the fields, herded everyone into the town hall except for a couple of us outlying families. Now they're going house to house." He waved a beefy arm. "We'll rally the other families. Figure a way to get our folks back."

After a microsecond of hesitation, X nodded. Looked like his choice had been made for him. "Bring this guy." He pointed at the body by the back door. He snatched up the dead man's carbine, slung it over his shoulder, then grabbed his shoulders as Hank picked up the feet. "Flo?"

She stood in the shattered doorway, shaking her head. "The town hall, you said? Then my place is there."

"They'll kill you, Flo," Hank warned.

"No, they won't. They'll be after you, not me. If the whole town is there, then my place is with them. Maybe I can stop this from getting any worse."

"Flo—" Hank began, but she turned, ignoring him, disappearing back into her home. "Mule," he muttered.

The cornfields grew up to the bottom of Flo's garden, and the two men hauled the fallen soldier among the stalks. It was slow going,

crouching among the head-high corn, dropping their load and throwing themselves flat twice when rotor blades rippled overhead. Despite the rising sun it was actually getting darker, the smoke from the fires in the fields thicker now, carrying an odd kind of popcorn scent that made X's empty stomach rumble.

"There a reason we're carting this dead weight with us?" Hank asked as they dropped the body, squatted again in the field, wiping away sweat.

"Uniform, and this." X rolled the man over. The soldier had what looked like a rectangular metal backpack fitted to the back of his torso armor plate. Four nozzles jutted from it at varying angles. "Jump pack. Help me, will you?"

Hank gave him a long look, then slowly moved forward to ease the corpse out of its armor and the jump pack. "You still pretending you don't remember anything about any of this?"

"Are you still pretending this isn't exactly what you wanted?" X did not look up. He got the pack off, then quickly pulled the man's helmet and mask off, stripped off his shirt, finally the trousers, and started fitting them over his own clothes. "What is it between you and Kaplan?"

"Family. History. Does it matter?"

"Suppose not."

"You have a plan?"

"How many in your militia?"

"About a dozen."

"Gather your men then and take position around the town hall, but stay under cover and don't shoot until I make a move," X explained. "I'll jump onto the roof, where this uniform buys me enough time to take out any guards they have stationed there. Your boys open fire and pin down anybody on guard outside while I pick them off from above."

"What happens if they start shooting the folks inside?"

X let the question sit for a moment before answering: "Well, then they die, Hank."

"Are you crazy? There must be two, three hundred people inside, including Flo and Kelly. If there's a slaughter, it'll be your damn fault."

X cocked an eyebrow. "Come on, you wanted a fight that would put you in charge of this town. Did you really think you could do it without anybody getting hurt?"

Hank mumbled something unintelligible, ran a hand through his beard. "All right," he said at last, started to get up, then paused. "What's in it for you?"

"Same as you, Hank," X said. "Moving up in the world. I'm a soldier. If this community is at war, that means I get to be in charge. And I get the feeling you folks are going to be at war for a long, long time."

Hank gave him a slightly haunted look, shook his head and then stumbled away, carelessly knocking cornstalks aside as he went. X watched him go, lips pursed. Well, if Hank gave him any trouble

later, there'd be ways of dealing with him, ways the two of them were legitimizing right this moment.

He checked his weapons—he ejected the carbine's magazine, slapped a fresh one home, tucked the officer's pistol in a hip holster. The dead soldier had also carried a one-shot rocket launcher, strapped to the side of the jump pack. X patted it affectionately, then headed back through the cornfield to the back of Flo's house.

X fired a short burst of the jump pack, enough to lift him up to the roof. He crawled to the top and peered over. There were two guards on the roof of the town hall, also with jump packs. A VTOL parked in the field outside, the other would be out patrolling. Two soldiers guarded the VTOL, while another four stood by the front doors. Eight, plus the three at Flo's house made eleven. There had been two VTOLs, that meant two squads of seven, so there would be three more inside the building. No sign of Kaplan either, which meant he was probably inside as well. Well, better hope they weren't feeling too bloodthirsty, or this would get very messy.

His first bounce carried him to the side of the VTOL. The guards looked up, frowned. One touched the side of their helmet, probably trying to radio him. X touched down lightly, knees flexed to absorb the impact, nodded to the two guards in a friendly way. Casually, he unslung the black metal tube from the side of his jump pack—a Bumblebee one-shot thermobaric rocket launcher. And then pumped its fuel-air warhead into the open side of the VTOL.

The explosion tore apart the inside of the VTOL in a sudden maelstrom of fire, blowing out every window, hurling meter-sized blades of shrapnel in every direction, flattening the two guards. X was already well away, arcing high into the air again, coming down over the roof, where the two sentries were now staring in amazement at the blazing column of fire shooting into the sky from the VTOL. X shot the first one while he was still in the air, the second as soon as his feet touched down.

Gunfire erupted from the buildings around the town hall, from the windows of homes, from behind parked vehicles and hedges. Bright flashes of light sparked in the early light. Despite their shock, the four soldiers outside responded quickly, returning disciplined fire, slowly pulling back toward the doors.

X didn't let them get there. He positioned himself on the edge of the roof, with a clear shot at their backs. He fired, felt the carbine kick back against his shoulder, watched one target go down, then another, before they realized what was happening. One turned, raising their gun, then fell back, their face a red mask. The other scrambled for the safety of the hall.

They'd probably try to sortie out the rear, catch the militia by surprise. X jogged to the opposite side of the roof, crouched, and waited. Sure enough, a door beneath his feet swung open and a dark

figure dashed out. X let the soldier get a few strides, then put a burst into their back, sending them sprawling forward.

"Drop your weapon or she dies."

X froze. Slowly turned his head and saw Kaplan standing on the roof. He had a murderous-looking knife pressed to Flo's throat, using her as a human shield. Kaplan's face was lacerated, like he'd been scratched by a cat with five claws.

Slowly, X took his hand from the carbine trigger, held up his hand to show it was empty, let the gun tip up and then fall to the roof. There was still gunfire from all around, and screaming now, the wounded, those trapped inside the hall below them, chaos.

"The pistol too," Kaplan barked. "Put it on the ground, kick it over here."

X complied. It skidded and clattered across the rooftop, coming to a stop just short of Kaplan's feet.

Kaplan looked down, gauging, then released his hold on Flo and shoved her forward, stumbling, directly between them. Kaplan used the moment to pounce on the pistol, and brought it up, laser sight painting a bright red dot on X's chest.

"This," Kaplan snarled, "is your damn fault."

"So people keep telling me."

Kaplan squeezed the trigger. Flo cried, rolled, tried to get out of the line of fire. The gun clicked. A red light winked on the side. Kaplan squeezed again, and again, faster, more desperately. The red light blinked so fast it was almost solid.

Almost leisurely, X bent down and retrieved his carbine from where it lay. "Officer's pistol," he explained to Kaplan. "Only works for the owner. Unlike this carbine, which works for anyone. See?" X fired a burst, knocking the sheriff off his feet.

Kaplan was trying to crawl away on his back, centimeter by agonizing centimeter, when X walked up to the sheriff, picked up the discarded pistol and shot him once through the head. X lowered the gun with a dismissive *tch*. "Shouldn't have called them in, Kaplan."

"It wasn't him," said Flo. "It was Malcolm. Malcolm Leroy. The teacher. Heard him say it. Kaplan just went along with the Paras when they showed, just because—because he was Kaplan. Law. Order."

X sniffed and made a little upside-down smile, the way people do when mildly put out, the corners of his mouth turning down, lower lip stuck out a little. "Ah, well. Sorry about that, K," he told the corpse.

"You psychopath."

"You okay?"

"No," she said, huddled with her knees against her chest, staring at Kaplan's inert form. "Julian's dead, they shot him. Two of his sons, too." Her eyes slowly tracked up to X's face. "I heard you say only the owner of that pistol could fire it. Who *are* you?"

“That’s the wrong question. You said so yourself.” He chuckled. “*It doesn’t matter*. Alliance, rebel, none of it matters. It’s a new day, Flo, and there’s no going back to who we used to be. This—” he held up the pistol and wagged it “—this is the only thing that matters anymore.”

X left her there, shivering and alone.

He found the door to the stairwell, and headed down, down, down into the darkness, whistling as he went.





ADVICE FROM A SOCIAL GENERAL: HOW TO PARTY

KEN' HORNER

—Excerpt from *The Young Lyran's Guide for Military Professionals*,
by Countess Astrid von Stubenbach, 3151

While you may have heard the timeless maxim that “information is ammunition,” you should be aware of an older one: “It’s not what you know, but *who* you know.” And nowhere is that more true than in the Lyran Commonwealth Armed Forces (LCAF). Even the greatest of warriors, an Alexander, a Patton or an Allard-Liao, is helpless in the face of the enemy if they do not have allies. Our forces need food, ammunition, replacement parts, even replacement soldiers, things we must rely upon the Quartermaster Corps for. In addition, promotions, transfers, and deployments are all reliant on someone outside our control. There are various forms of networking and relationship building, but in today’s missive, I will enlighten you on how to party.

Make no mistake, parties are not for your enjoyment, not if you wish to truly rise in the ranks of the LCAF. These are opportunities to get to know the movers and shakers of the military and those who associate with them, something that is as true for a local soiree as for a New Year’s ball on Tharkad. To excel, one must know which parties to attend, how to prepare, what to do when you are there, and finally how to properly exit.

This isn’t college, this is your career. Not every party is worth attending, and occasionally you will have a scheduling conflict to deal with. As with the battlefield, reconnaissance is vital. Never immediately accept an invitation unless it is from someone who would be capable of waking up the Archon at any time. Instead, be gracious and defer to checking your obligations. Then begin the recon. Contact your associates who would be in the same circles, but do so in an oblique manner; don’t let on that you’ve been invited but rather “heard a rumor.”



Find out where it will be, what the dress code is, and most importantly, who else will be there. Know who your friends and foes are and what your objectives are. Ensure that someone worth knowing will be there, either someone new or a chance to build on an existing relationship. Make sure you will have friends there to assist you should a moment turn awkward, or you need someone to run interference for you.

Once you have decided to attend a party, it is time to prepare. First, choose an outfit based on the venue and the dress code (if there is one). I've seen a few aspiring socialites' careers take a rough turn when they didn't realize the spring party would be outside in the garden. Being forced to hop from heat source to heat source or to cover up that carefully selected outfit with a heavy coat limits one's opportunities and allows others to control the flow of the party and your fate. Insulating, heating, or cooling undergarments are an essential layer of protection when foraying out of the temperature-controlled ballrooms that are often commonplace. Be aware that even indoor gatherings can be uncomfortable when held at a locale that has not been updated in the past few centuries.

Your selected outfit should accomplish two things: conform to the standards of the event and make you stand out in a positive manner. FuRrOr makes some wonderful dresses and suits, but perhaps the latest styles from the Magistracy might be a tad bit risqué for an old-money gathering on Gallery. Gunter Sachs, Jaipurpose, and Kobayashi are generally the top-of-the-line choices in the Commonwealth, but a Tiana Showers or Grace-Temple can provide an intriguing look without screaming "foreign." Be sure to skip the casual brands, such as Beta 2.0 or Drezzin: casual is for hanging out with your friends, not advancing your career. Of course, there is the dreaded option of a dress uniform. Unless it is an official LCAF event or you are a bona fide war hero, don't wear your dress uniform. You might have had it altered a bit to fit you better, but it still isn't going to help you the way a custom-made or tailored outfit will. As always, spend some of your recon time to find out what the host is wearing, and make sure you don't wear the same thing, clash, or embarrass them.

When arriving, make an entrance but not a spectacle. Some may think that "fashionably late" is the standard, but they are usually *unfashionably* late instead. Don't be the first there, but don't give everyone a huge head start over you either. Heed the cautionary tale of Pratibha Ousmane. Who? A rising star in the Lyrans military in the middle of the last century, she was a colonel in the Seventeenth Arcturan Guards under Lieutenant-General Davis Lillie, who commanded that RCT. Colonel Ousmane decided to be "fashionably late" to a party celebrating the retirement of General Lillie's longtime aide-de-camp, Colonel Battulga, only to miss the boat, literally. The party was aboard an airship which left (on time) before Colonel Ousmane arrived. Meanwhile, fellow Colonel Anthony Richardson got a long tête-à-tête

with the general, and not only got the aide position, but succeeded General Lillie a few years later.

Upon entering, don't make a beeline to anyone or any group. Again, recon first: take a brief trip around the room(s) to find out who is where and with whom. Your time is finite, and you need to take advantage of it, though do not appear hasty or rushed; a good display of half of your presentation is worth far more than a poor job of all of it.

This is where allies are vital: being able to spread out and keep an eye out for openings against multiple targets makes you more efficient. They can also provide a wingman to agree with what you are saying, helping assure your target that you are worthy of their time. If you have competition for their attention, this is where allies can also help you. A quick comment to a rival on their way to your target can put them in an untenable position. Be curt to your ally and the faux pas will enter the rumor mill with a frenzy, but a few minutes' conversation can cause them to miss their window. Of course, you should be ready to return the favor, so utilize your allies when you can get the most return from it. Sometimes the only reason to attend a party is to help build your alliances.

Balance is vital in succeeding in the social scene, everything in some sort of moderation. Don't dominate the conversation, but don't meekly absorb everything like a sponge. The meat of the conversation is important to getting your accomplishment, but if one does not lighten the mood with some banter and more frivolous talk, then you just appear blunt. Sneaking in a tidbit about a rival can be a wonderful tool, but droning on and on about them just makes you seem bitter or obsessed. Make sure you know whom you are conversing with. For example, perhaps the wine is a common Moscato, but if you know the general prefers anything sweet, you can throw a false compliment about it while near them, and you can rightly commiserate with the colonel, who is an oenophile. In the end, prioritize your targets and make sure to get through the top few. Enjoy a few beverages and snacks, but don't overdo it, and be sure to tip generously.

Once you have accomplished your main goals, it is time to think about an exit strategy. Don't linger too long trying to wring every second from the attendees; that just screams desperation. An earlyish exit is fine, but ensure that you are not embarrassing your host. Just as when you entered, be sure to say your goodbyes to those worthy of your time, especially the host. Do not make a big production, however, just a few lines of your impending departure, delivered with grace and subtlety. If you are double-booked with another engagement, do not bring this up; if others are going they will see you there, but if they are not invited, you are just increasing the hostility, either for you or for the host of the second party. In the event of an after-party, however, some quiet inquiries might be the only way to find out about them. Again, no need to let everyone know that you have been invited to

one, though an exception could be made on occasion for a select few vital allies who you feel would fit in with whoever is throwing the after-party. Take care of your transportation, your outfit, and yourself afterward. And, of course, always send a thank-you note to your host for inviting you and putting on such a wonderful party.





ROADBLOCK

FAITH MCCLOSKY

OUTSKIRTS OF NEW DEMETER CITY

DEMETER

WORD OF BLAKE PROTECTORATE

19 FEBRUARY 3077

The Fifth Crucis Lancers needed an evac medic right away, and Corporal Azalea Thomas was the first combat medic on deck. Something about a roadblock that was holding up a significant portion of the unit from forging onward over a bridge across the wide gash that marked the boundaries of New Demeter City. Sure, there were other bridges, but time was of the essence, and it always seemed like there were never enough bridges.

The transport compartment of the Cal-Boeing Swiftran medical VTOL was packed with nine other medics. All their faces bore the same mixture of youthful exuberance and sheer terror that dominated her thoughts. The first call, however, was hers.

Azalea bit her lip as the roar of the rotors filled the craft and reached deep into her chest. Optimism was long gone on the road to liberate Demeter from the Word of Blake. The Fifth's initial gains had given way to the long, sloggish road they all dreaded, and the casualty lines swelled accordingly. Patch them up and get them back to the front, that was her job. No matter how fast they rolled in, you had to stem the tide. The Fifth Crucis Lancers Regimental Combat Team had to keep rolling. This was only the beginning.

She had started out in the MASH trailers at the front, dealing mostly with torn-up infantry. They were always the most numerous wounded when things hit the fan. This was what she signed up for, but it didn't make it any easier when the fighting started in earnest. Twelve hours on, six hours off, a seeming assembly line of patching

together broken troopers well enough to send them back to more stable facilities. Patching leaks, that's all it was. Patch the leaks and send them on. Rinse and repeat.

Then one morning, as she fought free of the clutches of sleep and fatigue, her supervising physician had found her and said the RCT was taking losses among evac medics. It was no surprise: it was dangerous work, being first on the scene for traumatic injuries and stabilizing them enough to make it back to the MASH trailers. Someone just like her had gone out there to help and never returned, another statistic on the casualty rolls. Dr. Killmeade had noticed her ability to stay cool under pressure and recommended her to fill the empty slot. Excitement, some people would call it. Freedom from the monotony of patching up one torn up soldier after another.

Azalea sped toward the front, unsure of herself. What was she doing out here? Why hadn't she listened to her parents and taken a quiet job in a hospital back on Belladonna? She could've had had a good job, making a decent living at some quiet hospital in the heart of the Federated Suns, but she had opted for adventure. She scoffed at herself. This was adventure all right, but that was little comfort as her heart thumped just a little stronger than normal while the lightly armored craft flew ever closer to the front.

Lost in her thoughts, she barely noticed they had slowed, the massive engines of the craft rotating for a vertical landing. Only the gentle *thud* of touchdown broke her reverie.

The young straw-haired rifleman next to her laid a hand on her shoulder. "This is it. End of the line."

She nodded and forced a smile as she adjusted her glasses and scrambled to grab all her pieces of kit. Satisfied that she was in order, she ran down the open ramp and looked around.

The roadblock was obvious. A giant BattleMech, a *Thunderbolt* from the look of it, sprawled awkwardly across the path of a large metal bridge. The 'Mech had fallen in such a way that it completely blocked the road, making crossing impossible. A recovery vehicle sat dormant some meters from it, and a host of BattleMechs and combat vehicles crowded around the end of the bridge to announce their displeasure with being held up.

A young man in MechWarrior garb strode toward her, a look of consternation in his eyes. "You the medic?"

She nodded as she squinted at the fallen behemoth, its armor still popping and cracking as it cooled from the battle. "What's the story? Said you guys needed evac up here?"

The MechWarrior—SMYTHE was the name on his cooling vest—ran his hands through his sweat-soaked hair and visibly tried to compose himself before speaking over the roar of the rotors. "That boy there's one of mine. Took a round to the cockpit that dropped his 'Mech right on the spot. Some infantry managed to climb up there, says he's alive

and talking like he's fine, but the cockpit is mangled nine ways to hell, has him pinned in there. My company commander is on me to get this wreck cleared so we can forge ahead across that bridge there, but I'm afraid if we move the wreck, my boy's liable to take more of a hurting. I called for a medic to see if we couldn't get him out before the movers go poking all around there. Guess that's where you come in."

She drew in the smell of burning metal and myomer, an altogether different smell from the usual horrid mix of carbon and disinfectant back at the trailers. "Name?" She started walking toward the prone BattleMech, and the MechWarrior followed her.

"My name? Lieutenant Smythe, ma'am."

She shook her head. "No, Lieutenant, *his* name." The acrid smell of coolant grew stronger the closer they got to the prostrate metal titan.

"Fennimore. That's his name. Levi Fennimore. He's barely out of the academy, pretty new to my lance. Pretty sure this is his first action."

They reached the base of the wreck, and she felt the heat radiating from spots where lasers had scored the armor. A handful of infantry troopers stood with their hands on their hips while the driver of the recovery vehicle looked away absentmindedly as he leaned against one of the bridge's huge metal struts.

One of the troopers, a rosy-cheeked corporal, stepped forward. "It's a right mess up there, ma'am. Something punched through his cockpit, and the 'Mech fell face first into that big old mess of beams and struts. His systems are fried, but he's talking up a storm if you get up there near his hatch. Something's got him pinned at the waist. He can't even get close to moving till we tear the obstruction free. But it's a mess of wires and metal up there, and you know, they always say don't pull the knife out till you know how bad the wound is and all that. We figured you could take a look and help him out while we get the wreck moved out, patch him up if anything goes south."

She patted the trooper on the shoulder. "Good thinking, Corporal. How hard is it for me to get up there?"

The young man glanced toward the wreck before answering. "Depends on how good a climber you are. The armor has pretty much cooled off. You just got to watch your step, and mind you don't fall."

She glanced up at the fallen monster, peering toward the now-cracked canopy that encased the warrior inside. Her experience at climbing consisted solely of weekend outings on the rock-climbing wall at school back home and what little she had to do in basic training. She hadn't taken to it back then, but then again, she hadn't fallen on her backside either. Envisioning the climb in her mind, she lunged forward and began her ascent.

Soon, she found herself perched atop the cracked canopy, looking in as though crawling through one of the eyes of the giant beast. She pushed her way inside, careful to avoid the cracked ferroglass and protruding shards of metal.

What she found was fear. The fair-haired, blue-eyed man staring back at her could have been on any recruiting poster throughout the Federated Suns. Of course, the poster wouldn't have shown the sweat-soaked hair plastered to his face or the oily grime of combat. And it wouldn't have shown the longing and fear in the boy's eyes as he processed what was going on around him.

"Levi," she said to him in as neutral and calm a tone as she could muster.

"Yes ma'am?" He winced and tried to compose himself as she climbed closer to him in the cockpit.

"My name is Azalea. Battalion sent me out here to check on you before they moved this big mess you've made. They're in a hurry to get over the bridge, but you've gone and got yourself stuck in their way. So, they called me in to help you out. How are you feeling?"

His eyes had a glassy quality to them, darting about as if afraid to linger too long on one spot.

"I've been better. The whole damn cockpit caved in around me, pinned me in my couch. Can't really move my legs too much, but my upper half feels fine. Well, except where the coolant is leaking into the cuts. Stings like a beast. Other than that, I feel pretty good. Though I'd like to get out of this seat."

She smiled reflexively as she took his vitals. The air was heavy and laden with the smell of sweat, a sharp contrast to the whirling breeze outside. "We're going to get you out of here as quick as we can. We just want to make sure we're not going to do more damage coming out than it did going in, okay?"

"Sounds like a plan to me. The quicker the better."

She wormed her way deeper into the cockpit to get a better picture of his overall state. When she finally managed to get a good view, she struggled to muffle her gasp. She looked up and locked eyes with the young MechWarrior before she could avoid the mistake. Her despair and his fear met in an instant of perfect human recognition before either could wrench their gaze aside.

"Shit," he said.

"What?" She looked down quickly, avoiding his eyes.

"It's bad, isn't it? Something's bad. I saw it in your face."

She shook her head and lied. "No, I'm just not used to being out in the field. It's a lot less sanitary an environment here than when we see you guys in triage. Look, your vitals are strong. You could probably stay here all day if you wanted to. But the brass won't have that, so we have to get you moved."

It was bad, though. It was as if a giant finger had just pinched him off at the waist: the beam simultaneously pinned him in place and held him together. There wasn't much blood, which was good, but her trained eye could see the damage on the inside. Damage that was being held at bay like a dam holding back a flood tide.

She noticed the way the young man wouldn't take his eyes off her. He was scared, and he was clinging to the only other human thing around him. She was his anchor, holding him steady to life. But that wouldn't last forever. "Look, I'm going to go down and get things coordinated so we know who's moving what and where. But I'll be back, okay? I promise."

He nodded and closed his eyes for as she made her way precariously out of the cockpit and back down to the others. When she reached the ground, all the eyes in the world focused on her. First among them was the lieutenant.

"So, what's the word, Doc?"

She sighed and put her hands on her hips. "First, I'm not a doctor, I'm just a nurse. But..." She paused, trying to wrap her own mind around her thoughts before she spoke them aloud. "It's not good. One of the cockpit struts smashed inward and crushed his pelvis. He's practically split in two. His lower half is almost completely severed from his upper body. He's not going to make it."

The young infantryman shuffled his feet and spoke up. "Wait, I carried on a full-on conversation with him while I was up there. Now you're telling me he's sawed in half? How can that be?"

She held up a hand to forestall any other questions. "Look, the beam that pinned him is, in effect, holding him together right now. Now, he's going to die slowly, but right now his body is, for all intents and purposes, still fighting to stay alive while the beam holds him together. The moment we move that beam, he's going to suffer massive internal hemorrhaging. Once it moves, everything lets go, then he bleeds out inside."

The lieutenant slapped his palm against his leg. "Wait, so what you're telling me is that he's fine right now but he'll slowly fade away. But the second we move him, he's a goner?"

"Yes. That's exactly what I'm telling you. As soon as we relieve that pressure, he starts to bleed out."

The lieutenant shook his head in frustration. "So, what do we do? If we move him, we kill him. But if we just sit here, he dies anyway. Can you just, you know, give him a shot or something?"

Fury boiled in her core. "I most certainly cannot just give him a shot of something. That would be murdering him. His chances may be next to nothing, but we have to *try*."

The corporal from earlier stepped forward. "He's going to die either way, so what's the difference?"

Exasperation overcame her. "The difference is that one way we're fighting for him to the end, the other is just plain murder. He'd be dying at the hands of his own people!"

The lieutenant raised his arms to forestall any further debate. "What do you want us to do then, Doc?"

She closed her eyes for a moment, steeling herself against what she knew she had to do. There was only one course of action, and it hurt to admit it. "What we do is move the beam and I do everything I possibly can to make sure he lasts long enough to make it to the rear."

The lieutenant shook his head in disagreement. "How is that any different than just jabbing him with enough morphine to put him out for good?"

She looked the lieutenant in the eye. "The difference, Lieutenant, is that when he closes his eyes for the last time, we will have done everything we could for him. We will have fought as hard as we can for him. Courage isn't always about firing a weapon or taking a bullet."

She kicked her boot into the dust of the path. "How soon can your guys on the recovery team get to prying that cockpit beam loose?"

The driver of the recovery vehicle stood up for the first time. "My guy is already in his exoskeleton. He can be up there ripping things apart in two minutes."

She nodded. "Okay. Let's get things rolling then. I'm going to climb up there and see if there's anything I can do beforehand to make things easier. Do you guys have comms I can link into?"

The corporal rummaged through his pack and produced an earbud, which she quickly took and fitted to her right ear. "These next few moments could be that boy's last. Let's make them count."

She climbed back up the fallen beast and poked her head once more into the cockpit. The young MechWarrior seemed startled at first, but quickly leaned his head back.

"Told you I'd be back, Levi. Now, we've got things all sorted down there. There's a guy in an exoskeleton going to climb up here in a minute and we'll see about getting that beam off you. How are you feeling?"

His eyes darted nervously around the cockpit. "Cold. Tired. Ready to get the hell out of this thing."

"I hear you. Won't be long now." She pulled a syringe of morphine from the aid pack and quickly jabbed him in the arm. "That's for the pain. You're probably going to feel a little tired, maybe a little flushed. That's okay. Whatever you're feeling, don't fight it, just relax. Got it?"

The young man nodded tentatively. "So, Azalea—that's what you said your name was, right? What is it you're not telling me? I know it's something, I saw it in your eyes. Give me the damage report."

She focused away from his face and examined the point of impact trying to gauge the level of damage done when the beam had slammed down on him. "When your cockpit got shattered and that support smashed into your waist, it crushed your pelvis pretty hard. It doesn't look like there was any tearing. Think of it like a giant pincer."

She looked up at him as he replied. "So, it pinched my legs off. I know I can't feel them at all. You're telling me I'm going to lose them? I won't walk or pilot a 'Mech again?"

She sighed inwardly. *If only it were that simple.* The poor boy's mind was going off to the worst thing he could imagine, not being able to walk or pilot a 'Mech in battle again. He knew it was bad, but his mind hadn't gone to that place of contemplating his own death yet.

She put a gloved hand on his bare shoulder where it protruded from his cooling vest, and he felt sweaty and clammy to the touch. His body was slowly coming to the realization that it had to take action to save his life. But it didn't know the half of it. "It's a bit more complex than that. When it pinched off your lower half, it seems to have pinched off all your vital arteries. It did the damage, but now it's holding you together. When we move the beam, that pressure comes off, and any injuries start to bleed right away. We have to get that damage pinched off again right away so you don't lose too much blood. It's going to hurt like hell."

He shuddered. "That's okay. I can feel the painkiller working already. Getting kind of sleepy. But you can stop the bleeding and get me to the hospital or whatever, right?"

She took a deep, deliberate breath. "I don't know. I'll do everything I can, but when the beam comes off, there's no telling how the damage will present. I have to stop it all, and fast."

The young man's lip trembled, and she could feel his arm tense up in her grasp. "What if you can't?"

"Let's not talk about that, and focus on what we're going to do, okay?"

"What if you can't?" he asked again. Almost pleading.

Her heart rose up in her throat. "If I can't stop it after a few minutes, you'll feel like you are falling. It might be scary. But don't worry, there's always someone to catch you. Just remember that."

The silence was oppressive. It was as if nothing else in the universe existed but those two souls, desperately trying to scour the entirety of their lives to give the next few minutes meaning and scope.

She wasn't sure how long they were there, locked together in existential alarm, but she felt the touch of an armored glove on her shoulder. It popped their little pocket of reality and dragged her back to the cold vastness of the rest of the universe.

"Are we ready, Doc?" The voice behind the exoskeleton's mask muffled any emotion from its user.

She turned her gaze from the armored trooper to the vulnerable young man next to her. "They're ready to go. Is there anything I can do, anyone I can talk to for you?"

He shook his head and she could almost hear the rattling of his teeth in fear. "I recorded a holo for my folks, almost like a joke. Never really thought it would come to this. But I guess it's all I've got. It's something. It's in my cooling vest pocket."

She steadied her shaking hands and fumbled with the zipper until she retrieved the tiny disk and put it into her thigh pocket. "Just to be

safe. You'll get to redo this once they get you patched up back at the barn." Their eyes both revealed they knew the lie, but the lie was all they had in that moment.

She tried to brace herself emotionally, but had no faith in how she would hold up. She nodded to the armored trooper. "We're ready."

With a creak and a groan, the beam yielded to the power of the soldier's enhanced grip. As the metal let out a shriek, so too did the MechWarrior as the pain from the release of pressure suddenly burst through his defenses.

Azalea felt a blow glance off her helmet as Levi's arm involuntarily lashed out. She had to fight off his other hand as it flailed desperately and blindly at the location of the pain that now defined his entire existence. She felt her heart beating in her ears and she was vaguely aware of the rest of the universe closing off into a tiny tunnel that connected her to the wounded man's body. There was no thought at that point, just instinct and muscle memory as she groped fruitlessly to find and assess the main points of exsanguination.

In the logical recesses of her mind, she knew immediately that it was hopeless. It was like trying to plug holes in a crumbling dam with your fingers. It simply couldn't work. But the part of her that made her human could not quite give up. She tried to no avail for minutes that seemed like ages. The logical side of her noted the loss of blood pressure over time, a battle she could not win. But something in her core would not let her stop. Soon there was too much blood to differentiate tissue from fabric, nothing firm for her to pinch off and stem the tide.

She made the mistake of looking up into the MechWarrior's face. Her eyes locked with his on an indescribable level of human communication. She could feel him clinging to her with his very soul. She could not bring herself to look away. They were separated only by the lens of her glasses, smeared on the outside with his blood and the inside with her tears. Suddenly, his gaze shifted to over her shoulder, and he looked past her.

In that moment, she knew he was gone. He surrendered himself. The fall took him.

She was aware of nothing else as the MechWarrior's blood soaked up into her clothes. Her hands no longer moved. She lay there motionless. Then finally—after how long she didn't know—she heard a call in her ear.

"Hey, Doc. How's it going? Doc?"





PPCS

MATTHEW CROSS

BME 210: ADVANCED WEAPONRY ENGINEERING FOR MECHWARRIORS

DR. KIRAN SUZUKI

NEW AVALON INSTITUTE OF SCIENCE, FALL SEMESTER

LECTURE 7: THE PPC: (NOT) LIGHTNING IN A CAN

25 SEPTEMBER 3125

Begin Transcript

All right, class. Seeing as last week's laboratory assignment resulted in one of you tripping your *Blackjack Omni*, falling on the Gauss rifle and detonating its capacitors, destroying the weapon and a significant portion of the BattleMech, labs are now simulator-only. While accidents do happen, you idiots have officially ruined my favorite part of teaching. I was really hoping to shoot at you all with PPCs this week, but alas, someone messed that up. *[Transcript note: The entire class begins staring at one cadet, Alexander "Tear Tooth" Perry.]*

Today's lecture will focus on nearly every MechWarrior's favorite weapon, the particle projection cannon, or PPC, and its Inner Sphere-produced variants. The Clans' perfect version of the weapon will be covered in a future lecture.

I am sure every single person in this room is familiar with the PPC; the signature weapon of some of the most iconic 'Mechs this galaxy has ever seen. The 'Mech-scale PPC was developed in 2439 by the Terran Hegemony, and has been in continuous production on countless worlds across the Inner Sphere. While the "vanilla" version has generally fallen out of favor with armies and manufacturers, the other variants are in wide production, and used in thousands of war machines throughout the Inner Sphere and beyond.

Generically, PPCs consist of three major systems: a beam generator, an acceleration and focusing system, and the inhibitor. The beam generator uses any number of techniques to generate a pulse of protons or ions, which are then boosted to nearly light speed in the acceleration and focus system before hurtling toward their target. The inhibition system suppresses the side effects of the enormous magnetic, electrical, radio-frequency, and (sometimes) radiation fields around the PPC and at its muzzle, preventing interference in other systems and, critically, inhibiting arcing and backlash that could damage the PPC. The exact mechanisms vary between models—a Donal PPC firing a proton beam generates, accelerates, and focuses its beam differently than a Lord's Light PPC producing a heavy ion bolt, and most PPCs are different than the oddball Parti-Kill PPC that directly taps a fusion engine for plasma to magnetically fling as a self-contained plasma toroid. The results are the same: massive damage on the target and the risk of self-damage.

Because of the latter problem, PPCs have inhibitors. These range from electron emitters on the muzzles of proton-based PPCs, which keep the weapon (and vehicle) charge-neutral so they don't suffer from severe environmental electrical discharges, to laser-based systems that bore atmospheric tunnels so heavy-ion PPCs don't create an explosion in the atmosphere right at the muzzle of the weapon. These inhibition techniques can have a wide range of effects from shot delays, beam deflections, even extreme recoil. All inhibitors are software controlled, and their reach is determined with every shot, but never extends more than 100 meters in front of the weapon.

Unfortunately, the effect of an inhibitor is difficult, but not impossible, to predict. The software calculation takes into account transitory factors such as humidity, planetary EM fields, localized electrical events, and more. Skilled warriors typically learn sweet spots with the weapon, or when conditions are perfect within the moment to minimize the effect of the inhibitor. The Black Widow was famous for a reason, and it wasn't for missing with a PPC at close range.

Introduced in the year 2740 (and then reintroduced by the Dracs in 3037), the extended-range PPC represents a technological leap over the standard PPC, but it is not without drawbacks. The ER PPC improves focusing and targeting systems, and combines those with greater beam-particle density to project its beam farther. This denser beam provides the same damage output at higher effective range, but this comes at a cost. The ER PPC generates 50 percent more waste heat than a standard model and has a price tag also about 50 percent higher. Despite its increased range, the ER PPC is nearly the same size and mass as a standard PPC, making it a simple field swap between the two weapons.

While differently sized PPCs have existed for centuries, such as the trusty infantry-support PPC, or the much smaller man-pack PPC,

successfully scaling 'Mech-scale PPCs has been a difficult task. While supporting logically sized weight, heat, and damage outputs, the light and heavy PPCs were not invented until the beginning of the Jihad. Most research was conducted by the Dracs, and they discovered that while simply shrinking the bore of the particle chamber and other capacitors resulted in a functional PPC, its range and damage output compared poorly to standard medium-class models. In a similar way, scaling up the device usually resulted in more charged-particle flow back into the weapon than an inhibitor could handle, resulting in many explosions, which, oddly enough, brings me joy...

The real breakthrough that led to both light and heavy PPCs ended up being more of a material-science adaptation than any fundamental changes to PPC design. By using new materials and components rediscovered in the wake of the recovery of the Memory Core, engineers were able to properly scale PPC systems for larger and smaller output. While the science used to create these weapons could create a wide variety of damage outputs, Inner Sphere manufacturers followed the lead of the Draconis Combine and standardized on light PPCs, which ablate about half as much armor as the standard PPC, and heavy PPCs, which match the punch of Clan ER PPCs. Compromises in both designs limit their range and accuracy to that of standard PPCs.

The snub-nose PPC was an interesting late Star League-era development to reduce the PPC's mass and overcome short-range inaccuracy. Engineers found that by overcharging the mechanism, adjusting the inhibitor to minimize short-range interference, and providing additional shielding for the control electronics produced a powerful blast that could be deadly accurate to almost 300 meters. However, the weapon's beam diffused quickly, and its damage output dropped significantly at the end of its effective range. The weapon's weight savings has made it a desirable weapon, despite the extra cost due to expensive electronics shielding and redundant controls. "Snubbies" also require more maintenance compared to standard PPCs, due to their overcharged nature.

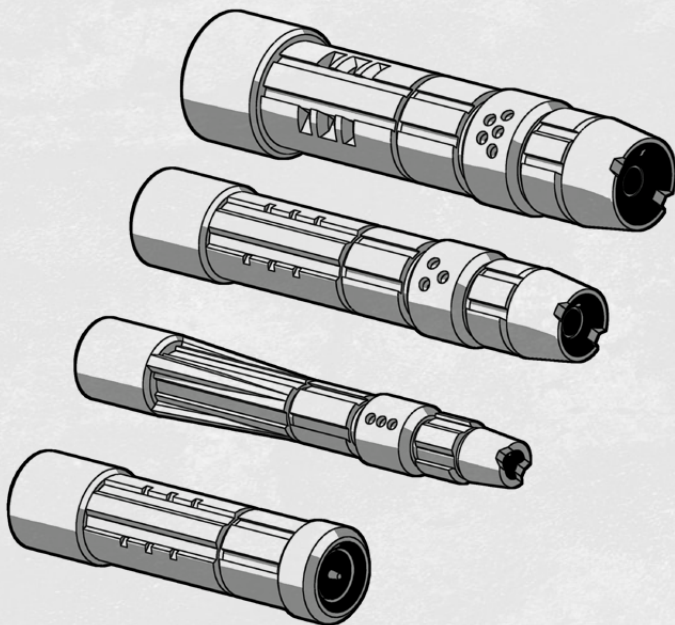
Now, I'm sure you've all heard of the latest craze that is the PPC capacitor. These are essentially an extra bank of capacitors that increase a PPC's beam duration and damage output. These come at a cost, in the form of increased waste-heat generation and rate of fire, as you are essentially charging the PPC twice. What few of you would know though, is that MechWarriors in the cockpit can overcharge a PPC without a capacitor. While the dean would have my tenure revoked for teaching you how, I can tell you that the safeguards on the PPC charging system can be intentionally overridden. Similar to disengaging the inhibitor, this can have unintended and unexpected consequences while simultaneously destroying the PPC you are using. This operation is emergency use only, mainly because of the aforementioned PPC destruction, and it's not for the faint of heart, especially not for Cadet

Perry. [Transcript note: A ripple of laughter runs through the assembled cadets. Alexander Perry's face goes bright red.]

Being hit by a PPC is never a fun thing; besides blasting off armor, a PPC hit delivers stray electromagnetic, RF, and spallation-radiation effects. While the electronics systems of your 'Mech are designed to withstand the blast from a PPC, it doesn't mean they will be unaffected. Your displays will flicker, your coolant pumps may glitch or pause. Myomer bundles are rarely affected while protected by armor because after the inhibitor's effects, few PPCs deliver sizable electrical currents that can make those big bundles twitch, but that plastic burns real good when PPCs get to them. Once the dean reinstates the labs, I'll make sure we get a chance to use a *Blackjack Omni B* to view firsthand the effects of the inhibitor, and I'll also be arranging some live-fire exercises to show the effects of getting hit by a PPC. I relish the opportunity.

Okay, now that we've covered the basics and some history of the weapons, it is time to open the file `HELLSTAR_PARTICLE_CANON_REV3102.IVT` so we can start looking at the inner workings of one of the most commonly manufactured PPCs.

End Transcript

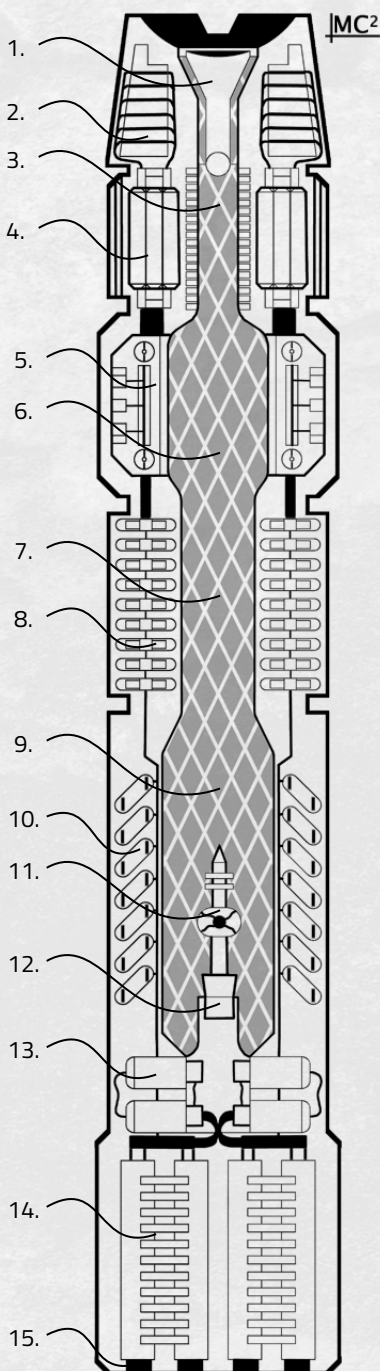


Top to Bottom: Heavy PPC, Standard PPC,
Light PPC, Snub-Nose PPC

DIAGRAM 1A:**Novel PPC design**

by Dr. Andrew T. Franchise
for his PhD Dissertation,
Circa 3098.

1. Primary Emission Nozzle
2. Stream Suppressor
3. Second Stage
Field Compression Region
4. Focusing Coils
5. Arc Attenuation Matrix
6. Attenuation Region
7. First Stage Compression Region
8. Acceleration Coils
9. Particle Condensation Region
10. High-Energy Particle Accelerator
11. Particle Emitter
12. Particle Generator
13. Primary Capacitor Bank
14. Two Phase Heat
Exchanger Manifold
15. Primary Energy and
Coolant Interconnects





SACKCLOTH AND SAND

DAVID RAZI

VÁRRI IIIA

FORMER RIM WORLDS REPUBLIC

Endless pink dunes and blue sky stretched out into a blurred horizon, as they did every morning Konily went on a rounding.

The Yuuka Rift was a great basin of sand and dust, more dry than hot, but deadly to all but the most determined and aware. Beyond the distant haze were mountains where his people once lived, in the cursed lands of rock and glass and endless struggle. That was until the men the elders called pirates drove them into the wastes, many years ago. Only a handful of times had Konily seen the mountains up close, and even then it was from almost a day's travel off.

Konily was yet four and twenty seasons of age but still unwed, and without having made claim to his mother's vacant stead as a tanning smith. Reluctantly, he had just signed up for the guard, for then he could at least leave camp regularly.

Beneath him, his *yuukalak* stood utterly motionless, every breath and blink carefully regulated to conserve energy in its native arid habitat. Beside him came Herik on his mount, sidling up to Konily before also gazing into the distance.

Herik pulled his cowl down around his wide, rounded jaw. "Every time you round the camp, you stop halfway to daydream, have you noticed that?"

Konily glanced sidelong at his friend before lowering his own cowl. His deep tan and freckles were common to most all people he'd ever known, but ringlets of dark hair escaping his hood were a stark contrast to the usually rust-red locks noted in all Yuuka tribes.

"Not every time."

"But this time."

Konily suppressed a sigh. "I saw something."

Herik smiled and started to draw his bow. "Why didn't you say so?"

"Not food, in the sky."

Confused, Herik swiveled his head and slung his bow. The sky was empty of anything, with the exception of the one thing it always had, the great eye of Várri, a swirling orb of faint blue that covered much of the sky and was beyond the sky itself.

"It was a light," Konily said, breaking the dead calm of the Rift. "There, like a star, toward the mountains."

"One of Várri's Tears, probably. I've seen them in daylight."

"No, so have I...not like that. Bigger. Much slower..."

"You're just looking for an excuse to go out there." Herik laughed, pulling up his cowl. "Come on, we should get back. Half the round to go still, and I want breakfast."

In his gut Konily knew what he saw, but he also knew if he didn't get back to camp soon, he'd catch words from the captain. He grabbed the reins and tugged to get his *yuukalak* headed back to the ring of dunes to the east, when a glint caught his eye.

"There!" he shouted, pointing off to the north.

Herik turned, again reaching for his bow, but froze dead still at the sight. It was unlike anything he had seen before: a cluster of fiery orange lights arcing slowly from the sky, right from the eye of Várri herself. They streaked through the stark blue and into the haze of the horizon, where the Rift met the mountains and the land of the pirates. Smaller darting lights spread for as far as Konily could see, and he dared not look away. A distant, muffled rumble punctuated the spectacle. Silence came next, as the two young men looked at each other.

Konily turned his head to Herik. "I saw something."

Herik, eyes locked at where the fire fell from Várri, nodded in agreement.



Recessed in a stone pit below the pink dunes, the camp was filled with men, women, and children, all listening to the elders in the circle address Konily and Herik with increasing volume and dismissiveness.

"Absolutely not!" said one, waving an arm at them. "It does not matter what you saw!"

The two sat cross-legged before the panel of what few men and women could proudly claim to have weathered twenty years of age, and held station of import among the tribe. The boys had rushed back to camp as fast as their mounts would carry them, with Konily demanding to see the council as fast as the captain of the guard could arrange it.

Elder Ye, miraculously still adorned with red hair at her age, smiled at the boys.

"Young Konily, you know well that we do not meddle with affairs beyond the desert." She paused and looked away. "And certainly not for ancient scraps to remind us of our wasted past."

Several on the council nodded somberly.

Konily weighed his words carefully, feeling much of the slowly growing crowd leaning on him with their gaze. "One fell very close to us, fire bursting at both ends—"

"That is enough," Ye interrupted with strained kindness. "You're going to cause needless worry."

Stroking his beard, another elder nodded. "Our place is the Rift. Our people learned with blood that we can never go back. Your mother knew that."

Dead almost a year now, Konily's mother still managed to be used against him.

Herik turned his head slightly to catch Konily's eye, imploring him to drop the matter, and Konily nearly was about to reconsider when life came to the figure sitting at the center of the elders' semicircle. She raised a finger, and it seemed the entire camp froze in time. Her arm arced slowly to her right, westward.

"How close?" she croaked, looking past the boys, into her mind's eye. Wasting breath on trivial discussion was no way to reach Elder Yeoshak's age of twenty-eight in the arid desert of the Yuuka Rift, so when she spoke, none dared not listen.

"Near the copse of spires, a half day out."

Rolling her head up, looking up past the pink and orange rock of the camp walls, out of the pit, and into the cutting blue sky, Ye searched the edge of Várri that protruded, as though it looked back at her, knowingly.

"They have come this far for less..." she said, almost to herself.

The council collectively tensed at her words, doing their best to maintain composure in front of their gathered families. Everyone knew who "they" referred to. Konily's curiosity was understandable, but a raiding party from the impenitent hordes in the mountains could spell disaster for the tribe.

On the rim of the pit, ten meters up, a woman called down into the crowd. "Smoke! Smoke to the northwest!"

Worried glances were exchanged through the crowd and council alike.

Seeing an in, Konily straightened his back and willed his voice to cooperate. "Elders, if whatever fell wasn't seen from the hills before, it will be now. We have limited time before pirates make their way down."

The crowd began to murmur at the suggestion pirates would enter the desert. Normally the weather and ceaseless desolation would deter any such intrusion, but no one could deny the allure of fiery tears falling from Várri's all-seeing eye. Outlanders said they could be weapons, or priceless gems, or whatever else their imagination decided was

worth fighting over. In the Rift, the only story was that they were to be avoided. But with one so close...

Elder Yeoshak motioned everyone to silence. "Captain!" she bellowed with greater force than her slight frame belied.

Clad in leathers and cowl, with his long rust locks in braids, Captain of the Guard Urgun strode into the circle and bowed his head.

"Take your two young scouts. Douse the fire. Assess the risk to the tribe."

"Yes, of course," he said in a baritone voice through his thick beard.

"Return with nothing you can't safely leave behind," Elder Yeoshak finished, drawing nervous looks from some.

As the families of the tribe fled back to their homes to busy their minds with daily tasks, Captain Urgun approached the two young men and told them to get their things for a hard and fast ride. The rest of the guard would be preparing for the worst: the wild men from the mountains coming to see what was burning in the desert.



For hours on end, the twelve feet of the *yuukalaks* pounded the rosy sand, bringing the men on their backs farther into the great yawning desert, sand pelting their freckled hands and faces despite the eerie stillness of the wind. Ever closer they came to the black pillar of smoke that rose upward, a thick, oily scar carved through the virgin blue sky, straight up, threatening to cut into Várri herself. Only brief rests for water held the three travelers back. They had packed light, bringing only minimal food, bows, and empty sacks.

Urgun, however, had brought something only the men in the mountains ever had in considerable numbers. His polished black rifle had been handed down to each captain for generations, along with what little ammunition could be traded to the few merchant travelers who came to the Rift in recent years. Hunting was best done with bow and arrow. Rifles came out in the tribe at only the direst of times. Konily had never held one, only recently having joined the guard.

As the sun started to wane, so too did the black plume diminish, but by then Konily could smell it quite strongly, and taste it as well. It started to waver, its source changing location. A distant rumble rose in intensity as they rode forth. Still they pressed on, less sure with every second, but never turning back.

They approached the dunes over which the flaming tear had met the ground, and while Urgun and Herik slowed to dismount, Konily charged to the crest, ignoring his captain's warning. The anticipation was too much to bear, and it pushed everything else away.

The thunderous rumble rose to cacophonous heights, terror and curiosity rising in equal measure as his steed reached the crest. He pulled the reins, holding fast as his looked down into the small basin

near the rocky spires they'd been riding toward. What he saw was unlike anything he'd seen, and he was paralyzed with fear.

Smoking with fire and heat and rage, a great black giant reached out with its arm. Explosions erupted from its body, blinding Konily and his steed, which threw him from its back. His companions joined him, aghast at the horror below. From across the basin, a squat beast, almost as tall as the other, snapped bolts of light straight into its opponent.

Desperate to witness the unspeakable, Konily crawled to the dune's crest and dared not look away, even as his captain strained to call out to him over the deafening brawl. Explosions ripped nearby, and he averted his gaze, only half-aware of a burning on his face and hands, and his cape and cowl yanked at him in the wind while grit struck his eyes.

The taller beast's right arm fell limp, and an azure burst arced from the handleless forearm that held its weapons. It staggered forward as its enemy burned fire into its belly, sawing it nearly in half at the waist before dropping its own hulking left arm down.

The squat beast sagged, a distant humming stopped as it pitched forward, burying its snout in the hot sand. Opposite from it, the giant was already slumped against the dunes.

Awash with an indescribable elation and fear, Konily slowly came back to his senses, realizing only vaguely that someone was calling his name. He turned around, and his smile vanished as his eyes found the captain of the guard tearing open the leathers of his childhood friend, blood pouring from an unseen wound.

Fumbling with a simple medical kit for packing and coagulants needed in the water-poor Rift, Konily watched Urgan find a burned and jagged chunk of metal protruding from Herik's lower abdomen. The sand soaked the blood as quickly as it came, and even quicker than that, Herik was gone.

Sprawled across the basin were great jagged scraps of metal, flayed and smoldering, all around the wrecked and lifeless monsters. One was almost utterly crushed in the middle. From the crest, Urgan gestured to the other, lying splayed against the dunes. Cylinders connected to its back and legs were crushed beneath it; wisps of black, vaporous ooze reached out to the heavens. Glinting metal sparkled out from the torn hide of the beast.

The excitement of a couple minutes prior was gone entirely, replaced by a numbness Konily had not felt in a year's time. The two walked up to the beast cautiously.

"It's just a machine..." Konily reached out to the leg, a yearning deep down to know this thing, but Urgan grabbed his wrist and yanked his arm back.

"Don't touch it! That's no damned machine." He looked back at their quarry. "That's a BattleMech."



The sun was already setting as the two approached the felled giant. Large hunks of armor were torn away, and sharp protrusions jutted out all over, but otherwise it had made the jump from the stars in surprisingly good condition—that is, until it fought the other one. Konily eyed his captain, watching him move about the head of the machine with some familiarity. It made him uncomfortable, but oddly envious. Some other facet of this man he'd known most of his life was now just barely visible to him.

"Don't reach into any of those tubes coming off it, and stay well clear of the limbs, just in case," Urgun said, scaling the dune to the back of the head. "Here," he said, gesturing to the side of the cranium. "Every cockpit has a hatch."

"This is a vehicle?!" Konily gasped.

Travelers far off in the steppes beyond the mountains, and still farther away in the old cursed kingdom, used vehicles. Groundcars, gyrocycles, hovertrucks—all ancient technology that was harder and harder to come by. The tribe had seen them on occasion, but they had none.

"No, no, it's much worse," Urgun said. "Good, this hatch looks bent but not jammed. C'mere and help."

Almost immediately, Konily was beside his captain.

As Urgun gave the count the three, they heaved, and the door hinge shrieked and gave, tossing them back against the sand as it swung open. The captain pulled out a flashlight, a tool for strict emergencies only due to the shortage of batteries, and prepared to shine it into the cockpit. Konily was already at the hatch.

"Wait, it might be bad in there," Urgun cautioned him, knowing that a pilot after combat could be a horrific sight, but Konily gave no start.

Through the one-way cockpit glass, the sun lit up the inside, bathing it in speckled light that glinted off the cracked displays, broken metal, and helmet visor. The pilot lay with her head back, arms limp on the sides of the control chair, with drying blood all over the lower half of her face and bulky vest of tubes. Her hair was tucked into her helmet but did not seem long. Her face suggested an age of maybe seven years, but it was hard to tell with the visor down.

Reaching slowly into the cockpit, pulse racing, Konily held his finger out under her nose and waited. He whipped his head around to his captain, eyes wide.

"She's alive!"

"Unbelievable," the old guard replied, climbing to look in the cockpit. "Well, we can't move her. Her neck could be broken."

"Out..." came a deathly croak from within, and the two men jumped.

Konily peeked back in, recomposing himself. "Are you—are you okay? Can you move?"

The pilot lazily rolled her head to the right and weakly gestured with an arm. "Get...me out..."

It was well after dark before the two of them managed to carry her down to the rapidly cooling sand, where she lost consciousness again. Soon after, they agreed there was nothing to be done, at least until morning. They brought Herik's body down with them, wrapped in a shroud they'd packed.

Konily agreed to first watch, too wound up to sleep. For hours, he stared over the ridge, checking occasionally to make sure the woman hadn't woken up. Nor the giant she had arrived in.



Sunrise came too soon for Konily's liking. Urgan distributed rations, and the fallen pilot managed to lean upright against the leg of her machine. Sickly green liquid still dripped into the sand in some places, to which she gave no mind. Her shoulder-length black hair fell in front of her face, and before she could brush it away, Konily saw her bright blue eyes shining through, gazing into and past him, like the great eye of Várri in the black night sky, watching them always. All she wore was a pair of thick brown boots, a single-piece green suit with short arms and legs, and that bizarre vest. Her scant clothing, ill-suited to the desert, exposed a great many cut and bruises, which she didn't seem to notice, easily explained by the many scars she had. A million questions begged for answers, but before Konily could decide which was most pressing, she asked first.

"Is this Várri Illa?"

"What?"

She sighed and pointed upward, speaking in frustrated, clipped words. "What planet is that?"

Urgan mulled it over for a second. "Yeah. It was."

The young guard failed to hide his confusion.

The captain continued. "Now begging your pardon, off-worlder, but what are you doing here?"

She shifted more upright, rolling her shoulders and neck slightly.

"We had to abandon ship in high orbit. Most of us had drop pods already mounted, and we took our chances before the ship broke up on entry."

"You're lucky you survived."

She looked him up and down briefly. "I have to rejoin my command. There may be others."

Konily stood and approached slowly. "I don't believe this... No one has come from off-world, not in over a hundred years."

The pilot laughed and coughed at his words. "A lot has happened." She smiled. "Not that you would know."

"Hey, we could've left you in there," Konily snapped.

"Here's how it is," Captain Urgan jumped in loudly before gesturing to the shroud lying by the stock-still creatures they rode in on. "I don't care who you are or where you're from, but my people will have some

questions, and the least you can do is give them answers. Now if you want to stay here, there's probably scavengers already coming for your 'Mech—"

"Understood," she said, trying to stand. "I will make the trip."

"Help her up, Konily. I'm sorry, but we have to leave your 'Mech here."

With some direction from the pilot, they removed field supplies and a sidearm from the cockpit. Then, slowly and painfully, they made their way back home. Their fallen companion was slung over the back of a *yuukalak* like so much cargo, while Urgan lingered just behind, his rifle underarm.



The pink sands picked up in the wind that came from the south. The opening of the crag was a swirling torrent, but the camp below was almost as active as usual. The guards had all come down from their rounds, the hunters had all retired for the day, and most everyone was watching as the scouting party returned.

Herik's wife, Koyukk, was inconsolable. His body was carried off to perform rites with the family. All other eyes were fixated with equal parts fear and wonder on the battered pilot. Urgan walked her straight to the elders' door in the cliff face, where she hobbled inside with Konily's aid but without complaint.

Only the most important family heads and elders were present in the room, but already the air grew thick and stale. There was no sense wasting time.

"Who are you?" Elder Ye asked through a scowl. "And why have you come?"

"I am—" The pilot paused, almost laughing to herself. "I am Star Captain Naiad of Clan Jade Falcon. Alpha Galaxy. But none of you know what that means." She opened her palms as if to say the matter was concluded.

"You're right, we don't. No one has come to our world in ages. And now...you come with war," said Ye with clenched teeth.

"I have no intention of staying," Naiad replied. "After I find what is left of my unit—"

"Your unit seems to have crashed in the mountains, if what young Konily tells us is true. Any survivors would be killed or captured. Their BattleMechs seized or dismantled."

"I will see for myself."

"Tell me, Star Captain," said Yeoshak from the dim corner where she watched, "how is it you came to be here? There are still vast armies and empires that span the stars?"

"There are."

"Then what has become of the Star League, and the bastard Kerensky that condemned us to this blighted world?"

"You worthless—" Naiad struggled to stand, held down quickly by Urgan at her side.

"Wait!" Konily shouted, jumping by Naiad's side to address her. "Are you from the Star League?!"

"The Star League collapsed three hundred years ago," she snarled at him, "torn apart by the mongrel scum of the Rim Worlds Republic!"

Looks were exchanged around the room, a mixture of confusion, anger, and shame.

"It's true," Yeoshak conceded. "Our ancestors betrayed the League, and for that, our world was scourged by its armies. So we live on this shattered world. Forgotten, it seems."

Naiad shook Urgan's hand from her shoulder, her face marred with disgust. "I don't even know what world this is. All I know is we are in Rim Worlds space, and I mean to leave as soon as my task is complete."

"But..." Konily started hesitantly, "you asked if this was Várri."

"Maybe at one time it was, but it is no longer listed on our charts. We jumped here with coordinates we stole off enemy forces. It seems they have been hiding in dead systems. We were to stop them from rearming with a cache of 'Mechs and supplies on the first moon of a planet called Várri III, but there was a...saboteur on board."

"Is that who you were fighting when we found you?"

"Aff:" She smiled grimly. "A warrior I thought I knew."

Konily watched her as she spoke. Here was a soldier from another planet, just like the ones he'd grown up hearing about, who turned their world into a barren waste of sand and glass. In these great BattleMechs, they must have come in the hundreds. It would have been incredible and horrible all at once.

"We have a radio for emergencies, but the range—"

"Bring it to me." Naiad slowly stood. "Until then, I need rest."

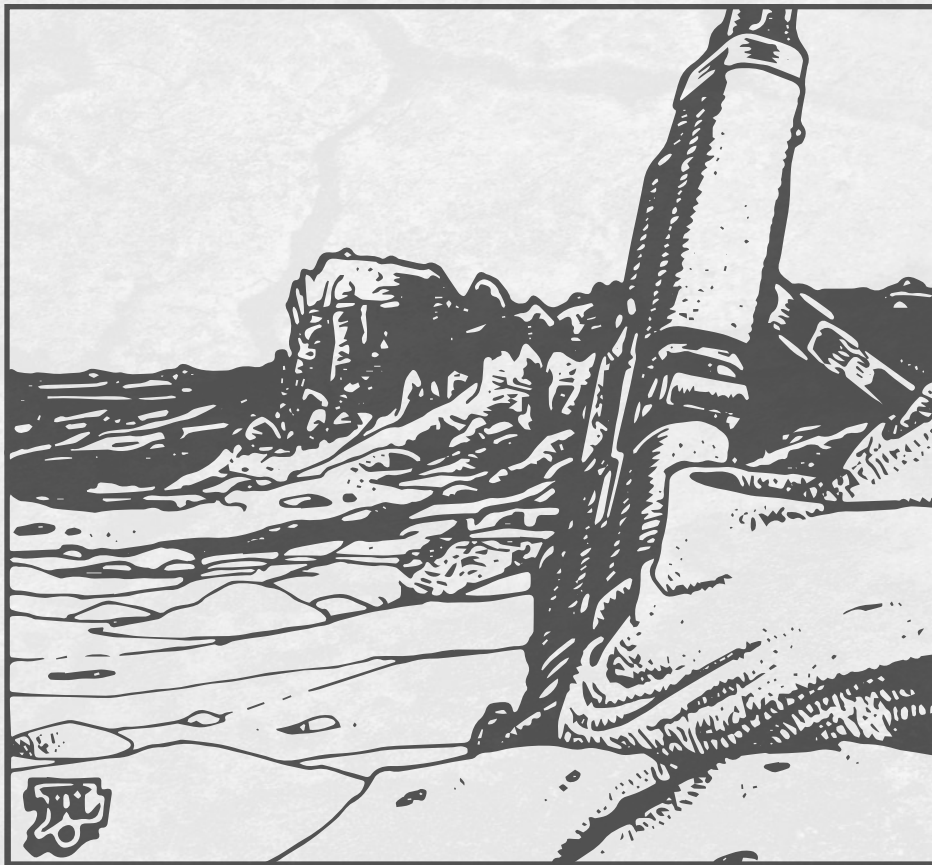
The elders balked at her rudeness, but Yeoshak smiled and shrugged. The meeting was over.



Night was cold in the Rift, but the winds had died down considerably.

Out over the dunes, Naiad watched the horizon, scanning with her field binoculars that survived the rough landing more or less intact. The mountains were barely perceptible through them, but small specks of light were easy to spot, assuredly villages. Occasionally she panned to where her 'Mech had fallen, but it seemed that none of the wild bandits had taken notice, or dared to investigate that far out.

Over the lip of the crag, Konily climbed and headed to the fallen pilot holding vigil on the dunes. A radio had been brought to her, along with some basic supplies. Though fascinated with her, the villagers regarded her as one might an aggressive child, best left to figure out her anger on her own. Every minute she brought the radio to her lips



and called to her fellow warriors. It was the only sound aside from the distant baying of some lower life.

"Echo Beak Actual to any Jade Falcon forces, respond," she said once again, the words coming without thought or feeling at this point. To Konily she said, "What do you want?"

"You've been up here for hours."

"I need the rest. This relaxes me."

"How many of your friends are missing?"

"There were fifteen of us." She sighed, annoyed at the distraction. "And the crew, I suppose," she added as an afterthought. "Maybe some of the ship is actually intact."

"No one's seen a starship of any kind in a hundred years."

"A hundred *local* years, maybe," she scoffed. "By the standard calendar, the Rim Worlds Republic was wiped out three hundred years ago. Only the dregs seem to remain."



"We did save you, y'know," he said, defensive now. "Do you think you can get back to space without help?"

"I think," she said lowering the binoculars, "that even on this ball of rock there must still be a transmitter that can contact my JumpShip. More than likely, at the Society cache I am here to find."

"Okay, well you see those mountains out there?"

"Obviously!" she snapped, her temper rising.

"They're covered in men called pirates—"

"I heard, thank you. I know how to deal with bandits."

"But you can't make the trip alone. No one can, certainly not someone who doesn't know the way."

She thought for a moment. "It is a straight line."

"Nothing in the desert is a straight line."

Baying again in the distance caught her attention before she brought the radio back to her lips.

"Echo Beak Actual to any Jade Falcon forces, respond." She looked at him. "Why would you want to come with me?"

"Well...my father was from the mountains—"

"I am *not* interested in this line of discussion."

"Come on, you owe me!"

"A warrior—" She rounded on him, kicking him in the gut, and knocking him to the sand with surprising force. "—never owes anything to...whatever *you* count as."

"A warrior." He coughed. "I am a guard of this camp."

She eyed the young man and stood back up. Throwing her binoculars on the sand at her feet, she stared out at the night sky. "You will not leave the planet with me."

"But I can come with you until then. Right?"

"Aff," she said, the word tasting like ash in her already dry mouth. "For now. But do not mistake us for equals."

Konily's head swam as Naiad spoke, watching her tense, her face twisted with regret.

"Are you always like this?" he asked.

"Worse."



Leaving the camp drew an understandable crowd, and criticism from many. No one permanently left the tribe unless it was to find a mate in neighboring camps. No one took *yuukalaks* from the tribe, even if they could be spared. No one went to the mountains unless in dire need of supplies. Not since Konily's mother had and came back with child in tow.

Many were glad to be rid of Naiad though, at any cost, and everyone had known Konily's need to leave for a long time already. Several families actually expressed a desire to help the two along as penance for the crimes of the dead republic. Now short two guards, the camp would be a bit vulnerable for a couple seasons, but they would survive as they always had.

Gone was Naiad's previous attire, replaced with a light desert cowl. They conducted their travel mostly in the early and late hours of the day, under Várri's watchful eye. Midday, painfully long to the off-worlder, unaccustomed to the slow rotation of the desert moon, was spent under awning struts they'd brought, made years ago by Konily's family, and handed down finally to him upon his mother's death.

For days they ventured, only once coming across another human. A trader from a distant tribe had nothing they needed, but did ask about the fire in the sky and terrible eruptions from the mountains to the north. Naiad held back and averted her gaze as Konily and the trader spoke, her pale, sunburned complexion and black hair too likely to draw attention compared to the almost uniform heavily freckled dark skin of the redheaded locals.

Avoid the twin ridges to the northeast of the flats, he cautioned them, for that was where he'd seen a groundcar headed some days ago. Konily thanked him for the warning, and as they cleared the next dune and he was beyond sight, they headed northeast straight on until dusk.



It was dawn as Konily and Naiad sat perched on a small ridge, with the barren waste at their backs and the rocky foothills leading to the mountains before them. The two cliffs of pink and red rock that had once perhaps been the mouth of a river were filled with the light of a campfire, and to the delight of the Star Captain and awe of the young guard, there stood a great hulking metal beast. Midnight blue with bright green highlights, it stood motionless on two thin legs; its arms hung with clenched fists below protruding shoulders.

"A *Griffin*," Naiad said to herself. "Duko's 'Mech."

"I see at least six pirates down there," Konily offered, "but no vehicle."

"I see the only vehicle I need."

"Can you use that 'Mech too?" he asked, a smile coming to his face.

"A *Griffin IIC* is not much compared to my *Crossbow*, but I would take even a lowly *WorkMech* at this point." She shuffled back behind the ridge before standing to gather her sidearm and remove her cloak. "Stay here with those," she said, pointing to their mounts. "I will most likely return."

"You're not going there alone!"

Before he could protest further, she held him centimeters from her face, his collar in one hand, her pistol in the other. He stared past the barrel into wild eyes that cast on him a look of resentment that burned like a blue flame.

"Do not make me leave you behind, you traitor-spawned filth."

She let him go and stalked off without looking back, disappearing behind the ridge.

Konily drew a breath as she left earshot. He clenched his fists a few times to calm his nerves, and grabbed the binoculars as he crawled to the lip of the ridge. He held them up and found Naiad hurrying to beat the rising sun. With his heart pounding, he struggled to breathe slowly, following her as she circled the hillock to find the shortest path to the 'Mech's legs, where she might get some cover. Only a couple small tents were present otherwise.

Even injured as she was, Konily watched her move with light steps and an alertness that suggested a lifetime of strict training. He watched her draw her combat knife in her left hand and her pistol in the right, and she advanced like a prowler until she reached the nearest pirate. Konily panned over to him, a foul-looking wastrel in tattered leathers, whom he could almost smell from here. He watched him absentmindedly toying with the stock of his primitive rifle.

A crack broke the silence as the pirate's face split open and he crumpled backward. Blood splattered on the hillock behind him as all eyes suddenly found the source. Alternating between the binoculars and his naked eyes, Konily frantically followed the action below. Rifles came up and erupted into fire, but Naiad juke to the side, her bullets ripping into flesh and fabric as panicked shouts came from the pirates.

Naiad kept moving. She rolled to the right, out from cover, firing the last of her rounds at the pirate hidden behind the *Griffin IIC*'s leg, and dropped the gun once spent. The pirates' return fire peppered the sand behind her, and she screamed when a bullet sliced into her leg, dropping her where she was. The pirate exposed himself to finish her off, but a thrown knife lodged in his throat. Dropping his rifle, he gripped the blade with panic in his deep-set eyes and clutched at the wound that spewed streams of hot blood.

Naiad pressed hard on her wound, limping to the back of the 'Mech, and grabbed the rifle, bullets ricocheting off the leg's armor as she hid behind it. All that remained was the screaming witch with the shotgun opposite the tents. Naiad wheeled out, grabbed the rifle with both hands as blood streamed down her leg, and fired. The pirate woman dropped back dead on the sand as a slug from her shotgun flattened against the *Griffin IIC*'s leg, centimeters from Naiad's shoulder.

Then Konily saw it, something he knew Naiad had not. He dropped the binoculars and scrambled for the bow on his pack.

Six bodies lay dead below Konily, but his aim locked well above them. Naiad eyed the tents cautiously as she grabbed a belt off one of the corpses and tied it around her leg. Konily heard her call to him, but he gave no response while he focused his aim at the 'Mech. He let go of the arrow and waited, then heard a gurgling yelp, and saw its source drop from above and collapse into a heap off to the side of the 'Mech. The fallen pirate had been tinkering in the *Griffin*'s cockpit but had emerged with gun in hand.



The sun was rising quickly on Konily's back, and he was feeling quite proud of himself.

They had dressed Naiad's wound, a graze through the flesh of her inner thigh, which wasn't so bad that she couldn't walk on it with acceptable discomfort, and then set about looting the camp. Groundcar tracks heading west into the hills betrayed the location of the pirate base, and most likely MechWarrior Duko.

From the pouch on her *yuukalak*, Naiad retrieved her helmet, which, aside from being covered in her blood, was still functional. She sat in the control chair and slowly disconnected Duko's helmet before installing her own. She insisted it would be easier than recalibrating his helmet, which was "technician work" anyway. Her opinion of both technicians

and scientists, professions Konily had never heard of, was decidedly low, and she muttered and cursed to herself during the process.

"This 'Mech has seen combat," she mused, seemingly to invite conversation for once.

"The damage isn't from the crash?"

"Actually, looks like Duko managed the emergency drop with little issue, but there are obvious laser hits along the torso. It seems more than one member of my Trinary may have been...sympathetic to Etienne..." She twisted a cord into place and placed the helmet in its cradle above the headrest.

"What's an 'Etienne'?" Konily asked from the open pilot hatch.

"Who. He was a Jade Falcon scientist. Our mission was to put him to death, one I was happy to help undertake."

"So...he's dead."

"Aff." She looked out of the cockpit, gazing into the hills ahead. "Actually, he...is the reason I am alive. My entire *sibko*—" She searched for the words before reluctantly continuing. "My brothers and sisters and I...we were made using a perversion of our most sacred practices."

"So you killed him 'cause he made you ashamed."

Her face flashed with anger, and her palms tensed. "Aff."

Konily joined her in looking at the outside world, into the distance.

"Do you ever feel like you shouldn't have been born?"

She nodded slowly, without taking her gaze from the cockpit glass. "But...I can better serve my Clan by making up for his mistake." She looked at him for an answer.

"Yeah...I feel the same way."

Thanks to the impersonal nature of Clan military hardware, Naiad's command override to the *Griffin IIC*'s computer didn't take long. After a few tests on the reactor and gyroscope, they took a brief rest, collected their things, and released the *yuukalaks* into the wild to find home with a herd somewhere, hopefully far from the mountains.

It was cramped in the cockpit, but the 'Mech made short work of the rolling hills leading into the rocky forbidden lands of the north, and the glass craters beyond even that. The whole trip, Naiad repeated her message over the radio, hoping any fellow Jade Falcons might respond, but to no avail.

Over the rocks they loped, the ever-present eye of Várri following their every move, only now it didn't seem quite so far away.



Surrender was the pirates' only option, yet still they refused. The small outpost was but one stop before heading to Mikkelik, the Cursed Kingdom, where the Várri capital once stood and pirates now ruled. It was defended with only a couple vehicle-mounted guns and a machine-gun emplacement, and the carnage ended in short order.

Konily was horrified at the power BattleMechs could unleash in combat, and he imagined what the fall of this world had looked like with hundreds of Star League 'Mechs dropping from the sky to exact their idea of justice.

When it was over, the two walked through the choking fumes that smelled of cooking bodies and burning metal. If Duko was here, he had likely been taken prisoner while relieving himself, gathering supplies, or some such task where he had foolishly dropped his guard. They finally came to the outpost's one sheet-metal building, which was largely intact. Inside, still in his coolant vest and combat togs, an unconscious warrior, clearly savaged by his captors, lay crumpled in the corner.

They dragged him into the sun and splashed him with water. Strung out on the last of his adrenaline, Konily gasped at the sight of life on Duko's face. Naiad remained impassive.

"Star Captain..." Duko managed through busted lips.

"How many got off the DropShip?"

His head lolled to the side as he tried to maintain consciousness.

"Duko! We need to find the Society outpost and raise the JumpShip. Did anyone else make it?" she demanded.

"No..."

"No one?! The entire Trinary—"

"No...outpost..."

Her breath caught in her throat.

"Sharga...fought him... No Society on Várri... JumpShip gone..."

Naiad stood, and stepped back in a daze.

Konily pieced the meaning together from their earlier conversations: Sharga, Naiad's science officer, thought to be free from the corruption of Etienne's scientist-caste cabal, had lured them to Várri. There were no escaping Society warriors regrouping here, just a chance to wipe out a shipload of loyal Falcon warriors where no trace of them would ever be found.

"Naiad," Konily said, "he's not breathing. Naiad!"

She slumped against the side of the damaged building, and all the fight visibly left her.

Konily walked over shortly after and stood before her. "He's dead."

She gave no response.

"Are we still—"

"There is nowhere to go. There is nothing here, no enemies, no honor, just endless sand and the last traces of a dead world best forgotten."

"Some of your people might still be alive."

"Our JumpShip was either destroyed or left the system. We have no way of contacting it anyway. Even if anyone else is alive, we are trapped here. With the offspring of the worst people that *ever lived*."

"Hey! We didn't turn this world into a barren desert!" he shouted at the sulking warrior. "Your damn Star League did that! No one from the Republic is even alive anymore. We barely even know what it was!"

She turned away, refusing to look at him in the eye.

"It was all three hundred years ago, right? It doesn't matter anymore." He moved closer and sat facing out into the desert with her. "It's a big planet, maybe there's some kind of life for you here."

"Moon."

"What?"

"This is a moon, *that* is the planet," she said, pointing to Várri as she stared at the ground. "*We* are orbiting *it*. The whole star system is called Várri. It—there is..." She gave up trying to explain it. "You are right, it does not matter."

"Do you need to bury Duko?"

"We do not do that," she replied, shaking her head while looking over at the body. She walked to her dead comrade, pulled a bracelet off his wrist, and pocketed it.

"We should take what we can and get going," she said, looking Konily in the eye with some of her resolve having returned.

"Where are we gonna go?"

"Where did you see the DropShip crash?"

"The largest part looked like it hit far east of here, beyond that tallest peak."

"Okay..." she said, straightening her back, "then we go east. We can decide from there."

Naiad scanned the horizon, looking over this world with her piercing blue eyes.

"After all," she said, "it is a big planet."





UNIT DIGEST: SEYCHELLES' STONEHEARTS

MICHAEL J. CIARAVELLA

Nickname: The Ivory Knights

Affiliation: Mercenary

CO: Colonel Reynard Seychelles

Force Composition: 2 heavy 'Mech companies, 1 heavy armor company, 1 mechanized infantry battalion, aerospace/ DropShip support

Unit Abilities: When determining equipment, the player may choose any option on a Republic of the Sphere Random Assignment Table instead of having to roll. When fielding a force consisting of 'Mechs, combat vehicles, and infantry, the Stonehearts gain a +1 Initiative bonus.

Parade Scheme: Black with cerulean blue accents

UNIT HISTORY

Little is publicly known about the mercenary command known as Seychelles' Stonehearts. Acting as an elite unit of troubleshooters, the Stonehearts are among dozens of mercenary commands that have come into existence following the fall of the Republic, taking up the slack where the Republic military had previously stood. Purposefully vague about their origins, the Stonehearts cultivate an aura of mystery, refusing to provide any sort of history before their appearance on Keid in 3151.

As a point of fact, the Stonehearts are intentionally drawing connections to other units with mysterious origins, such as Wolf's Dragoons or the false Red Corsair: a unit coming mysteriously into being, far too well equipped, and seeking to take whatever contracts they can, seemingly without interest in the politics of the Inner Sphere. The fact that they appeared with a large selection of Clan weaponry, recently supplemented with spoils from the Republic, has drawn

conclusions that they are an expeditionary force from the Homeworld Clans, or a Clan offshoot like the Minnesota Tribe or the Dark Caste.

The truth of their origin is hidden in plain sight: the Stonehearts were an independent unit of Ghost Knights and RAF regulars originally formed by Paladin Janella Lakewood, the head of the Republic's Department of Military Intelligence, as an emergency fallback to evacuate Exarch Devlin Stone and his command team off-planet if necessary. Under the nominal command of Colonel Reynard Seychelles, the contingency plan was never activated due to Exarch's refusal to abandon Terra. Following Paladin Lakewood's capture by Clan Wolf forces and the death of the Exarch, the Stonehearts immediately departed Terra for Keid.

In the wake of the fall of the Republic and the brutal terms of dissolution placed on it by the ilKhan, Seychelles felt no obligation to obey the terms of the Republic Armed Forces' order to stand down and disband. The Stonehearts have taken advantage of the chaos following the rise of the ilClan to make a name for themselves. While their lack of history and reputation should have worked against them, their willingness to take on difficult missions and recent successes have attracted attention.

The Stonehearts are doing especially well in former Republic worlds, where their stylings and color scheme make them a source of familiarity to those who grew up in the Republic. Their work on the worlds outside the former Prefecture X also provides cover for their current secondary mission: accessing and emptying hidden RAF equipment caches that had been established to support RAF forces.

New recruits to the unit undergo major background checks by the Ghost Knights. Anyone who does not receive a sterling bill of health is immediately disqualified from consideration, and most of the recent recruits have not been told of the unit's secret past.

Despite their successes, the Stonehearts are also plagued with a sharp divide among the command ranks. While Colonel Seychelles is nominally in command, several of the Ghost Knights are pushing back against his authority, which is factionalizing the unit. Seychelles seeks to rebuild the Republic in Stone's image, while the Ghost Knights seem content to do good wherever they can.

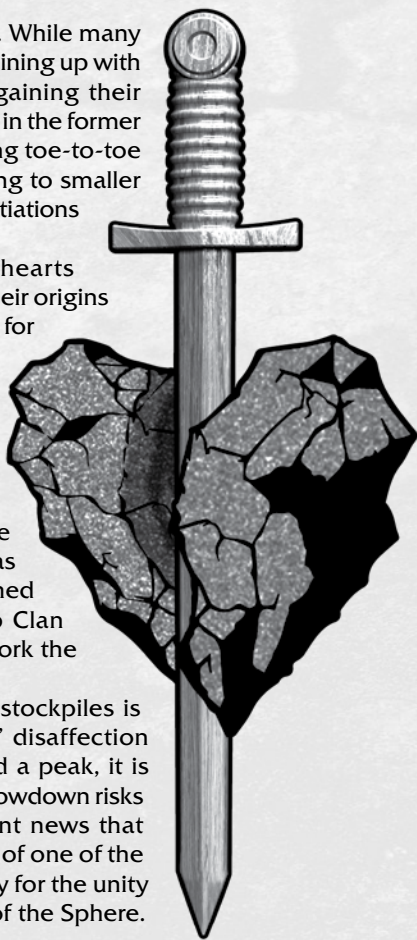
During the unit's initial formation, Mason Dunne, one of the ranking Ghost Knights, was seen by many as a moderating force, but he has become increasingly disinterested in the day-to-day operations in the wake of the long silence from his partner, Paladin Lakewood. Despite recent martial successes and the increasing stockpile of equipment the Stonehearts have accumulated, the unrest in the unit threatens to tear a rift between the two factions.

Colonel Seychelles is quietly reaching out to other fledgling mercenary units, hoping to find additional forces he can bring under his command. Once their current mission is done, he plans to finally let

the Ghost Knights go their own way. While many independent units are interested in joining up with the former Republic warriors and gaining their technology, the thought of remaining in the former Republic worlds and potentially going toe-to-toe with the nascent ilClan is unappealing to smaller outfits, and has kept any serious negotiations from progressing too far.

Although some of the Stonehearts worry that the ilKhan may discover their origins and feel obligated to hunt them down for violating Stone's stand-down order, in reality, the ilClan is not suspicious of the Stonehearts at all, finding their existence beneficial to the ilKhan's master plan. By taking on speculative missions in the former Republic worlds, the Stonehearts are providing aid and assistance in areas where the ilClan has not yet established itself; this will allow any follow-up Clan forces to capitalize on the groundwork the Stonehearts have already laid.

As the number of hidden RAF stockpiles is dwindling, and Colonel Seychelles' disaffection with the Ghost Knights has reached a peak, it is only a matter of time before a final showdown risks splitting the Stonehearts. The recent news that the colonel has caught the attention of one of the House Lords bodes especially poorly for the unity of this final vestige of the Republic of the Sphere.



COMPOSITION

Originally formed as a combined-arms battalion with infantry support using extensive amounts of Clan-made equipment, the Stonehearts currently also field a wide variety of Republic 'Mechs and armor due to stripping former Ghost Knight safehouses and secret Republic armament depots. This access to so much former Republic equipment puts the Stonehearts in the rare position of having more raw equipment than personnel, especially due to the high need for secrecy. Whether Colonel Seychelles will relax his recruitment policy to take advantage of his materiel reserves remains to be seen.





GHOST SHIPS GALORE: THE PRIDE OF NEW SAMARKAND

STEPHEN TOROPOV

Article posted to the *Naval Gazing* forum on the Buena Planetary Infonet, 15 December 3148

Welcome back, dear readers, to another installment of Ghost Ships Galore! Today, we look into the mysterious fate of the DCS *Pride of New Samarkand*. The third *Kyushu*-class frigate, it entered service in November 3058 alongside its sibling ship the *Galedon Explorer*, and within months of the much-heralded launching of the *Dieron Star*. Boasting impressive arsenals and the capacity to transport a regiment of 'Mechs each, these three ships signaled the Draconis Combine's enthusiastic commitment to a renewed space navy in response to the Clan threat. Yet within five years of slipping spacedock at Midway Shipyards, the *Pride* was quietly scrubbed from the rolls of the Draconis Combine Admiralty, with no obvious cause. How was such a potent symbol of the Dragon's might, a one-ship invasion flotilla capable of subjugating entire planets, suddenly written off without a word?

The truth, so far as this intrepid investigatory team can determine, is that not even the mighty Order of the Five Pillars knows for sure. Reliable sources within the military intelligence community suggest the Draconis Combine Mustered Soldiery has never closed its investigation into the matter, but no significant developments have come to light in at least a decade. However, the previously undisclosed circumstances of the *Pride's* disappearance, provided to our column by a retired Lyran Intelligence Corps naval attaché who asked to remain anonymous, hold tantalizing clues.

As the preparations for Operation Bulldog and Task Force Serpent were finalized, it seems the *Pride of New Samarkand* was entrusted with a top-secret operation supporting those grand undertakings. Thanks to

their fruitful partnership with ComStar's Explorer Corps, the Admiralty had identified a Smoke Jaguar Deep Periphery supply base known as Transfer Facility 4. The *Pride*, fully loaded with an ad hoc regiment of volunteers, was to overwhelm this way station and interdict the expected Smoke Jaguar reinforcement and resupply convoys once Bulldog commenced. In order to maintain surprise, this mission was to take place under a strict communications blackout until such time as the *Pride* received a recall code via a Combine-produced black box. The vessel embarked under these orders on 13 May 3059, coinciding with the launch of Operation Bird Dog. The *Pride of New Samarkand* never returned.

Given the secrecy of this mission, it was not until Bulldog's resounding success caused the Smoke Jaguars to retreat en masse to Huntress that the Admiralty realized anything was amiss. The recall code was sent, alongside new orders for the *Pride* to link up with Prince Victor Steiner-Davion's flotilla as it raced to reinforce Task Force Serpent. The *Pride's* black box sent back no confirmation message. The Bulldog flotilla sent a scouting force to Transfer Facility 4 as they rushed by the system, but found it empty of both Clanners and the *Pride*, with no signs of major naval engagements. Unable to stop for a search operation, the flotilla pressed on, hoping in vain to rendezvous with the *Pride of New Samarkand* along the way. Following the Great Refusal, Jaguar POWs and captured records reported no encounters with the *Pride*, though the garrison of Transfer Facility 4 was also missing in action. A more thorough search conducted on the return journey found a series of navigational marker buoys left by the *Pride*, but the trail petered out just short of Transfer Facility 4. Dedicated rescue efforts continued until the outbreak of the First Combine-Dominion War made them untenable, and the *Pride of New Samarkand*, its attendant DropShips, and all 863 souls aboard were quietly declared MIA on 1 January 3063.

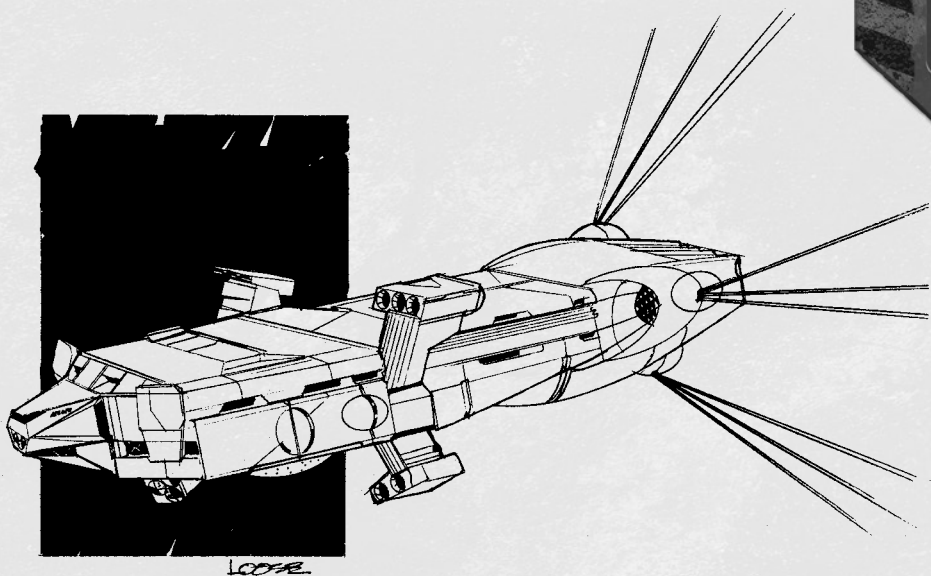
In the near century since the *Pride's* disappearance, many theories have been forwarded as to the ship's fate and whereabouts. Kuritan hardliners initially insisted that the irregular regiment aboard the ship, mostly mercenaries contracted by the new Star League, must have mutinied and taken it to be impounded by the Davions. Alternatively, some investigators suggest that elements of the *Kokuryu-kai*—the Black Dragon Society—may have suborned the vessel for use in later plotting. Following the outbreak of the Jihad, much suspicion landed on the Explorer Corps liaison team assigned to guide the *Pride* to its destination. Could they have been infiltrators loyal to the Word of Blake?

By the 3080s, all three of these theories seemed less credible, as any of those factions would surely have made use of such an impressive asset during the Jihad, and the ship remained stubbornly missing. An Interstellar Expeditions survey team conducted a trip to Transfer Facility 4 in 3087, and reported that it had been converted

into a Ghost Bear surveillance station and that they were forcibly escorted out of the system without finding any trace of the *Pride*.

As the years passed, more outlandish possibilities were floated. JärnFolk traders and captured Marian Hegemony pirates both have reported sightings of the ship or its marooned crew, though the details of these accounts are sketchy and contradictory. The most credible sighting is a report that a ship matching the *Pride's* displacement was detected by the commercial JumpShip *Floralinda* in the vicinity of the Outworlds Wastes, though the *Floralinda's* captain reported it jumped away rather than answer his hails. And of course, as with any Deep Periphery mystery, some swear the *Pride of New Samarkand* encountered a roving band of Minnesota Tribe warriors and was somehow integrated into their fleet, though evidence for this theory is circumstantial at best. Notably, none of these purported sightings occurred in the three-year window between the *Pride's* disappearance and when the DCA updated the ship's official status to MIA. The simplest answer would be a misjump, though even that could mean the hulk of this lost vessel waits in the void to be rediscovered.

As always, leave your theories and leads on the *Pride of New Samarkand* in the comments below! Next time, we'll investigate the FWLS *Despiser*, infamous for bombarding Solaris City in 2820. What caused its fateful misjump, and where did it end up? Watch your feed to find out!





TALES FROM THE CRACKED CANOPY: THE RED WRAITH

HARPER BRAND

At the Cracked Canopy, a MechWarrior bar on the gaming world of Solaris VII, a Memory Wall displays mementos of glorious victories and bitter defeats, of honorable loyalties and venomous betrayals, of lifelong friendships and lost loves. Each enshrined object ensures that the past will not be forgotten and the future is something worth fighting for.

INTERNATIONAL ZONE
SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
11 NOVEMBER 3084

“And then he said, ‘Apart from the dessert, Max, how did you like the wedding?’”

Leo laughed politely at the boorish patron’s bad joke while cleaning some glasses Sedge had left sitting out. He didn’t care for the joke, but happy patrons meant recurring patrons, so if it meant enduring some bad comedy on occasion to get folks like this current blowhard to keep parting with their C-bills, then he would gladly do it. The better part of tact meant not telling people how you truly felt about them, so he told most folks what they wanted to hear when they wanted to hear it. Make sure drinks were served, stroke some egos, nod at stories he knew were outright lies told straight through clenched buttocks.

But, all things considered, this kind of theater was one of the easier parts of his job. The harder part? Dealing with the *unhappy* customers.

And one of those sat in the back corner, tucked into a booth meant for two. Only, she was alone—and as often as she’d come here, Leo had never once seen her with company. She had striking features—high cheekbones, a tawny complexion, haunted hazel eyes,

and scarlet headband and a long coif of raven hair in wiry curls that barely concealed the MechWarrior-style undercut at the temples. Were he honest with himself, Leo would've found her captivating. But every time his idle gaze drifted over to her, those hollow pits in her eyes seemed to catch his, to suck away part of his soul, and he would look away guiltily, as though a schoolboy caught staring at his crush.

She'd come here every night for the past several days, always in the same booth, the same military-style outfit, though lacking any identifying insignia or noteworthy features save for the headband. And every night, she carried that same haunted look, that unshakable pall of darkness, whenever their eyes met. Leo knew better than to try hitting on patrons, but this concern was more for a fellow human being than a man besotted with her presence.

Not truly listening to the blowhard at the bar top anymore, Leo's gaze wandered over the man's shoulder, where her unsettling look had snared him again. Guilt gnawed at him, but there had to be a reason she kept showing up, kept looking his way. Was she an old finishing-school acquaintance he'd forgotten, perhaps? He had to unravel this mystery before it chewed straight through him.

He smile-and-nodded at the patron, then patted Sedge on the shoulder and asked him to take over for a few. And while Leo headed out from behind the bar, the blowhard had already started bending Sedge's ear with another tale featuring a truth quotient approaching zero.

Poor Sedge, but the kid'd have to learn patron-tact sooner or later, and this was some Class A training...

Leo made a show of wandering around the Canopy, checking on various booths here and there, just the head manager making sure everyone was having a good experience, see if they needed anything. No sense worrying that lone woman by beelining to her booth straightaway; he'd get there eventually. And eventually, he did.

"Everything all right, ma'am?" he asked, hedging his words on their double meaning, as not only did her haunted gaze seem even more deeply troubled this close up, her glass of Timbiqui Dark was also nearly empty.

"You happen to have anything from Terra?" she asked, her voice huskier than he'd imagined.

"Not on tap, no. But I've got a few genuine Scotches. I'll warn you though," he said with a chuckle to lighten the mood, "they're the opposite of cheap. But if you don't mind me saying so, looks like you're having a rough day and want to forget it, so if you want, I'll give you one on the house. Owner owes me a favor anyway."

"I appreciate the offer, but I'm not here to *forget*."

Leo nodded, surprised that she still hadn't volunteered anything about why she'd been looking over at him so often. Time to rip off the bandage.

"Is there...anything *else* I can do for you?"

"What do you mean?"

Leo shrugged. "You've been in here every night for the past week, and you keep looking over at me, like you need something, or maybe you know me from somewhere. Something grinding at your actuators?"

She closed her eyes and laughed, the hollow laugh of a war-weary cynic. "*Lo siento*. Didn't mean to. I...just keep looking at the *Wall*."

"The Memory Wall?" Shame and humility struck him like a land train. *Not everything is about you, Leopold*. "Oh... Sure. Uh, do you know one of the things up there?"

She shook her head. "No. But I've been trying to decide whether to give you something for it."

Leo nodded. He'd heard this so many times before and knew exactly how to handle it. "Tell you what. Why don't you tell me what you're considering, and I'll tell you if I think you should put it up there on the Wall or keep it. Fair enough?"

She nodded. The hands she'd kept under the table moved to the tabletop. For a split second, Leo worried she was going to brandish a hold-out pistol at him—not his first time for that, either—but her hands came up empty. What was she playing at?

Her right hand twisted a ring from her left thumb—a thick band of white metal, with two lines of copper running parallel to the edges. She set it on the table in front of her, between her hands, and she stared at it a few moments before looking up.

"I used to serve with the Word of Blake Militia."

All around her, Leo heard patrons audibly bristle at the mention of "Blake." Folks were still pissed about Blakists, even now, three years after the war had officially ended, but Leo flashed them all an angry paternal glower that said *You make trouble, I will throw you out and then throw your drink out on you*.

"Pay 'em no mind," he said. "Now, what were you saying?"

MARLENA'S STORY

AMARILLO, TERRA

WORD OF BLAKE PROTECTORATE

25 MARCH 3068

Truth be told, I don't like admitting that I used to serve in the Blakist military. Folks still look at me weird, either in anger 'cause friends or family members died at Blakist hands during the war, or with pity for getting "caught up in their brainwashing schemes."

For the record, I never bought into any of the Blakist party-line nonsense, the "Third Transfer" and such. I just wanted to protect people

I knew couldn't protect themselves, and serving in a Division stationed on Terra seemed the best way to do that. We were all told ComStar didn't care about the people on Terra, that they would enact total war to reclaim what they felt was rightfully theirs, so a lot of us feared they would resort to desperate measures. When the ComStar fleet appeared in Terran space, ready to launch a ground invasion, everyone in my unit held their collective breath, hoping and praying that the nearly two dozen WarShips converging on humanity's cradle wouldn't call down orbital fire and doom the very people I'd sworn to protect. People like my son, Dimas, back at our base near Houston.

Instead, that fire mostly happened out in space. At night we could look up at the sky and see the flash-paper bursts of WarShips being blown apart, the comets and meteors of their fragments streaming down to break up in reentry. The smaller explosions we could see, each one little more than the puff of a moth hitting a bug zapper, represented hundreds of lives being snuffed out aboard a destroyed DropShip.

On one hand, these troops were coming to take our lives, to raze the entire planet in order to reconquer it. On the other hand, even my military conditioning hadn't numbed me to the incredible loss of life happening out there in space. Soldiers should be allowed to fight, honorably, if possible, but what we witnessed on those first few nights left me sick to my stomach. This wasn't an honorable fight. It was a *massacre*.

My husband, Roldán, must've known how I felt that first night, because he held my hand as we sat on that hilltop near Houston and watched what the other folks in my Level II called "the fireworks show," like it was a goddamn Cinco de Mayo celebration. They all laughed about it, made rude gestures of vindication at a starry night filled with far too many supernovas. Roldán, though, he didn't say much of anything, just sat and took in the spectacle alongside me in his trademark stoic silence.

Normally a married couple wouldn't serve in the same Division, let alone the same Level II, but through some clerical error, we ended up together. Most folks who knew chalked it up to Precentor Martial Cameron St. Jamais shuffling around personnel so often in whatever three-card monte game he had going, but I knew better. The real reason? I think it's because I never changed my name after getting married. Roldán often joked about taking my name instead, but he never did, and we told folks that neither of us wanted to relearn our signatures.

Whatever the cause, I was glad to have him there that night. It made watching the sky and all of that death a bit easier to bear. Little did we know that, despite how many ComStar DropShips got shot down in that first few days of fighting, a different kind of hell would soon be descending on us.

It was a few days later that our Level II moved from alert status to deployment. The incoming Com Guard troops had scattered like straw in a tornado, dropping all over North America and Europe, and were trying to connect with others, to—according to the commander of our Division—form an attack force capable of threatening the people of Terra.

I later learned this statement should've been my first clue that something about this whole situation was wrong.

Our mission, in theory, was simple. Ninth Division was split up and deployed in Level IIs to hunt down any Com Guard stragglers we could find in western North America. If we could catch one or two of their 'Mechs out in the open, then we could easily swarm and neutralize them before they could link up with their compatriots.

The first few were easy fodder. Even though the enemy was painted in camouflage instead of an easy-to-spot ComStar white, their visual patterns offered no help: more often than not, we were fighting against woodland camo in an arid environment—further proof of how badly the Com Guards' landing operation had been botched. We shot each 'Mech down as it fled, in skirmishes costing us nothing more than some armor plating, easily replaced in the field. Spirits were high; we knew because of our efforts, the invaders would not prevail.

That wave of exhilaration lasted us until we were chasing down a pair of Com Guard 'Mechs in the foothills of the Sandia Mountains. That was when we heard the news about Houston.

Where our son was barracked.

Madre de Dios, I...to this day, I can't even think about it without feeling like I've been punched in the solar plexus.

Our Level III's CO, Demi-Precentor Majors, told us that enough of the Com Guard's 394th Division had regrouped to pose a credible threat, and had somehow gotten control of Houston, the site of an important Word of Blake base. One of Ninth Division's Level IIIs had moved in to take the city back, and made decent headway in just the first few hours of the campaign. The Com Guard troops fought tooth and nail to hold onto their gains, but elements of the Ninth's Crushing Reality III-delta overwhelmed them.

And in that final moment of desperation, the few remaining Com Guards nuked the whole city. Put everything to the torch with nuclear fire.

At that moment, the planet stopped spinning beneath me. I couldn't get in touch with my son no matter how hard I tried, even using military protocols that weren't intended for contacting civilians. Every line into the city was nothing but static.

The barracks where Dimas lived had been completely obliterated. And it was all ComStar's fault.

For days I blamed the enemy for turning my little three-person family into a duo. Just Roldán and me left. I let that fire burn until I could

barely think, until getting into the cockpit of my *Wraith* every day was the only thing that seemed to help me forget.

I drove numb across the Sandias in search of ComStar invaders. I wanted to kill them all for what they had done to me. To us. They had destroyed half of everything I held dear, and for that they deserved to burn in the same nuclear fire they had unleashed. A mushroom cloud for a mushroom cloud.

But let me tell you: if any of the 'Mechs or support elements in our Level II had indeed been equipped with tactical nukes, there is no doubt in my mind that I would not be sitting here right now. I would have rammed a nuke straight down the enemy's throat if that's what it took, taking myself out with it. But by the grace of whatever higher power there is, our battles proved more difficult, and we lived on.

Except for our commander, Adept Balian, who didn't even last our first post-Houston engagement. His *Grim Reaper* got cored during an ambush outside White Sands, in the northern Chihuahuan Desert, and when we tracked down his ejected command couch, it was empty, with some signs of a struggle.

The real consequence of Balian being MIA, however, was it put Roldán, the seniormost adept, in command of our Level II. In any other circumstances, a husband commanding their wife would've been a bad deal, but he guided us all with an even hand and didn't show me any favoritism—not that I expected or wanted any. We had a job to do and revenge to deliver, and that was enough to hold us all together—at least at first.

The remaining five of us—my *Wraith*, Roldán's *Lightray*, Wheatley's *Chameleon*, Tang's *Wyvern*, and Medici's *Initiate*—tracked the Com Guard stragglers into the outskirts of Albuquerque, where we completely lost their trail. That meant either we were dealing with hide-and-seek experts, or the locals were harboring them.

My first thought, I am now ashamed to admit, was *Why don't we just obliterate the whole city until the people surrender the enemy?* Simple and easy, right? But then I thought of Dimas, and his teenage face, being charred to a nuclear cinder. He'd done nothing to deserve such a fate, and the entirety of Albuquerque wasn't harboring fugitives; only a few handfuls were likely responsible.

As furious as I was against the Com Guard, what right did I, a Word of Blake Militia adept, have to make such a call? Resorting to ComStar tactics would make us no different than them.

We found all but two of the Com Guard 'Mechs in a warehouse on the outskirts of town. They had been disassembled when the pilots went to ground because it's easier to hide BattleMech parts on a magres scan than to hide an intact 'Mech. From what we could tell, these still-missing MechWarriors had prepared to tuck in for a long-haul campaign once the heat—i.e., us—had died down enough that they could reactivate and terrorize the populace further. The more telling thing, though:

these pilots had help. A MechWarrior can't take apart a 'Mech without some serious heavy equipment. And that meant active collaborators.

But why would anyone living on Terra want to collaborate with ComStar, especially after they'd blasted an entire city into atoms?

I asked myself that the entire time we were rounding up all of the dozens of suspected collaborators into the fenced-in lot around the warehouse. I asked myself that again, while sitting in my cockpit, awaiting orders on how to handle this situation, with my guns trained on the people milling about below like angry convicts trapped in a prison yard.

Roldán's *Lightray* loomed above the traitors. "ComStar sympathizers," he announced via his external speakers, "tell us where you are hiding the Com Guard MechWarriors, and we will grant you leniency. Remain silent, and you give us no choice but to imprison you for your crimes."

An older man who carried himself like a ringleader stepped forward and shouted loud enough that my external mics could pick him up clearly: "Go ahead and shoot us then, you brainwashed murderers! That's what you're going to do anyway, isn't it? You'll kill us all and blame it on ComStar—just like you did with Houston!"

At first I didn't even register what the man had said, but as he and Roldán went back and forth, I rolled it all over in my head again.

ComStar had been blamed for the nuking of Houston, and I had believed that because that's what our superiors had told us. But what I couldn't figure out was how ComStar would've had the means to destroy the city. Our navy had already wrecked all but one of the Com Guard WarShips, and the *Invisible Truth* was busy fighting for her life somewhere beyond orbit, so Houston's destruction via nuke couldn't have come from her—not with the kind of pinpoint precision that had consumed the city. The Com Guard DropShips and drop pods had to make emergency landings, and most of the ground forces that survived consisted of hardy 'Mechs, not the more fragile artillery launchers capable of launching nukes powerful enough to wipe Houston from the map, so the nukes couldn't have come from them. That left only shorter-ranged tactical nukes, ones with yields small enough to take out a few blocks at a time, so the Com Guards would've needed an impressive stockpile of them to obliterate an entire sprawling city, something I wouldn't expect a string of scattered combat drops to have ready access to.

And then it occurred to me that ComStar had been defending Houston *from* the Word, not trying to destroy it. What tactical advantage would they have gained from destroying an entire city along with their own troops? Sure, it would deprive the Word of some troops, but when you're outnumbered in enemy territory, you do everything possible to maintain your numbers and hold out for reinforcements for as long as you can. There were still plenty of ComStar troops planetside, so the

Houston contingent had no reason whatsoever to commit suicide just to spite the Word of Blake.

A wounded, angry, and toothless cur is itself not truly evil; if it attacks you it is merely trying to survive. Instead, the more pernicious evil is when someone got bit because they deliberately poked the dog with a sharp stick multiple times and they try to convince you that *they* are the true victim, that you should hate the *dog*, not them. The evil here is because if you believe them and put the dog down to avenge the biting victim, you feel no remorse, and the person who incited the violence walks away with their life.

ComStar was the wounded dog in this scenario. The Word of Blake had stabbed them enough times to make them attack Terra, and then blamed ComStar for defending themselves, then told us to hate the dog and put it down.

And like dutiful soldiers, we'd done just that.

But all of these mental gymnastics led me to the conclusion that the Com Guard troops in Houston hadn't the means to destroy the city with nuclear weapons; they couldn't have.

And that meant the Word of Blake had most likely launched the nukes that killed my son.

The government I served had killed my son and tried to blame it on the enemy, the bleeding dog backed into a corner. And there I was, with my *Wraith's* guns pointed not at the wounded animal itself, but at the people who had tried to *help* that animal escape danger so it wouldn't have to bite anyone anymore.

The comm clicked on in my neurohelmet. Roldán. "All units, this is Hearthfire Two. Fire on these traitors on my mark."

At that moment, everything turned upside down. My commanding officer—my own husband—was ordering me to summarily execute civilians. We were supposed to be fighting ComStar to *protect* the civilians of this planet, regardless of their guilt. Criminals like these were to be *tried*, not executed on the spot.

I keyed a private channel. "Roldán, *mi amor*, what are you doing?"

"I am just following orders," he replied, an almost machinelike coldness to his voice.

And that line triggered a memory of some history class I'd taken as a kid. Ever heard of the Nuremberg Trials?

Now, I don't know if you've ever served, but most militaries have a uniform code of military justice, and one of the most important items says it is a soldier's moral imperative to refuse to obey an unlawful order. In other words, if your CO orders you to commit human rights violations and you are arrested for it later on, then saying "I was just following orders" isn't a viable defense. Folks in the Nuremberg Trials after the Second World War on Terra tried to pull that, and the prosecutors laughed them all the way into a prison cell or an execution.

The last thing I wanted was to end up in a courtroom, arguing my way out of my own execution by trying to rely on the so-called Nuremberg defense.

And as I zoomed in on those faces below, I wondered how many of them were truly innocent like Dimas, bystanders in the schemes of those truly responsible for hiding the ComStar pilots. Must they all die to cover the guilt of so many?

And were they truly even guilty to begin with?

"I will give you until the count of five to comply," Roldán announced to the civilians below. "Five."

"Four."

"Three."

Roldán's *Lightray* opened fire with its lasers two seconds too early—either from nerves or because he never intended to give them the full count, I'll never know. But what I do know is the three other 'Mechs left in in our Level II joined him.

I'll never forget that look on those faces, as their mouths split open in abject horror at what was happening to them. I'll never forget the sound of those screams that cut through the hail of gunfire. Lasers flashed some faces away into atoms, bullets riddled other bodies apart. I wanted to throw up so bad that I had to let go of my control sticks a moment and double over as much as my safety harness would allow.

But Roldán and the others just kept on firing. There were several dozen people down there, and it would take time to kill them all, and no one was letting up. No one. They had all become murderers.

I radioed him. "Roldán."

No response.

"Roldán!"

Still nothing.

So I did the only thing that made sense to me. I turned my *Wraith* at the waist and fired my right-arm pulse laser point-blank at Roldán's *Lightray*.

I'll be honest in saying I didn't actually intend to hurt him. I was just trying to get his attention, to shake him out of whatever murderous trance he'd fallen into, maybe someday forgive him for committing this atrocity. But even unintended shots can drill straight through a pane of ferroglass canopy and bathe the cockpit with enough energy to incinerate the interior.

I didn't even register what I'd done until his 'Mech was falling to the ground, until my Level-mates were traversing their own torsos to face me.

In that moment, I should've been terrified of three 'Mechs simultaneously training their guns my direction, but all I recall realizing was that this meant my compatriots had stopped killing those civilians—and some of them were still alive.

Those few seconds my Level-mates took to realize what had happened are likely another reason I'm still alive. Do you know how difficult it is, psychologically, to fire on a friendly, to adjust your targeting system to designate that green-cared unit as a red-cared threat? Their hesitation and disbelief let me shift into survival-and-evasion mode, and on autopilot, unable to think of my husband's fate, I kicked my foot pedals and launched my *Wraith* to relative safety behind a nearby hill.

They may have hesitated in firing at me, but I did not. All of them were both legally and morally guilty of committing atrocious acts by following unlawful orders, and that made it all the easier to shoot at them. And the added benefit of them chasing me was they were no longer shooting at people who couldn't defend themselves. The farther away I could draw my Level-mates, the more time the civilians would have to retreat to safety.

But as I ducked and weaved among buildings and hills, as I narrowly avoided lasers and missiles, I was all alone. No one would be coming to help me. Only my wits, my training, and my 'Mech were keeping me alive. I took a few hits here and there—nothing major—but I knew my armor wouldn't hold forever. As long as I could find someplace safe, somewhere I could explain to command that my unit had received and executed unlawful orders, *then* I could rest—and find some way to mourn the loss of my entire family.

I was alone in the cockpit that day, but I want to believe the spirit of my son helped me take those first steps of revenge against his true killers. My first shots of opportunity kneecapped Tang's *Wyvern*, slowing it enough to fall behind in the chase, but I was taking laser and missile hits left and right, which chewed up my armor until it was the consistency of a broken eggshell on a hardboiled egg.

I had almost reached the Sandias when my scopes showed my pursuers were just about to catch up with me. The whole situation felt *wrong*. My Level-mates had done a fully immoral act, which justified my retaliation. But there I was, fully in the right, about to get gunned down like a cornered dog, even though I had done the morally right thing.

It felt like the universe was laughing at me. Punishing me for my attempt to maintain my moral compass. I mean, why follow the righteous path if it only leads to destruction at the hands of naked evil?

I can't tell you the right answer to that, but as far as I'm concerned, if enough people walk a righteous path, the people who see them will be inspired enough to fight back against the evil and keep it from triumphing. It's a nice thought, sure, but out there in the Sandia foothills, there was no one around to witness my stand except roadrunners, horny toads, and tumbleweed. My Level-mates gunning me down out here would score no points for righteousness.

I don't know what possessed me, but in that moment, I decided I was sick of running. My son and husband were dead, and I had nothing

left to live for: even if my Level-mates showed me mercy and captured me, I'd either languish in a prison cell or be executed for treason.

So I turned around to either face my sentence or to deliver one of my own.

Wheatley and Medici were ahead of me in their *Chameleon* and *Initiate*, near the foot of the slope leading up to the Sandia peak, and in my hesitations, Tang's limping *Wyvern* had also caught up to rejoin the battle. Three-against-one was terrible odds, but that didn't matter anymore.

The moment my large laser pinged its readiness, I thumbed the trigger and melted armor from the *Chameleon's* right leg, making it stumble in its charge, Wheatley's return fire missing me completely. Darting left, I circled Medici's *Initiate* and stabbed it with a flurry of strobing fire from my medium pulse lasers. I hit them whenever and wherever I could, but between my constant fire, the desert heat, and the sudden alarm of a breach in my reactor shielding, my cockpit was baking like I fought on the surface of Sol itself.

A stray hit from the *Initiate's* long-range missiles hit my left knee just as I was about to stomp my foot pedals and leap to a moment's worth of safety, and I tumbled hard, hard enough to almost knock myself unconscious when all 55 tons of my *Wraith* landed on its side on the scrub-covered mountainside. I braced for a killing blow, because as close as my Level-mates were, there was no way I could recover before either Wheatley or Medici came over and shot out my cockpit.

But as I struggled to rise anyway, my comm clicked on.

"*Wraith* pilot," came an unfamiliar voice over an open frequency, "do you need assistance?"

And that was when I saw a pair of battered, desert-camoed Com Guard 'Mechs charging down the hillside from behind the tramway building at the summit, the *Lancelot's* and *Ostroc's* lasers ablaze.

Tang's *Wyvern* crumpled beneath the withering blitzkrieg, and Medici backed her *Initiate* away from the unexpected aggression. Before I could even lever my groaning 'Mech back to its feet, Wheatley's *Chameleon* followed the *Initiate* in retreat.

I took a few potshots at their withdrawing forms but only inflicted minimal damage. Even so, every hit felt like retribution against my son's true killers. I wanted to hunt them down and remove them from this life for what they stood for, for what they had forced me to do, but I was in no shape to offer meaningful pursuit. My *Wraith* was so damaged that I was surprised it could even stand, and with such a limp there was no way I could escape these ComStar heavies, should they decide I was a threat to them.

I half expected their offer of assistance to be a joke, that they would gun me down solely because my paint did not match theirs. But instead, they led me back to where they'd holed up, to the base they had been operating from, an impromptu spot populated by Com

Guard survivors, ComStar sympathizers, and anti-Blakist agitators. They told me some sympathizers in Albuquerque had seen the whole affair at the warehouse, and warned them that my Level II was in the area. But what intrigued them was how one of the Blakists had shot down a fellow Blakist 'Mech before fleeing the scene.

I was wrong about one thing though. There *had* been witnesses to my act of righteousness.

Later that evening, me and my new friends returned to the warehouse, where we found evidence that some of the civilians had managed to escape the massacre. Small victories. We salvaged the mostly intact shell of Roldán's *Lightray*, which meant another 'Mech for their guerrilla arsenal, but this ring here—*clink, clink*—is the main reason I went back. I wanted something to remember him by, even if the memories were painful, y'know?

It's not even a ring, really. It's a gasket sleeve from some actuator hydraulics, and it was the perfect size for his ring finger, so a tech friend embellished it for us as a wedding present. But I've had this for far too long. Sure, it reminds me of him, of my son and all the times we shared—but it also reminds me that he did not even hesitate to fire on helpless civilians. There's just so much pain in this little object, and I think it's time to let it go.

INTERNATIONAL ZONE
SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
11 NOVEMBER 3084

"One of the grand ironies of this whole tragedy is I got taken in by the very same people I'd been sent to hunt down," she said after a long pause. "Those same ComStar MechWarriors on the lam sheltered me as one of their own, and shared all of the atrocities the Word of Blake had committed beyond Terra—all of the death and destruction across so many worlds.

"The Word had willfully kept the people of Terra ignorant of the greater events transpiring in the Inner Sphere. As long as we believed the Word was fighting against our enemies to make the Inner Sphere a safer place, we had no worries. But ComStar and the anti-Blakist contingent on Terra pulled back the thin veneer of Blakist lies, showed me the master I truly served. It didn't take much, though. Even if I hadn't figured out that ComStar couldn't possibly have nuked Houston...well, being ordered to murder civilians without due process is one hell of a smelling salt, believe you me. Took me a long, long time to get over the rug being pulled out from under me."

Leo nodded. He'd heard many tales over the years of how Wobbies had broken free from their shackles and taken up the cause to restore some semblance of order in the hornet's nest the Blakists had started back in '67, but this was the first case of mariticide he'd come across. "It's easy to be blinded by patriotism when patriotism is all you see in front of you," he said. "When you eat, breathe, and drink it twenty-four hours a day, it's easy to fall into that trap. I'm sorry to hear about your husband, but for what it's worth, I'm glad you're still here."

He winced upon realizing she might construe that last as him trying to hit on a war widow, so he changed the subject fast enough that he hoped she wouldn't notice. "So...what'd you do after that?"

"Well, long story short, I spent the next decade doing everything possible to disrupt Blakist operations on Terra. And I mean *everything*. I've got plenty of scars to prove it."

One of the nearby patrons, a big galoot with a bristling beard and a beetled brow, frowned at her. "Hey, lady," he blurted, "what'd you say your name was?"

"I didn't," she said, smart enough not to fall into his trap. "But they call me La Fantasma Roja."

Leo blinked in astonishment, barely able to register her admission before the brute shot up from his seat.

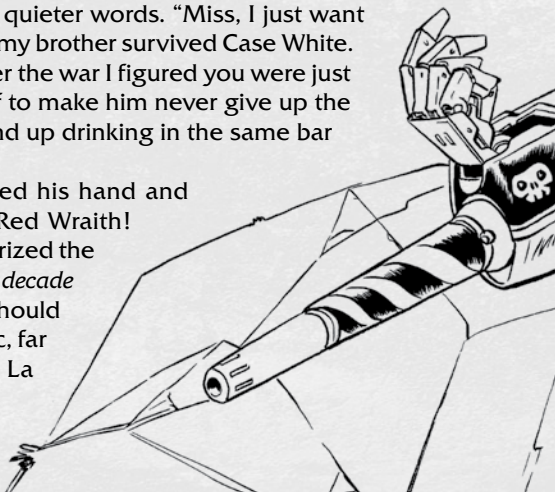
"Wait just a dang-blasted minute," he said, stalking toward their booth with intent.

Leo reached down to the hold-out pistol hidden in his waistband in case there was trouble.

"*You're the Red Wraith,*" the brute declared, loud enough that patrons in the bar across from the Cracked Canopy probably could've heard him. "*The Red Wraith? The bane of TerraSec? The red Wraith no one could seem to kill?*" His eyes lit up with amusement, and he slapped his palm on the tabletop with gusto. "Holy hell, I thought you were just a legend!"

His features softened into an affable smile, and he looked about to cry as he leaned forward with quieter words. "Miss, I just want to say that you're the sole reason my brother survived Case White. He talked about you so much after the war I figured you were just one of the stories he told himself to make him never give up the fight. *Damn*. Never thought I'd end up drinking in the same bar as you. Small universe, eh?"

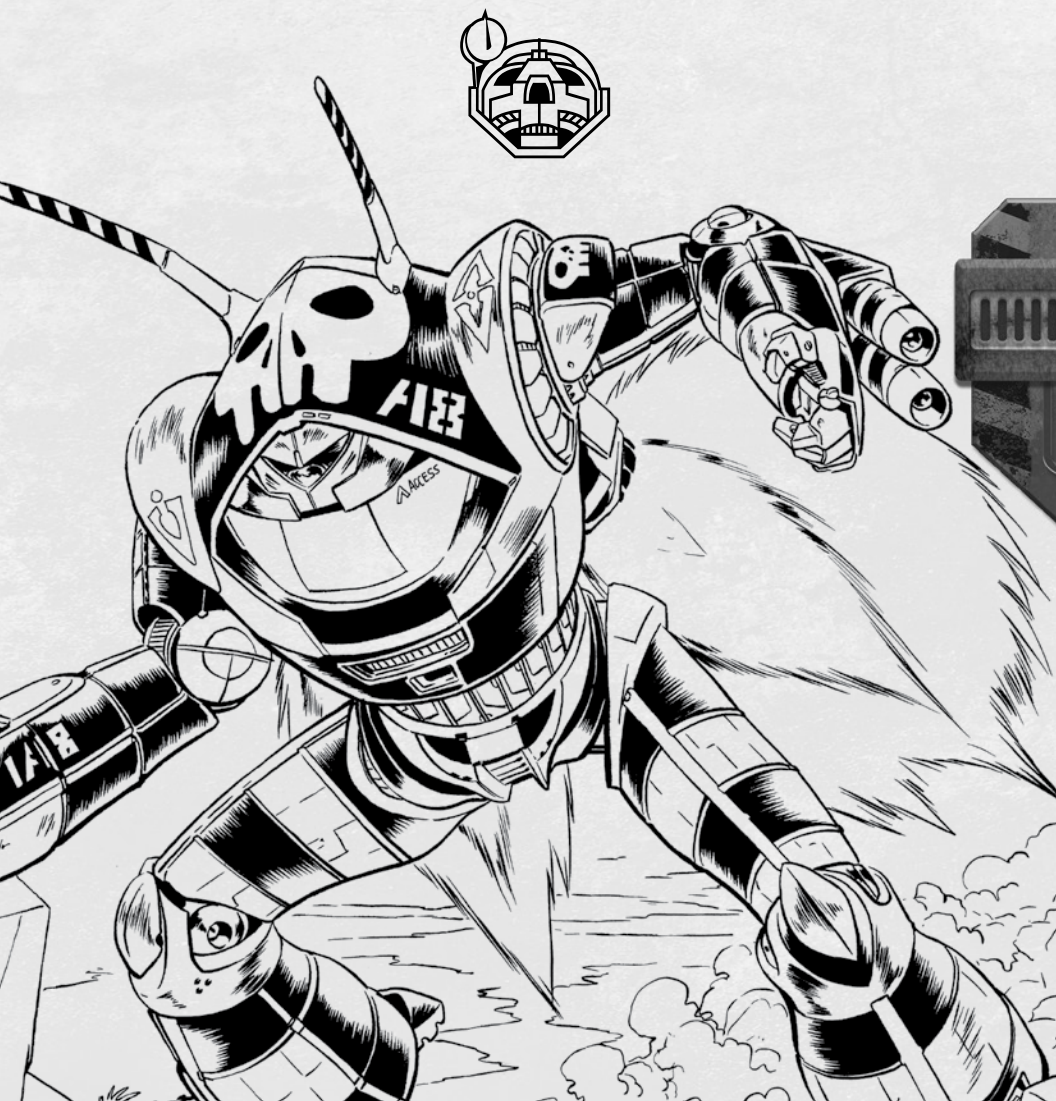
The burly MechWarrior raised his hand and said, "Everyone, this here's the Red Wraith! This woman singlehandedly terrorized the Wobbies on Terra for more than a decade without getting caught, and she should be a damn Paladin of the Republic, far as I'm concerned! Barkeep, get La



Fantasma Roja whatever she wants, and a full round for everyone, on me!"

Leo chuckled at the confluence of events. He'd entertained a lot of patrons, but he'd never shared a booth with a living legend like this. So many people thought the Red Wraith was a bogeyman the Word used to scare their troops, but she was a real flesh-and-blood person, sitting right there in front of him, the story of her tragedy embodied in the ring she was leaving for the Memory Wall.

She pushed the ring across the table to Leo, then looked up at him with a mischievous grin. "Well, as long as he's buying, I wouldn't turn down one of those Scotches."





CHAOS CAMPAIGN SCENARIO: SWORD OF SEDITION

AARON CAHALL

Long metastasizing within the Republic of the Sphere's democratic government, the Senate rebellion was perhaps the most severe and transformative of the challenges facing the Republic in the years after Gray Monday. Though only briefly a military threat, the political ramifications of the insurrection all but forced new Exarch Jonah Levin's hand in the eventual raising of Fortress Republic around the core of the nation.

Cabal

The heart of the rebellion lay in Devlin Stone's handling of the existing nobility present on worlds ceded to the Republic at its birth. The idea of a noble class entitled by birth to rule over the general populace ran completely counter to the meritocratic ideals around which Stone and David Lear intended to build the new nation. At the same time, the two understood that simply tearing away centuries of authority from the entrenched nobles would cause substantial unnecessary conflict. Instead, they incorporated the nobility into the power structure of the Republic in the form of the Senate. Though not a legislative body per se, all candidates for the Senate were required to be noble-born, and the Nobles Court within the Senate was tasked with policing the nobility.

As the Republic prospered under Exarch Stone, the Senate's influence—and thus, the nobles' power—waned. Though still representatives of their people and their worlds, the nobles had little to do beyond attempting to influence policy and refereeing disputes over trade and other minor matters. Three decades after the founding of the Republic, a new generation of nobles came into their inheritance only to find it little more than a hollow title.

Working in concert, a handful of these nobles deployed what influence they still possessed to begin sponsoring and advancing

promising young RAF soldiers—some noble-born themselves, some not—starting in the mid-3120s, hoping to eventually create a cadre of Republic Knights loyal to the Senate, and perhaps one day even Paladins.

Eventually, the senators' conspiracy came to the attention of Paladin Victor Steiner-Davion, who began assembling a damning case against them. On the orders of Senator Geoffrey Mallowes of Skye, assassins slipped into Steiner-Davion's quarters in Santa Fe on 26 November 3134, murdered the legendary leader, and erased his evidence.

The Divine Right

The assassination of Paladin Steiner-Davion marked the start of the Senate rebellion, though an investigation reconstructing the fallen Paladin's work would not uncover the barest outline of the conspiracy for several months. As the extent of the Senate's perfidy came to light, unrest against the noble body—stoked by pro-Exarch elements on Terra—began to grow. Mallowes' subsequent arrest, the initiation of a military investigation by the Republic, and Levin's dissolution of the Senate on 8 April 3135 ignited a full-on insurrection by the Senate.

The senators found their champion in Conner Rhys-Monroe of Markab, a well-respected Knight of the Sphere who renounced his position after his father was implicated in the conspiracy and took his own life in February 3135. From strongholds in Europe and North and South America, Rhys-Monroe led the newly christened Senate Alliance forces in a series of attacks on RAF troops. These offensives culminated in an attempt to seize Paris on 1 June 3135, the day of Steiner-Davion's funeral. Hoping to capture and treat directly with the gathered leaders of the Inner Sphere for recognition of the Alliance, Rhys-Monroe was thwarted by Paladins and RAF leaders deploying via VTOL directly from the streets outside the Republic Cathedral, and a fierce defense led by Julian Davion, serving the Republic under a newly formed alliance between Levin and First Prince Harrison Davion.

The failed attack on Paris represented the high-water mark of the Senate's insurrection. Withdrawing entirely from Terra, Rhys-Monroe coordinated the Alliance's military activities from Markab, including an unsuccessful attempt to seize the functioning HPG on Ronel. Initially spread across a smattering of worlds over which they held varying degrees of control, the Alliance eventually carved out a handful of worlds in the shattered Prefecture VII, centered on Augustine.

However, Levin's declaration of Fortress Republic on 1 October 3135 effectively severed any hope the Alliance had of usurping the Republic's government; the cluster of worlds would linger for several more years before being absorbed into the resurgent Free Worlds League as the Augustine Alliance. Finding himself far distant from the few Alliance worlds, Rhys-Monroe eventually turned his attention toward resisting advances by the Draconis Combine, leading resistance efforts from Markab until his death in defense of Skat in April 3140.



TOUCHPOINT: ISTA QUIDEM VIS EST

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 parenthesis, allowing the battle to be played with either rule set.

The man known to many as "Emil" and to almost none as his true self waited a moment while service staff cleared away the remains of dinner. If any knew him in his civilian guise, or wondered why the helpful concierge was a frequent visitor to the Hall of Government, none would dare comment.

"You're putting a lot of faith in Prince Harrison and the Suns," he said, turning to the Exarch as the others left. "Regimes change. The Great Houses function on different principles, different agendas than the Republic."

"I know," Levin sighed. "But we need allies. Prince Harrison agreeing to redeploy the First Davion Guards to allow Julian to lead the defense shows his commitment."

"Perhaps." Emil picked up a stray fork forgotten by the staff, and spun it by a tine against the table. "You realize the irony of relying on a noble house to put down an insurrection led by those seeking to restore the power of the nobility."

"I'm realizing how much of this job consists of nothing but irony."

SITUATION

MEAUX, EUROPE

TERRA

PREFECTURE X, REPUBLIC OF THE SPHERE

1 JUNE 3135

As the Senatorial Alliance desperately sought a decisive strike to cement their legitimacy and restore noble power within the Republic, the funeral of Paladin Victor Steiner-Davion in Paris provided Conner Rhys-Monroe with just such an opportunity. By capturing the gathered leaders of the Inner Sphere and dealing with them directly, Rhys-Monroe hoped to avoid lengthy, uncertain diplomatic efforts and upend the Republic on Terra itself. The Alliance force expected to rush around the Republic's prepared defenses, unaware that the faltering nation had found a new ally awaiting the interlopers in the Parisian suburbs.

GAME SETUP

Recommended Terrain: Light and Heavy Woods; River

The Defender arranges two maps with the long edges touching, and designates one edge as north. The Defender's home edge is the western edge of the battlefield; the Attacker's home edge is opposite.

The Defender deploys two-thirds of their force anywhere on the western half of the battlefield. The Attacker designates 75 percent of their force to enter the battlefield during the Movement Phase of Turn 1.

The remaining portions of each force enter the battlefield as described under *Falling Back* in the Special Rules below.

Attacker

Recommended Forces: Senatorial Alliance strike force, Senatorial Honor Guard, elements of Tenth Hastati Sentinels, Essen Mobile Infantry Force

The Attacker's force is 125 percent of the Defender's force. No more than two-thirds of the value of the Attacker's force can consist of BattleMechs.

Defender

Recommended Forces: First Davion Guards, elements of Tenth Principes Guards and Tenth Triarii Protectors.

No more than 75 percent of the value of the Defender's force can consist of BattleMechs.



WARCHEST

Track Cost: 450

Optional Bonuses

+100 Wall of Fire (Attacker Only): The Defender has *Artillery Support* (see p. 77, *BattleMech Manual*) and uses the Target Number and Damage Value Groupings for Long Tom artillery.

+100 The Sunsword (Attacker Only): The Defender's force includes Julian Davion (Gunnery 2, Piloting 3; AS: Skill Rating 2) in a *Templar III*.

Davion has the Combat Intuition and Multi-Tasker Special Pilot Abilities (see p. 70, *Campaign Operations*; or p. 93 and 98, AS:CE).

+100 My Father's Memory (Defender Only): The Attacker's force includes Conner Rhys-Monroe (Gunnery 2, Piloting 2; AS: Skill Rating 2) in a RFN-8D *Rifleman*. Rhys-Monroe has the Jumping Jack and Weapon Specialist (Rotary AC/5) Special Pilot Abilities (see p. 70, *Campaign Operations*; or p. 97 and 101, AS:CE).

-150 Missed Connection (Defender Only): Reduce the overall value of the Attacker's force to match that of the Defender.

OBJECTIVES

Protect the City of Light (Defender Only): No more than 75 percent of the Attacker's force exits the battlefield from the Defender's home edge. [400]

This Ends Now: Destroy or cripple more than 75 percent of the opposing force. [350]

Rising Power (Attacker Only): The Attacker exits more than 75 percent of their force from the Defender's home edge. [400]

A Dimmer Future (Attacker Only): Destroy all named characters' units (Julian Davion, Tara Campbell, Gareth Sinclair) among the Defender's force, including any taken as options above. [400]

SPECIAL RULES

Falling Back

During the Movement Phase of Turn 4, the remainder of the Defender's force enters the battlefield from the 6 hexes (AS: 12") extending from the center of the north edge of the battlefield toward the western edge. This force includes Countess Tara Campbell (Gunnery 3, Piloting 1; AS: Skill Rating 2) in an HCT-5D *Hatchetman* and Paladin Gareth Sinclair (Gunnery 3, Piloting 3; AS: Skill Rating 3) in a *Black Hawk (Standard)*. All units in this force begin the game with 25 points of preexisting damage, resolved in 5-point groups; reroll any damage which would resolve against a unit's internal structure (AS: Apply 2 points of Armor damage to each unit; ignore damage that would transfer to Structure).

During the Movement Phase of Turn 5, the remainder of the Attacker's force enters the battlefield anywhere along the eastern half of the north edge of the battlefield or the eastern edge of the battlefield.

Forced Withdrawal

The Senatorial Alliance seeks a decisive battle but needs to preserve what forces it has; *Forced Withdrawal* (see p. 258, TW, or p. 126, AS:CE) is in effect for the Attacker. The Republic's defenders cannot allow Paris to fall; the Defender is not subject to *Forced*

Withdrawal with the exception of any named characters whose units are crippled.

AFTERMATH

Confronted with a rapidly redeployed First Davion Guards anchoring the center of the Republic's lines, and stymied by the heroic actions of Julian Davion, Countess Tara Campbell, and Paladins Maya Avellar and Gareth Sinclair, the "Loyalists" abandoned their attempt to seize Paris, and ultimately, their position on Terra altogether.





THE WEIGHT OF A NAME

MARC FOLLIN

To all Clan Wolf Bloodname Houses:

By order of the Khan, all further Trials of Bloodright will cease, effective immediately. They will resume when a Bloodhouse can produce enough eligible warriors to take part in the trials, and the Clan Council deems our combat readiness to be in a state sufficient to support such trials.

*Khan Miriam Shaw
25 June 3147*

**DROPSHIP KARMESINROTER HUND
DONEGAL SYSTEM, DONEGAL THEATER
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
27 JANUARY 3148**

Lana was reclined on the bunk of her stateroom, reading quietly from her noteputer, when a soft knock drew her attention. Kiera stood at the threshold with her body on the outside and her head thrust through the doorway. Lana glanced up and raised her eyebrows inquisitively.

Kiera broke the silence first. "I just heard the news. Star Captain, *quiaff?*"

"Aff. Upon receiving my report on our successful raid to capture this beauty—" Lana struck the bulkhead with her fist for emphasis. "—Star Colonel Radick transmitted his congratulations, along with my new rank. He told me to pass along the news that the win has gone a long way toward boosting morale, and the merchant caste is salivating over the extra DropShip capacity."

Lana smiled at the *trothkin* who had been with her through the fires on Arc-Royal and everything since then. "Star Colonel Radick also told me he has managed to scrape together another Star of 'Mechs

to join ours and the Elementals. We are at full Trinary strength now." She winked at Kiera. "I find myself in need of a Star Commander, and I am afraid you are the most qualified. Your help in planning the raid on Timkovichi and working as my second was instrumental in our success."

Kiera let her features become a stone faced mask, "You know I could challenge you for Star Captain, *quiaff?*"

Lana flashed Kiera a feral grin. "I have bested you in a Circle of Equals before, I will do so again." After holding the tension for a few seconds, she dropped the bravado and fixed Kiera with a quizzical smile. "If you help me become Star Colonel on the other hand..."

Both women laughed as their hard edges and posturing melted away. They enjoyed this bit of camaraderie after a hard-won battle. When the moment of levity subsided, Kiera pointed to the noteputer in Lana's hands. "Reading more of *The Remembrance* again?"

Lana gazed past Kiera a moment before nodding and meeting her eyes again. "It started as a means of finding a way to honor Erwin somehow, and now I find it all fascinating. Especially when I can find historical records that let me understand the context of what was happening when the author wrote a certain passage. Everything is there if you look. The reasons and meaning behind all of our rituals."

Kiera walked to the bunk and sat at the end while Lana pulled her legs toward her torso to make room. "You really are set on becoming Loremaster someday, *quiaff?*"

"Aff. I feel that is how I can best serve the Clan. I nearly ended up in the Watch. I understand it and can accept the necessity. But I also feel I can walk the line between keeping our soul and having a functioning intelligence branch."

"I hope you enjoy waiting," Kiera said. "It will still be a few years before there are any Trials of Bloodright."

Lana looked at her friend and chewed on her lower lip. "About that. I may have an idea. It is....unorthodox. I have been waiting to sound it off someone I can trust."

Kiera turned her head and narrowed her eyes before uttering a drawn-out, partially committed response. "I trust that it is not so unorthodox I will be in trouble if I let you pull me into your confidence, *quiaff?*"

Lana's eyes brightened, and her energy increased as she laid her noteputer on the edge of the bunk and leaned in towards Kiera. "I might make a few enemies, but if we pull this off, I will have my Bloodname. And I will be one step closer to becoming Loremaster, and you may just get the rank you deserve."

Kiera nodded. "All right. Tell me about this crazy scheme of yours."

**NEW MARSDENVILLE
DONEGAL, DONEGAL THEATER
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
5 FEBRUARY 3148**

Lana stopped just before the doorway and took a moment to compose herself. The adrenaline and nerves threatened to make her hands shake unless she willed them to stop.

Come on, Lana, you are a warrior of Clan Wolf, with the blood of great heroes coursing through your veins. You can have a conversation with the Loremaster. Aff, but no other conversation has ever had this much impact on my future.

She took a deep, calming breath and keyed the button that would announce her presence to Loremaster Lukas Mehta. The response came quickly as Lukas told her to enter.

Lana opened the door and took one step into the office before realizing four people, not one, were seated within. She forced herself to continue into the room after only the briefest of pauses. Stopping in the middle of the semicircle, she addressed Lukas, the oldest warrior present, easily identified by his salt-and-pepper hair. "Thank you for agreeing to speak with me, Loremaster."

"Please be seated, Star Captain. You have brought us much to discuss." Lukas Mehta stretched out his arm to indicate the chair Lana stood next to. It was positioned in the center of the room with Lukas directly facing it, with two warriors sitting in chairs to his left, and one to his right.

Lana took the seat. *I might as well try to control the narrative.* "Thank you. You have many questions about the proposal I sent you, *quiaff?*"

Lukas looked Lana directly in the eyes, his a gray color that reminded her of a fallen mentor. "You have not asked why there are other people at the meeting I led you to believe would be private. Explain."

A test? Should I engage, or stick to my reason for coming here? Erwin would tell me to follow my instincts. Meet the challenge, show strength and confidence. "I will admit that I did not anticipate there being additional parties at this meeting. However, I have taken the time to study those you hold in confidence. Unless I am mistaken, the three of them are all those currently on Donegal, *quiaff?*" Lana cocked her head to the side and deliberated continuing further. "If I were to speculate, you wanted to have the opinion of the others before accepting my proposal."

The woman to Lukas' right smiled and turned to talk to him and the others. "She is honest, quick to analyze a situation, and adapt. Her logical capacities are sound. I have already heard of her previous exploits as a warrior. I like her. She will vote wisely in the Clan Council."

Angela Sender. Direct and interested in quick, decisive resolutions, as always.

Lukas raised his right hand and nodded slightly to both acknowledge Angela's words and signal her to stop. "Why do you think I have sought the opinion of the others?"

You wrestle with the same concern I have in going down this path. "Because I offer you a double-edged sword. By accepting my proposal, you will gain the right to administer competitions for a languishing Bloodright as well as another seat on the Clan Council. By doing so, the Bloodhouse I have been part of since birth will lose a *ristar* and likely put a strain on your relationships with the warriors of Bloodhouse Kerensky. To do this requires many political considerations."

"You are aware that the Bloodname you are asking to compete for may be contentious amongst our distant *trothkin*. As well that it could be one of our most prestigious, *quiaff*?"

"Aff. I am counting on that being the one you pick. Given the nature of that Bloodheritage and our history on Arc-Royal, it is the only one that would lessen the blow to the Kerensky ego."

Lukas locked his gaze with Lana's for a handful of sickening heartbeats. Eventually he turned his head to view his companions. All three nodded slowly after meeting his gaze.

The Loremaster returned his attention back to Lana. "There is no guarantee that you will win the trial, but regardless, you offer us something we desire greatly for the cost of some political friction with Bloodhouse Kerensky. We here are willing to accept your proposal, and I am certain it will not take me long to convince the others to reach a majority."

Lana let out the breath she was holding and began to relax. Her relief was short-lived.

"I have read your information and agree with your assessment, but we must make certain it is sturdy as ferro-lamellar armor, with no chinks. I wish to hear you explain it in your own words, as you may be called before the Clan Council to argue your position."

Lana was prepared for this. She had run through the idea over and over again in her head for days before she even confided in Kiera. "Based on the oldest traditions from the founding of the Bloodnames, and the decrees of the Founder, I wish to exercise my right to choose whether I compete for the Bloodname of my genefather or my genemother. When the Bloodnames were first established, the first generation born of the Bloodname founders were allowed to choose which name they competed for, ensuring that male Bloodname founders would have descendants that would carry their name. Our scientists long ago unlocked the technology to make any genetic sample usable as the maternal parent. But that ancient tradition was never rescinded, nor needed in recent history."

Lana paused to catch her breath and prepared to say the words she knew she would have to utter in the Clan Council chamber.

"As a Trueborn daughter directly descended from Khan Phelan Kell, I exercise my right to compete for my father's name. If any would deny me this right, I will meet you in a Circle of Equals."

UNDISCLOSED LOCATION

1 JUNE 3148

Lukas stepped down from his seat to stand on the floor of the amphitheater the Exiled Wolves had commandeered as their Clan Council chamber. He turned in a slow circle to look at the assembled Bloodnamed warriors, before stopping to face Khan Miriam Shaw. Khan Shaw was a MechWarrior from Elemental stock, and Lukas was impressed with her physique, even this far removed from the chair she sat on.

He took a deep breath and projected his voice throughout the amphitheater. "My Khan, assembled warriors, I have asked to speak before you today to offer a path toward returning one of our most sacred rituals. For too long have the warriors of Clan Wolf been denied the right to compete for Bloodnames. Today I tell you that the wait is over, and I ask that the Khan allow us to hold those trials and begin bringing new warriors into our council."

Khan Shaw took Lukas' measure before sitting back comfortably in her chair. "I believe your arithmetic is incorrect, Loremaster. No Bloodhouse has nominated enough warriors or held a Grand Melee to fill the final spot."

"Neg, my Khan. There is one Bloodhouse that has enough warriors to hold the trials."

Khan Shaw sat straighter in her chair and shifted, glancing with her eyes toward each of the Bloodhouse leaders gathered around the room.

Now she is going through the list to determine which one I speak of. None will be apparent, but it is time I set the trap.

After glancing through the room, Khan Shaw leveled a withering gaze on the Loremaster. "Lukas. I have pressing business elsewhere and no time to waste. I demand you explain yourself quickly."

Lukas grinned and addressed the room. "My Khan, Bloodhouse Kell has enough proven warriors that are worthy of competing for a Bloodname." He turned his head as he continued, playing to the crowd more than to his Khan. "Our current circumstances have consolidated our forces and eased the logistical burden of holding Trials of Bloodright. Our people would do well to have our sacred rituals to focus on."

He turned his attention back to his Khan as murmurs of agreement came from the audience around him. "I ask your permission to administer the trials and allow our warriors to compete for a Bloodname. I offer a trial that would swell our warrior's hearts beyond measure and spur

them to great victories in the coming battles. I ask that you let them compete for not just any name, but the name originally granted to us by ilKhan Ulric Kerensky himself. I wish to immediately begin the trials for the Bloodheritage of Khan Phelan Kell."

Loud cheers came from a number of warriors around the chamber, coupled with the reverberations of stomped feet and fists pounded on seats. The Khan quickly silenced them with a gesture of her hand. "Lukas, old friend. I would gladly grant you this request—the Founder knows we could use the morale boost—but you have not met the criteria I have set forth. We have decanted but handfuls of Trueborn using Khan Kell's genes, and fewer still have joined the ranks of our warriors. Too few to hold the trials."

Lukas fought hard to suppress a grin. *She has taken my bait.* "Forgive my forgetfulness. You know how worked up I can get when speaking on the council floor." He strolled toward the center of the room while addressing the assembled Clan Council. "In normal circumstances, you are correct, my Khan. However, there is precedent for holding Trials of Bloodright with half the usual number when a Bloodhouse is small or significantly Reaved. A new Bloodhouse would qualify, *quiaff?*"

Khan Shaw narrowed her eyes at Lukas and spent long moments weighing his words and the possibilities it offered her before responding. "Aff. I am willing to entertain this line of thinking."

A warrior from Bloodhouse Vickers called out in protest. "Would this not cause some to question the validity of those trials?"

Lukas and Lana had already anticipated this question, and Lukas gave their response. "Of course, as I am sure some in this very council do. We will settle it as is our way. If the warriors in question are worthy of their Bloodnames, they will refute the claims and emerge victorious."

Khan Shaw raised a single eyebrow at her Loremaster. "I have known you long enough that I trust you have already convened your committee and determined those you will nominate. Present it now so that I can ensure you have not padded it with inferior warriors."

Lukas retrieved his noteputer and sent the prepared file to the display screens around the room. He took an easy stance as he awaited the Clan Council's scrutiny.

He did not have to wait long before hearing the inevitable protest from a Kerensky: "Star Captain Lana is not eligible to compete!"

Lukas feigned ignorance of the true reason for the challenge. "On the contrary, I believe she is worthy. She earned her place as a Star Commander in her Trial of Position. She came of age in the crucible of our fight for Arc-Royal and was tempered by it, made strong. She planned and successfully led raids during our time on Donegal, and her Trinary had the honor of leading our assault on Upano. I say she is worthy of competing for a Bloodname."

Murmurs filled the chamber while the Kerenskys continued to protest.

The leader of Bloodhouse Kerensky was nearly red with fury as he yelled into the chamber. "You have grown daft, old man! You are so desperate to hold the trials that you attempt to steal the glory of the Kerenskys! Lana is of our Bloodhouse. Her genemother is none other than Ranna Kerensky, granddaughter of Natasha Kerensky. She cannot compete for a Kell Bloodname."

Lukas met the fiery gaze of the Kerenskys. "On the contrary, I credit the good genes of her genemother for her successes as much as I swell with pride at the contributions of her genefather." Lukas bowed slightly. "As to her ability to compete for her genefather's Bloodname, she has the right to choose. From the earliest days of our Bloodhouses, the first generation born of a Bloodname founder is allowed to choose which geneparent's Bloodname they wish to compete for."

A red-haired Kerensky pushed forward and challenged Lukas. "The birth sex is irrelevant in the creation of warriors. Only those born of matrilineal lines created from Khan Kell's genes should be worthy!"

"Aff, our scientist caste's abilities have made it so the issue has never come up in recent history. As well we have had few instances of new Bloodnames being created since the founding. But the original precedent is all that we have, and it remains valid. Lana, as a member of the first generation born of the genes of the founder of Bloodhouse Kell, should be permitted to choose which geneparent's name she seeks to claim."

A Kerensky retort was silenced when Khan Shaw's commanding voice filled the chamber hall. "Enough! Lukas, you can back up your claims, *quiaff?*"

"Aff, my Khan. Lana brought this possibility to my attention, and I have researched it thoroughly. From all I remember of the earliest stories, and the records of the founders' decrees at that time. She is correct."

Khan Miriam Shaw stood from her chair and walked to the center of the room, her huge strides and bulk forcing Lukas from the spot. She slowly spun in the center to address all of her assembled warriors. "I see no reason to deny the request to hold this trial. We shall gather our warriors and lift their spirits with a Trial of Bloodright long in waiting."

She turned to Lukas and nodded her assent. "Gather the warriors who wish to press their luck in a Grand Melee and begin administering the trials."

Before Lukas could acknowledge the order, a Kerensky interrupted him. "My Khan. If Star Captain Lana wishes to turn her back on my Bloodhouse, I demand that she do so to our faces. Bring her forth and let her declare her own wishes in the open. If she has the courage to do so, we will express our grievance."

A portion of the assembled warriors nodded their agreement and called out their support.

"Very well. Someone go fetch Star Captain Lana so that she may address the council with her wishes." Khan Shaw moved toward her chair to wait in comfort for the next spectacle.

Before the Khan could take her seat, Lana's cool and calm voice rang out from the entrance to the chamber. "I am here, my Khan. I felt it appropriate to await your orders today."

Angela Sender held the door open, while Khan Shaw's stony countenance worked to suppress a grin.

Lana strode towards the center of the Clan Council chamber, her head held high and short crop of white hair lighting up the room. Her green eyes remained focused and steady.

UNDISCLOSED LOCATION

18 AUGUST 3148

Lana walked the *Arctic Wolf II* into the area designated for the Circle of Equals, and took a position at the crest of one of the many ridges spreading down from the nearby mountains. She set her visual display to maximum magnification and scanned the far side of the Circle until she spotted the four-legged *Jaguar* taking up its own position. It halted in an open section, with a long run of level ground between them. Satisfied that she had a bead on her opponent, Lana turned her attention to the nearby stands.

The temporary seating had been assembled close to the nearby mountain range, giving spectators an impressive view of the foothills below and the Circle of Equals. It would be nearly impossible to hit anything at this range, but the 'Mech's optics were good enough that Lana could make out the people gathered to watch the final round of this Trial of Bloodright. She surveyed the people in the stands, stopping for a bit each time she thought she recognized someone.

Lana repositioned her viewer to provide a good look at the tiny section set up for lower caste members who had received a rare invitation. They had terrible views and were packed in together, even with the strict invitation-only rules for non-warriors. It did not take long to pick out Kiera and Heather, her chief technician. The pair were an island unto themselves in the sea of people. The lower castes gave Kiera a wide berth, leaving a circular beacon of bare metal around them.

Fire crept onto Lana's face as the sight of Heather reminded her of recent events. She could clearly make out the cast and sling around Heather's arm, and the tech leaned heavily against Kiera for support. *Looks like the bruise over her eye has worsened.*

Lana took a moment to close her eyes and calm herself as she had done on more than one occasion since Heather's injury. Alexei Ward had been in the 'Mech bay, pontificating on the virtues of who

should be allowed to complete for Phelan Kell's Bloodname. He made it brutally clear he did not consider Lana to be among them. In a testament to her loyalty, Heather had spoken in Lana's defense. Before Lana could intervene in breaking them apart, an astech lost his footing and stumbled into Heather. Her flailing attempt at maintaining balance causing the wrench in her hand to connect with Alexei, who had promptly made short work of disarming her, which resulted in a black eye, a broken arm, and a general beating.

The smug look on Alexei's face when Lana closed had told her he knew she wanted to plant a fist in his face. The rehearsed goading he leveled as they squared off proved Lana's suspicions he had come here specifically to draw her into a fight to hurt or kill her on the eve of the final match. She had been seconds away from calling for an impromptu Circle of Equals anyway. But Heather had caught Lana's attention and shook her head slightly, pleading with her to back down.

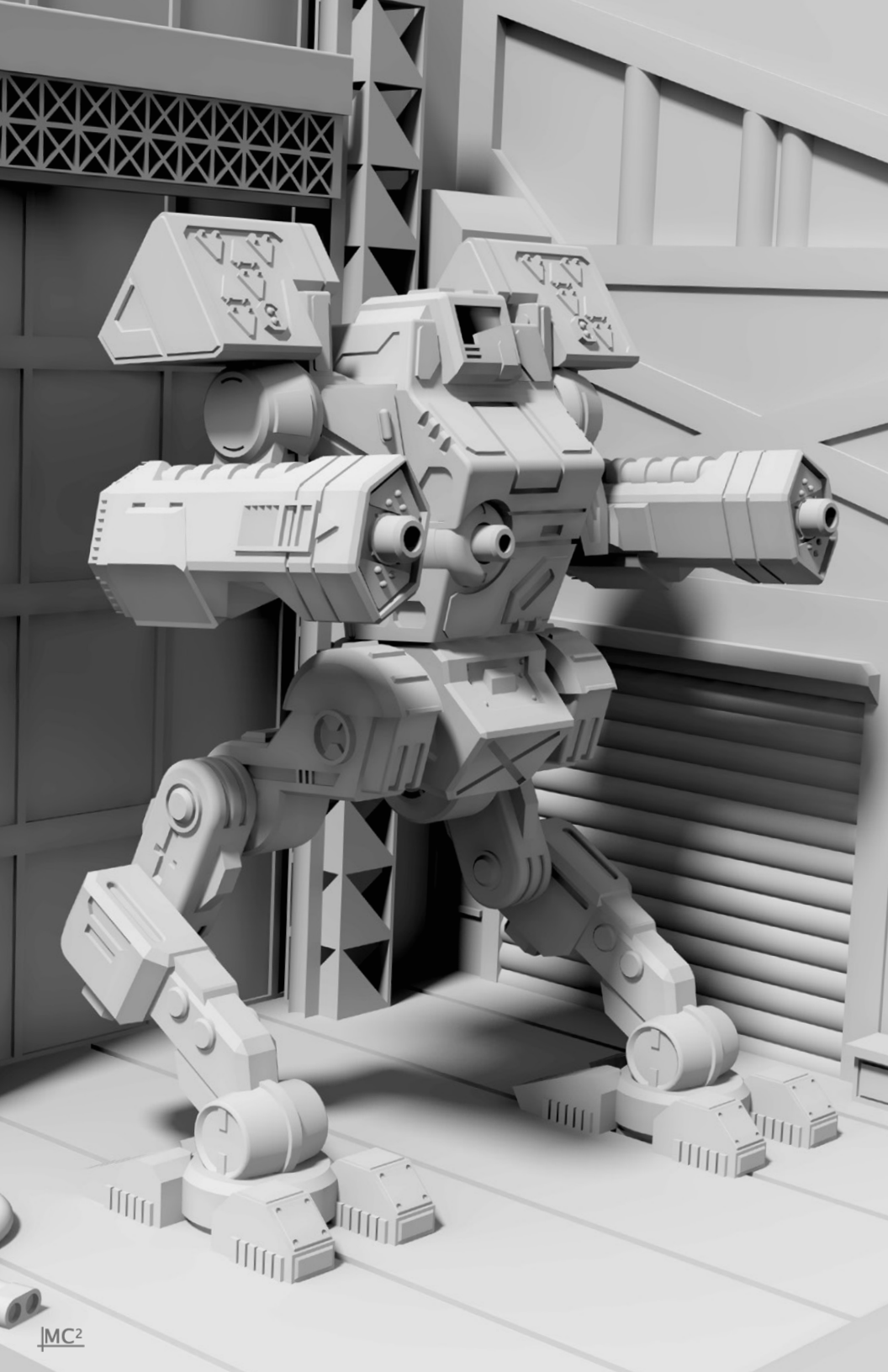
The trip to take Heather to the medical center had given Lana time to cool off. The medtech made it clear that Heather was in no shape to work on 'Mechs any time soon. In the only stroke of luck that night, a replacement tech was already at work completing her orders when she returned to the bay.

At least the tech got the modifications I wanted correct. The Arctic Wolf II, a 40-ton 'Mech, was nowhere close to the 75-ton punch of her usual Savage Wolf A, but Gabriel was the Hunter and was allowed to pilot his usual 35-ton Jaguar. The Arctic Wolf II was the closest 'Mech in size and capability she could borrow. Lana had instructed the technician to take a standard Prime configuration and swap the long-range missile launchers for advanced tactical missile racks. At least it is close to my usual loadout, and the jump jets will give me the advantage in these hills.

Before Lana had an opportunity to run through her strategy again, the comm system buzzed, and she heard a now-familiar voice. She quickly panned her viewer to watch as Loremaster Lukas Mehta addressed the crowd over a PA system and comms.

"Warriors of Clan Wolf, this is a glorious day, one that will provide you all a great honor. You will bear witness to the prowess of these two warriors. One of whom will leave this Circle of Equals bearing the Bloodname of Kell."

Lukas paused and grabbed something from a wooden box held open at the hinge by a nearby assistant. "Our Khan has graciously allowed me to alter the usual rituals to grant you participation in a rare event." He held something aloft over his head so that all could see. A belt of indeterminate markings from Lana's vantage. "This heirloom of the Bloodheritage these two warriors compete for will be granted on these very steps to the winner. This has been worn by only one other before today, and from this day forward it will follow the bearer of this name."



The Loremaster held the belt before him for a moment, then reverently returned it to the wooden box. The assistant closed it before pulling it close to his chest for safekeeping. Lukas returned to the microphone, but shifted his body angle to look to Khan Shaw while he spoke. "Please, my Khan. Signal the start of the trial."

Khan Shaw stood from her seat to tower over the warriors around her, raising her arm as she did so. Lana listened in awe as even the comm system conveyed the strength of command in her Khan's voice: "Warriors. May you find glory within this Circle of Equals, and prove to those assembled you are worthy to bear the weight of this name." Khan Shaw paused briefly before dropping her arm to signal that the trial had started. "Begin!"

Lana wasted no time in pushing the throttle and angling the *Arctic Wolf II* toward a ridge to her left. She lost sight of the *Jaguar* for a few heartbeats as she dipped into the valley between the earthen fingers, and trudged the 'Mech up the far ridgeline. When her *Arctic Wolf II*'s head and boxy shoulders peeked over the top, she quickly reacquired her target. Her displays indicated the *Jaguar* was just within the maximum range of her ATM launchers, and she was eager to score first blood.

Lana toggled the pair of launchers over to her extended-range warheads while she slid the targeting reticle over the *Jaguar*'s silhouette. When the tone and color indicated a positive lock, she triggered the attack. Lana watched with satisfaction as the telltale plumes of missiles leaped from her 'Mech's shoulders and flew toward the *Jaguar*.

When the missiles had travelled about 300 meters, the fire at their tails sputtered. Instead of seeing the flare of the secondary stage kick in, Lana watched in confusion as one by one the engines went dark and the missiles plummeted to the earth well short of the target. Lana was still staring in confusion as dirt flew into the air and the sound of the explosions echoed through the foothills.

Savashri! Did I select the wrong ones?

Lana deftly positioned her 'Mech on one knee to take full cover behind the ridge, buying her time to give her displays a thorough review.

Neg. The extended-range missiles are clearly selected for both launchers. I watched the techs load all three types in the ammo bins. Of course, after everything else, I get the tech that can fail a routine pod swap and reload. Must have mislabeled them in the system.

Lana lifted her *Arctic Wolf II* from its knee to take another peek over the ridgeline. Gabriel's *Jaguar* had already closed a significant amount of the distance and was charging across the valley below her. It was weaving its way through the few larger trees in the area, making it difficult to get a missile lock.

Lana settled for a snap shot with her extended-range medium lasers—leading the *Jaguar*, then squeezing the trigger. The red stutter of

a small pulse laser streamed from her right torso, as her torso-mounted pulse laser had engaged instead of her arm-mounted lasers.

"You have to be kidding me," she said. "How can a tech even graduate if they get this wrong?"

That was when it hit her. *He did not do it wrong by accident. This is on purpose. Oh, those surats. If I find proof of who did this, they will pay.*

Gabriel's return fire drew Lana's focus back to the fight. The *Jaguar* spent some of its fire against the hillside, but Lana rode the remaining impacts as lasers stripped armor from her left arm, leaving its insides completely exposed to the world. Missiles impacted her *Arctic Wolf II*'s chest, shredding some of the armor and causing the impacts to reverberate all the way to her command couch.

Gabriel's *Jaguar* had slowed to get a better shot, and Lana used the opportunity to try her missiles again. She glanced at the rangefinder as she waited for the reticle to flash gold and indicate at lock. *One hundred fifty meters. Perfect range for my standard ATM ammo.* Lana's muscle memory clicked the missiles over to her short-range warheads, but she hesitated a fraction of a second before selecting her close-range high-explosive load instead. *Come on, instincts.* When the reticle indicated a strong lock, she squeezed the trigger for her missiles and what should have been her small pulse laser. She was rewarded with steady green lances of light and a dozen missiles that tracked perfectly to their target, melting and shattering armor from the *Jaguar*'s side. *Paying attention, surats? A true warrior knows how to adapt and overcome.*

Lana watched as the *Jaguar*'s stable legs kept it on its feet throughout her onslaught and then powered it up the ridge to engage her at close range. Lana planted her *Arctic Wolf II*'s feet firmly on the ground and waited for the perfect moment to trigger her jump jets. When the *Jaguar* was too committed to its maneuvering to quickly alter course, Lana leapt her *Arctic Wolf II* overhead and pushed hard into the left pedal to twist the 'Mech through the air, and landed behind the far ridge, facing the *Jaguar*. She again triggered her weapons, mindful this time of which ones were which.

The *Jaguar* fired a trio of lasers that missed past Lana's right side. Lana however watched the satisfying cascade of missile explosions ripple along the *Jaguar*'s torso and left legs. The quad 'Mech's momentum caused it to stumble sideways up and over the ridgeline, before it regained its footing and took up a position in the spot Lana had just vacated.

This ends now.

As the *Jaguar* worked itself into position and the missile turret on its back traversed in Lana's direction, she pushed her throttle to full. She sprinted through the tiny valley that separated them and crested the ridge to loom above the *Jaguar*. Lana ignored the targeting system's warning that the extended-range missiles would not arm properly at this range, and triggered everything.

The space between both 'Mechs filled with death, as laser beams and missiles leaped between the combatants to sear away armor and shake the nearby trees with concussive force.

The chaos was so complete that Lana could see nothing but smoke and lances of coherent light outside her cockpit canopy. She was forced to keep her 'Mech upright through feel alone. The onslaught felt more like an earthquake or a landslide as she fought the controls with each new impact.

She was nearly thrown off-balance when the *Arctic Wolf II*'s left arm was sheared from the body, the sudden loss of weight pitching the 'Mech to its right side. She furiously worked the controls, and her *Arctic Wolf II* stumbled around until the unsteady foot found purchase in the dirt and stone. As the heavy footpad finally slid into place, only the dislodged earthen bits rolled down the hill instead of her 'Mech.

Before the smoke could clear, Lana heard, and felt, the explosion from the detonating ammo bin in the *Jaguar*'s turret. The pressure from close-range explosions caused the *Arctic Wolf II* to shudder slightly.

When a breeze dispersed the hanging smoke, Lana smiled as she saw the crippled remains of the *Jaguar*, its legs splayed out beneath it, its turret nowhere to be seen, and its torso and engine shielding reduced to a mangled mess. Lana pointed her 'Mech's remaining arm towards the *Jaguar*'s cockpit, then opened her comms.

"I claim victory in this Trial of Bloodright, and the name that is my right. Gabriel, you accept defeat, *quiaff?*"

The moment was long in coming, and the voice on the other end of the comms was pained. "*Aff. I accept my defeat at your hands.*"

The smile that split Lana's face caused her muscles to ache as she turned the *Arctic Wolf II* toward the stands and began the trek to receive the honor she had won. She adjusted the magnification on the viewer as she traveled, searching the stands for a certain person in particular.

So that is where Alexei Ward is sitting. Excellent. I want a good look at his face when he realizes who is leaving the Circle victorious.

UNDISCLOSED LOCATION

6 SEPTEMBER 3148

Lana fought both heavy boots onto her feet and stood up from her bunk. She reached over and grabbed the belt from her small desk. Holding it reverently, she ran her hands over the buckle. Admiring the cool touch and smooth feel of the metal in the shape of a hound's head. She stared at the green gems placed for the eyes, so much like her own, so much like her benefather's.

Turning it over, she slowly read aloud the names that had been etched into the backside “Phelan....Lana.” She ran her fingertips along both names as she read.

This is my Bloodheritage now.

Lana buckled the belt in place and checked that her laser pistol was secure in the holster. Then she grabbed her cooling vest and exited her stateroom.

Kiera was waiting for her in the hallway, carrying her own cooling vest and a noteputer. She was also wearing a sour expression. She glanced at the noteputer in her hand, her mood somehow darkening even further, before she lifted her head to address Lana.

“The trails all went cold. It turns out that Alexei Ward was Gabriel’s sponsor on the Loremaster’s committee. In addition, the replacement tech was a testdown from Alexei’s *sibko*. I found enough smaller details to make it easy to guess who was behind it all, but not enough to actually do anything about it. I suspect they wanted you to know who had sabotaged you. Just another layer to the plan.”

Kiera shoved the noteputer into a thigh pocket, as if she could make it all go away through force. She lifted her head to look at Lana and forced a smile to her lips. “Part of me even admires the *surats* for this level of planning.”

Lana placed her free hand on Kiera’s shoulder and gave her a reassuring smile. “If that is the burden I bear for winning a Bloodname, I will gladly accept it. Besides, it will help keep me on my toes.” She took the opportunity to pointedly wink at Kiera. “I need practice on my way to becoming Loremaster.”

“You are right, and we have more important things to attend to. Your warriors are waiting for our next training op in the briefing room. Khan Shaw wants us to maintain our readiness.” The smile that spread across Kiera’s face was genuine this time. “Star Captain Lana Kell.”

Kell. I like it. It feels...right.





MAKE 'MECHS MATTER: 'MECH-LESS ROLEPLAYING

JOEL STEVERSON

In *BattleTech*, BattleMechs are like magic, and you're playing in a "Monty Haul" world. If you're not familiar with the idiom, it describes fantasy roleplaying settings where magic and magical items are too plentiful. When everyone has an incredibly powerful magic sword, such a sword is no longer a rare and powerful artifact; instead it's a coin too worthless to bother picking up off the street. When you apply this analogy to *BattleTech* roleplaying, 'Mechs are indeed magic. If they're overpopulating your game, making them scarce is a great way to reintroduce some gravitas to your RPG adventures.

This is not to say that 'Mechs should never make an appearance, rather that when they show up it should be significant and climactic. For example, you can hint at their presence during the first two acts but save their arrival for the pivotal moment in the third act. You'll make 'Mechs a much more potent challenge for your party, and they'll savor their victory more when they've truly earned it. Increase the risk proportionally to match the reward and avoid heavy-handed solutions.

A lance of mercenary MechWarriors isn't going to accept a contract that prohibits them from using their 'Mechs of course, but they will sign on for an objective raid. When that raid goes sideways, if you ensure that the best solution involves leaving the cockpit, it ups the dramatic tension without feeling contrived. To paraphrase Eisenhower, leadership is the art of getting people to do something you want done because *they* want to do it. For example:

Intel said the base was defended by a Star of 'Mechs, so we went in hot. Six gun emplacements opened up on us, and we took them down without breaking a sweat. We scattered two platoons of infantry, and the base

was ours. It was easy—too easy. Then Hawkins found the entrance to the underground tunnel...

The best roleplaying sessions often revolve around the party overcoming an unexpected challenge. This scenario presents the players with some difficult choices. They're wondering what happened to the defending 'Mechs and expecting a counterattack, but they've uncovered a mystery. If that's not enough to entice them to leave the safety of their 'Mechs and investigate, then sweeten the pot.

Radar was clear to five clicks. Suddenly, three soldiers dashed from the rubble and ran down steps into a tunnel. It was Star Captain Harris and his lackeys. We owed him payback for Drosendorf, and it didn't hurt that he had a bounty of 10,000 C-bills on his head. Also, what was in the briefcase he clutched to his chest like a newborn?

Once you have at least some of the party on the hook, continue to reel them in while upping the ante. The party might decide to have two MechWarriors chase after Star Captain Harris while the other two stand guard. Once they're a good distance into the tunnel they might encounter locked doors or automated defenses. It's tempting to choose this moment for the defending 'Mechs to appear on radar, but an intermittent or otherwise indistinct radar contact will heighten tensions without seeming unfair to the players.

Parties generally succeed when the mission's goal aligns with their strength. As Sun Tzu eloquently dictates in *The Art of War*, hit them where they're weak. Draw them farther and farther from their 'Mechs while keeping success just out of reach. During the second act, players should begin to expect something is about to go horribly wrong. Feed their fears, stoke their suspicions, but avoid an early payoff and prolong the suspense. Let the players find intel regarding a *Juliano* with a distinctive paint job or some unusual modification (like jump jets). Feed them snippets about the diabolical MechWarrior who pilots it. Connect it to the character's past when possible. Both *A Time of War* and *MechWarrior: Destiny* include traits like Dark Secret, Enemy, and In For Life, and they provide ample opportunity to connect the story's villain to your characters in a meaningful way.

When you're ready for the story's climax, bring out the 'Mechs in an unexpected—but fair—way. Hidden adversaries, employer betrayals, and similar mechanisms have their place, but they shouldn't be revealed in a way that the players will interpret as their gamemaster cheating. Instead of all five defenders bursting forth from hidden locations on the base, have four of them make a frontal assault. The two players still in their 'Mechs will feel like they still have a chance with those odds. The two on foot might even be able to get out of the tunnels and back to the cockpit. Spend that time reminding them that there's still one



defender unaccounted for, but wait until they're almost safe before it charges in from the opposite direction.

Alternatively, the *BattleTech* setting is home to a few thousand inhabited worlds with a rich history spanning several centuries divided into six unique eras from the founding of the Star League (2570) to the rise of the *ilClan* (3150). This incredibly diverse playground can host virtually any modern roleplaying scenario. You can run entire campaigns without ever encountering 'Mechs. Are your players itching for a bug hunt? Have them visit the Capellan world of Taga where they can bushwhack through dense jungles and test their mettle against the Tagan Medusa. If cloak and dagger is more their thing, make them a ComStar black ops team, and task them with a false-flag op to ensure the start of the Third Succession War. If they're jonesing for some space exploration, then let them sign up with *Interstellar Expeditions* and explore the vast depths of the *Periphery*, where anything is possible. Do your players think unstoppable cybernetic killing machines only exist in movies? Surprise them with a *Manei Domini* encounter.



RPG ADVENTURE SEED: WOLF HUNTING

This is a three-act roleplaying adventure for use with either *A Time of War* or *MechWarrior: Destiny*. It focuses on keeping players active outside their 'Mechs for most of the adventure.

CIUDAD DEL MAR, BUENA

ALARION PROVINCE, LYRAN COMMONWEALTH

18 SEPTEMBER 3150

Hawkins rocked back in his chair and rubbed his chin. It was a good offer, but more importantly it was a chance to even the score with Star Captain Harris. They still owed him for Drosendorf.

He thumbed the **REPLY** button on his tablet and accepted the contract. They were going to hit the Wolves hard, and finally get some payback for all the Lyrans who had died fighting the Wolf Empire.

ADVENTURE OVERVIEW

Recommended Group Size: 3–6 PCs

Recommended Group Type: Mercenary or Regular Military

Recommended Skill Levels: Regular-Veteran (Key Skill levels of 3–6)

Description: You finally have a chance to give Star Captain Harris some payback. His Wolves bested your unit last year, and you've been thirsting for revenge. You're going in as part of a Lyran Commonwealth raid on Smolnik. Your mission is a surgical strike on a Wolf base in the Waldfluss Basin. The base is defended by Harris' Star of 'Mechs, six gun emplacements, and a few Points of conventional *solahma* infantry.

Objectives:

- Incapacitate the defending forces.
- Destroy the base's defenses without damaging the other structures.
- Search the base for any useful intel.
- Exploit any targets of opportunity.

Complications:

As discussed in the preceding article, Harris' Star of 'Mechs won't be present when the players attack the base. The group should easily defeat the gun emplacements and infantry. Give them a bit of time to consider their options and explore the base, then have the players spot Harris and a few others running to a bunker. Upon inspection, the players discover the bunker is actually a large underground structure.

ACT I: VENGEANCE

This act should set a quick tempo. Give the players a deadline for accomplishing their mission to create urgency and discourage extended observations. The fight against the gun emplacements and infantry should be short and straightforward. The goal is to get the players out of their 'Mechs and exploring the base to set up the next act.

ACT II: THE HUNT

This is the bulk of the adventure. At least some of the players should pursue Harris underground. The structure is a labyrinth of twisting tunnels with locked, reinforced doors, automated defenses, and an appropriate number of underlings for the party to fight in their pursuit of Harris. Regardless of their efforts, Harris should elude capture.

If some players stand guard topside, they should be kept busy with false radar readings, scouts, feints, additional infantry action, etc. They should not actually encounter the defending 'Mechs at this time.

ACT III: FINALE

Once the players have been drawn far into the subterranean tunnels and nearly captured Harris, four of the defending 'Mechs assault the base. These 'Mechs are generally lighter than the players', but their combined weight must pose a real threat.

The players have to choose between following Harris or getting back to their 'Mechs to fight the returning defenders. Harris moves through the tunnels to an underground 'Mech bay near the base. He will rejoin the fight in his assault 'Mech for the climax of the battle unless the players pursue him to the 'Mech bay, where they can have a final shootout instead of a 'Mech battle.

CONTINUING ADVENTURES

Harris has a briefcase filled with important intelligence that will lead the players to their next adventure.





ALL GOOD THINGS

JAMES LEE

HE MIN DESERT
250 KILOMETERS WEST OF HE MIN
NEW CANTON
SARNA MARCH
2 NOVEMBER 3057

Colonel Evelena Haskell, CO of the Twenty-First Centauri Lancers, barged through the door of the regimental command center aboard the McCarron's Armored Cavalry's *Overlord*-class DropShip *Dauntless*. She shoved aside a startled aide who had made the unfortunate mistake of walking near the doorway, nearly spilling him and his paperwork to the floor. Two other Lancers officers stormed in with her and took up position behind her when she stopped.

Unbridled fury seethed from her voice as she grabbed the shoulder of Colonel Marcus Baxter, spinning him around and jabbing a finger into his chest. "*What in the hell was that?*"

Baxter raised his eyebrows in surprise, then pressed his lips together, eyeing her. Her chestnut hair, shaved on the sides of her head, flowed over her shoulders and ran down to the middle of her back. The thirty-nine-year-old was tall and lithe, her 181cm frame accentuated with long, shapely legs and well-toned arms. Her skin, darkened from too many days in the sun, glistened with sweat, having just traversed several kilometers of the desert to reach his DropShip via jeep. "Why, Colonel Haskell, what was what?"

"You know *damn* well what I'm talking about. My DropShips get jumped by *both* of the Kestrel Grenadiers' aerospace wings, I ask for help, and you send *two* fighters to help us? *Two?!'*"

"Colonel Haskell, I can't leave my DropShips unprotected just because your aerospace wing isn't capable of protecting your assets. I have a duty to protect *mine*. And watch your language."

Evelena narrowed her eyes and continued to raise her voice. "Protect *your* assets? From what?" She shook her head and held her hands open in disbelief. "Your intel team told us the Grenadiers only have two aerospace wings. They were both attacking the Lancers. You don't trust your own intel?"

The aged colonel straightened and placed his hands behind his back. "Don't be ridiculous. Of course I do. McCarron's Armored Cavalry standard operating procedure dictates that we escort our DropShips while they are entering the atmosphere of a hostile planet."

"My full aerospace wing was on escort duty," Evelena said. "They did everything they could. I guess I made a mistake by counting on my allies to do their damned jobs." She turned to the side, looking at her accompanying officers. "Major Ling, what is the status of the Twenty-First Air Lancers?"

The short, black-haired man took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly. "Out of three squadrons, two fighters are still operable. Six are in need of major repair and will be out of commission for the foreseeable future. Four of them require minor repairs and will be airworthy again by the end of the day. The other six are gone. Two pilots are still active, nine are in sickbay with various injuries, and seven are KIA."

"Lieutenant Colonel Searcy, how are our DropShips?"

Blond-haired, blue-eyed Ryan Searcy was Evelena's executive officer. Several years younger than her, he had risen through the ranks nearly as quickly as she had, demonstrating a solid tactical mind as well as a mastery of strategy. When her son Michael admitted having no interest in living the mercenary life, she'd begun prepping Ryan for command. He still had some things to learn. Good commanding officers watched the battle and gave orders, leading their forces to victory. There were times when a commander should get into the thick of things, but he sometimes had trouble telling when those times were.

"The *Antioch*, *Hunter*, and *Opal Star* are moderately damaged. The *Storm Talon*, *Polaris*, and *Normandy* are lightly damaged. The *Renault* is basically untouched. All are still functional."

Evelena turned back to Baxter and raised an eyebrow. "Tell me, Colonel, how did your forces hold up?"

"Enough! It's not my fault that you couldn't protect yourself. Now, if you'll excuse me, I believe we have an invasion to prosecute. You have your instructions. Go prepare your people."

With her eyelids half closed and her jaw clenched, Evelena turned to her officers. "Let's go."



Evelena mashed the hoverjeep's accelerator to the floor. Once it cleared the DropShip's boarding ramp and started plowing through the orange desert sand, Ryan looked over at her, shouting over the roaring engine and fans.

"They did that on purpose, Colonel. I know it. This whole deal stinks. I can't believe Marik sent us out here to help the Capellans. He knows our history. Since we left, we have *never* worked for them. *Ever*."

"I'm well aware of our history, Ryan. We're under contract with Thomas Marik, so we go where he says and do what he wants us to do. He's always treated us well. After Wasat, Sun-Tzu asked him for a unit to back up the Cavalry. We were only a jump away, so Thomas sent us. He knows he can rely on us, and it's our job to do right by him. We're here to back up McCarron's Armored Cavalry, and that's what we're going to do."

"I'm not saying we *shouldn't*. I'm just saying something feels wrong here. After how that landing went, I don't trust them. Any other unit would've sent as much help as they had available. Baxter knew there weren't any other enemy fighters on the planet. He just didn't want to help us."

"I don't like it either," Evelena said, "but we have a job to do, and we're going to do it."

HE MIN DESERT
100 KILOMETERS WEST OF HE MIN
NEW CANTON
SARNA MARCH
2 NOVEMBER 3057

Evelena paced back and forth in front of the holo display in the *Storm Talon's* briefing room. The *Overlord*-class Dropship was the Lancers' command ship, commandeered along with the rest of their equipment when the unit had mutinied from the Capellan Confederation in 2875. The Lancers battalion commanders watched intently as she continued the briefing.

"I am assured that, despite Count Balatine's statements to the contrary, the planet's population apparently wishes to rejoin the Capellan Confederation. Capellan loyalists have given us quite a bit of information about our opposition. The Kestrel Grenadiers are scattered all over, and it looks like they are out on maneuvers across the continent. These maneuvers are being displayed to the public in an attempt to recruit for the militia. The vast majority of the forces guarding these places are the Grenadiers' armor and infantry assets, backed by militia." She pressed a button and the next set of holo images appeared.

“Our strategy is to strike the capital city of He Min and the spaceport just to the east of it as quickly as we can. The city is surrounded by desert on the east, north, and west. The city’s southern border is protected by the He Min Sea. The Grenadiers didn’t react until we set down because they weren’t sure of our target or strategy. For all they knew, we would hit the planet’s other important points. Now that they know where we’re set up, their scattered elements will be heading this way to reinforce the units guarding He Min. The city and spaceport are protected by the Grenadiers’ ‘Mech regiment, an armor regiment, and an infantry regiment. Intel thinks a militia artillery battalion is there as well.

“The Nightriders are going to keep watch here and act as a reserve if needed. It seems not everyone wants the CapCon back: significant guerrilla forces are organizing and making a serious nuisance of themselves. That leaves us and Christobal’s Regiment to get the job done. Here’s the plan.

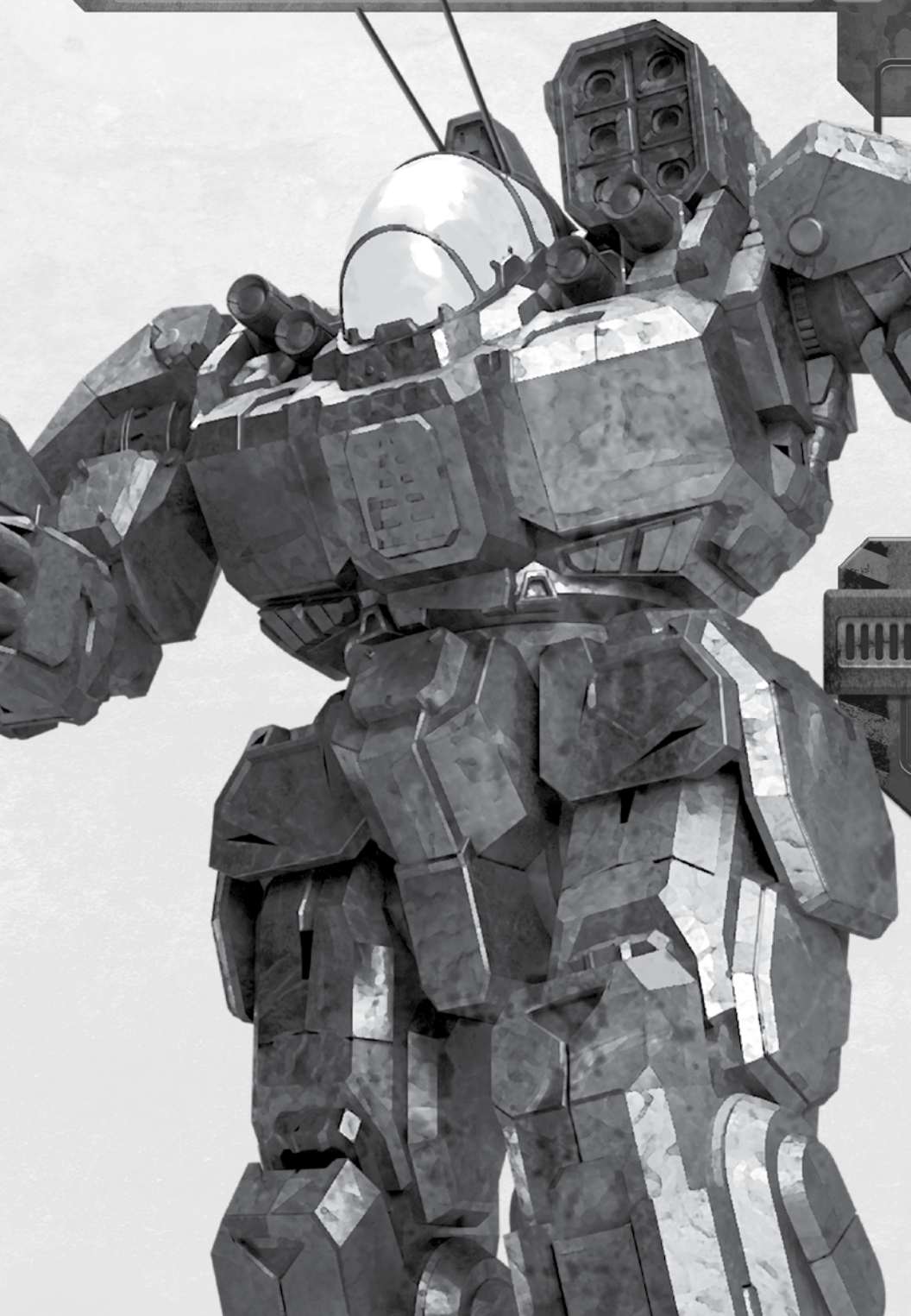
“We will assault the Grenadiers’ main line on the western side of the city. It’ll be a nasty fight, but we won’t need to do it for long. Christobal’s Regiment will work their way around to the north and hit the Grenadiers in the flank. We only need to pin them in place, keeping them from turning their line so Christobal’s Regiment can roll down the line and crush them. The Grenadiers have moved out several kilometers to the west of the city. They don’t want any collateral damage, and neither do I. We want to do as much damage while outside the city as we can. There are multiple DropShips grounded at the spaceport, backed by militia. That’s a lot of firepower to deal with, so it is critical that we deal a lethal blow to the Grenadiers while they’re willing to meet us in the field. I’ve sent the details to your noteputers. Go brief your people and I’ll see you on the field.”



“What the hell is taking so long?!” Evelena shouted into her neurohelmet radio. “Cav Actual, by God you had better engage soon or we’re going to have to pull back!”

Baxter’s gruff voice filled Evelena’s earpiece. “Christobal’s Regiment has had a rough time in the sand and with enemy pickets, but they’ve





cleared them and are nearly in position. Keep the enemy pinned down for a few more minutes."

"Damn!" Evelena slammed a fist on the armrest of her *BattleMaster's* command couch. *We don't have a few more minutes. We're in the middle of a bloodbath.* She took a quick shot with her particle cannons at a FedCom *Enforcer* cresting a hill in the distance, then switched back to the Lancers' regimental command frequency. "Sword One, Shield One, Knight One, this is Lancer Actual. Christobal's Regiment is almost in position. Status?"

LeMonds answered first. "We're taking a beating, Lancer. These dunes are a real pain in the ass. As soon as we push the enemy back from the dune they're hiding behind, we move up and they're hiding behind the next one. If we keep taking losses, we're going to have trouble keeping a cohesive line."

Li-Smith and Trahn responded similarly.

"Okay, here's what we're going to do. We've got to keep the enemy engaged for just a few more minutes. Knight One, keep that left flank pinned down. Tighten your spacing to increase the density of fire you're putting down range. My company will move up and fill in some of the gap, but Sword One, you'll have to shift your line left to link up with me. Shield One, you're going to have to cover what you're holding now, and stay connected to LeMonds. If you need to, you can wheel to the right to deny our flank, but don't give too much ground. I'll have the Nightriders move up to reinforce you."

Evelena watched as the Lancers' line shifted in response to her orders. Greasy black smoke rolled through the air from burning 'Mechs that lay behind the golden sand dunes. Some of those were FedCom, but many were Lancers. Her troops were taking a savage beating, the worst of which came from the FedCom artillery battalion stationed somewhere near the city, about twenty kilometers away. The Lancers would begin to push the enemy back, then FedCom artillery would hammer them, forcing them to pull back and allowing the enemy to regain their composure and resume their previous positions.

She changed to her secondary comm channel. "Command company, on me. We're moving."

She slammed the throttle forward, and her 85-ton *BattleMaster* began a lumbering run through the sand. She took potshots at several enemy 'Mechs as they peeked up from behind the dunes to search for prey, but scored no decisive hits.

It didn't take long before her company took its place behind a massive golden-orange dune of sand in the line of battle. Casey Durham's *Thunderbolt* took up a position just to the left of Evelena, with Jason Sprigg's *Stalker* to the left of her. Adam O'Dell took a position on Evelena's right in his *Marauder*. The lance slowly climbed up the dune, cresting the top together.

Carnage greeted Evelena in the valley below. Burned and twisted 'Mechs from both sides littered the sand. Her eyes flicked back and forth, scanning the horizon. She settled her crosshairs on an already ravaged FedCom *Penetrator*, waited for the dot in the center of the sights to flash golden-yellow, and squeezed her two triggers.

Dual bolts of azure man-made lightning flashed from both of the *BattleMaster*'s arms toward the enemy 'Mech. They ripped deep, jagged scars across the tattered armor covering its chest, and molten rivulets of ferro-ceramic armor dripped into the hot sand below. As the beams tore across the left side of the 'Mech's torso, a green puff of smoke signaled the destruction of a heat sink, then the beams seared into the internal structure of the *Penetrator*'s torso. The three pulse lasers mounted there sagged as the beams ate the rest of the way through the structure, and the left arm fell away to the sand below.

A wave of heat washed up through her cockpit and drenched her in a layer of sweat, but the *BattleMaster*'s double-strength heat sinks quickly pulled the waste heat away. The *Penetrator* retreated behind the cover of the dune, only to be quickly replaced by another 'Mech. The enemy *Cerberus* leveled both arms at Evelena's 'Mech and fired. Two nickel-iron slugs flashed from the Gauss rifle barrels and crossed the distance to her in the blink of an eye.

It felt like her stomach sank to her feet as the *BattleMaster* heaved up and back. Her teeth rattled as the 'Mech's back slammed into the sand and slid down the hill. She shook her head to clear it, then realized the taste of blood meant she must have bitten her tongue.

Jason's worried voice filled her ears as he saw his commander fall. "Lancer Actual is down! Casey, Adam, pull back and cover her!"

Evelena shook her head again. "No, maintain fire! I'm fine. I'll be up in a second. Just keep those bastards pinned in place!" She checked one of the secondary monitors for a damage report. *Damn that thing! Over half of the armor on the sides of my torso is gone. Those Gauss rifles hurt!*

She slowly pushed the *BattleMaster* back to its feet, then moved back up to the firing line, where she was pleased to see the *Cerberus* lying face down, smoke and fire belching from its back. "Whoever got the *Cerberus*, thanks."

A quick grunt was the only reply as her lancemates traded fire with more FedCom 'Mechs.

"Cav," she sent to Baxter, "where the hell is our help?"

"They're already hitting the FedCom flank."

"Tell them to stop pussyfooting around and *push!*"

"Lancer, they're advancing as fast as they can. You'll just have to hold."

Evelena glanced at her sensors, quickly taking in the status of the battlefield. *They're barely moving. They can't be facing that much resistance... They should be halfway up the FedCom line by now...*

She was brought back to reality when a sudden shriek tore through the air, followed by geysers of sand and fire from enemy artillery erupted all around her. *All right, that's it! That artillery is tearing us apart. If we had any air support left, we could silence it, but Baxter made sure that was taken care of. We can't take losses like this!*

Evelena reluctantly switched her comms to the regimental frequency as explosions continued to erupt all around her company. "All commands, fall back to rally point Alpha. I repeat, fall back to rally point Alpha."



An hour later, Evelena was seated in her office aboard the *Talon*, discussing the butcher's bill with her officers, when a red-faced Marcus Baxter swept through the door. *I'm surprised he's not frothing at the mouth*, she thought as he stopped on the other side of the desk and slammed his fist down.

"Everyone but Colonel Haskell, get out. *Now*."

Evelena got up from behind her desk and nodded at all but one. "Lieutenant Colonel Searcy. You stay."

Baxter watched the other officers exit the room. Once the door hissed shut, he turned back to Evelena. "Do you realize what you've done? We were *this* close to destroying the Grenadiers." Baxter's thumb and index finger hovered in front of him, millimeters apart. "*This* close. We would have rolled down their line, and then all that would have stood between us and the spaceport is a little bit of armor and some infantry. We'd be drinking beer out on the tarmac right now. This is *your* fault. I had heard that the Lancers were the best of the best. I guess I heard wrong."

Evelena scowled as she walked around the desk to face the angry colonel. "*Our* fault? We held that line three times longer than we were supposed to. Hell, not only did we hold that line, we kept the entire enemy regiment pinned in place! One regiment versus another, which, I will remind you, flies against all conventional wisdom when attacking an enemy force. My people gave their *lives* to buy time for you to flank the enemy. We kept that line pinned down for *thirty-two* minutes. And you had trouble with *sand*?" Her eyes flared as pent-up rage worked its way out. "*Sand*?! Your men should've been rolling down the line after *ten* minutes. If that's the best the Big MAC can muster, I'm shocked you're still in business."

Baxter straightened as he narrowed his eyes and raised his chin. Evelena was sure a vein was about to burst in his right temple. "You are out of line, Colonel! *I* am in command of this operation, and you *will* show me proper respect. As far as Christobal's Regiment is concerned, they were doing their job when you turned tail and ran."

He turned around, crossed his arms, then turned back to face Evelena. "Yes, they were delayed. The loosely packed sand in the

dunes to the north of the city made for slow going. They had to fight through pickets as they went. You know as well as I do that no plan survives contact with the enemy.”

“I suppose the sand was the reason they *walked* down the line once they finally attacked while we were fighting for our lives?”

“The FedCom commander used her artillery to form a walking barrage in front of my troops. They walked it back slowly, using it as a wall to buy time for one of their armor regiments to shore up their flank.”

“If they had moved *quickly* like they were supposed to, they would’ve been through the artillery and into the enemy.”

Baxter frowned. “You expect us to charge headfirst into massed artillery fire?”

“If it was your job, then yes.”

Baxter shook his head. “That’s not possible. Losses would have been catastrophic.”

Evelena snorted in disbelief. “So you let *us* take the losses instead. Unbelievable. Why didn’t you tell me what was happening? We could’ve adjusted the plan or pulled back in time to cut our losses.”

“We were close. You just didn’t hold on long enough.” Baxter walked toward the door, then paused. He turned his head, looking back at Evelena. “Get yourself together, Colonel. I expect better. I’ll let you know when I’ve figured out our next move.”

Evelena stood there, arms akimbo and mouth agape as he walked out through the door.

Ryan exhaled loudly, his eyebrows raised. “You know, Colonel, people are starting to talk.”

She walked over to her desk, pulled her chair back, and took a seat. She then motioned for him to do the same on the opposite side of the desk. As he sat down, she picked up a small framed picture of her son, Michael, from her desk. The wiry, brown-haired twelve-year-old was back at the Lancers’ home base on Nestor, concentrating on his schoolwork. To Evelena’s disappointment, he had no interest in being a MechWarrior and continuing the family tradition of Lancer command, instead wishing to pursue a career in ancient Terran history. The boy had shown an affinity for it since his first trip to a museum years ago. Even with the disappointment, she still loved her son with all her heart, and was proud of how he was coming along.

She smiled, put the picture back on the desk, then looked at Ryan. “What are they talking about?”

Ryan took a seat and pursed his lips. “People are beginning to think the MAC is hanging us out to dry. When we hit atmosphere, we might as well have been dropping by ourselves. We’ve only got one barely functional aerospace squadron left, and that’s because we combined the shattered remains of the entire *wing* with injured pilots who are still able to fly. Then what happened today... Colonel, I have to say, I think the same thing.”

Evelena rapped her fingers on her desk as she looked at him. "I've had those same thoughts myself, but we can't do anything about it. We don't have any hard evidence." She leaned back and to the side in her chair, propping her chin up with her left hand.

"Colonel, the Big MAC is one of the best mercenary units in the Inner Sphere. They are *not* this incompetent."

"I know, Ryan. I know. Do you think the Capellans are still holding a grudge against us? It's been almost two hundred years."

"I don't know if they all are, but I know *we* still do. Sun-Tzu probably does, too. Everyone knows how unstable his sister Kali is, and his father Maximilian before he died. Being batshit crazy is a prerequisite to be in that family."

Evelena chuckled. "Truth. *Damn* Thomas Marik for putting us in this position. He should've known better." She paused. "So what do you suggest we do?"

Ryan held her gaze for several seconds as he worked up the courage to speak. "Our contract is on a by-the-month basis now. I say we leave."

"You're suggesting we should mutiny against the Capellans?"

"It wouldn't be the first time."

She chuckled again. "You're right." She sighed, then pressed the intercom button.

One of her aides quickly answered the call. "Yes, Colonel?"

"I want all of our DropShip captains and battalion COs in my office, ASAP."

HE MIN, NEW CANTON

SARNA MARCH

3 NOVEMBER 3057

The previous day's fighting, while damaging to the Lancers, had been just as damaging to the Kestrel Grenadiers. The FedCom troops had suffered an estimated 26 percent losses, while the supporting armor regiment had suffered nearly as badly when it attacked Christobal's Regiment shortly after the Lancers had pulled back.

The new plan was simple: the Twenty-First Centauri Lancers would form the right side of a new battle line, while McCarron's Armored Cavalry would form the left. They would advance straight into what remained of the Kestrel Grenadiers in a frontal assault, using superior numbers to crush them before help arrived from the Grenadiers' supporting units.

The line gradually shifted toward the city as the Lancers and Cavalry spent all morning hammering the FedCom forces. After taking heavy losses, the FedCom force had pulled back into He Min for cover. Now

the Lancers and MAC were at the city's western and northern edge, respectively. So far today the Cavalry were doing their fair share of the fighting. Evelena prayed they kept it up.

She watched from the bubble canopy of her *BattleMaster* while standing on a hill two kilometers from the city. The Lancers had been skirmishing with the Grenadiers at the edge of the city for nearly an hour. Not much progress was being made due to the Lancers doing everything they could to keep property damage to a minimum. Taking the planet wouldn't do much good if they turned the population against the Capellans in the process. Although, based on the latest reports, that appeared to be happening regardless.

She saw a Lancers *Grasshopper* use its jump jets to leap into and out of cover, taking potshots at a FedCom *Scarabus*. The *Grasshopper's* latest laser barrage had cut the FedCom 'Mech's armor to ribbons and left it lying face down on top of a car, struggling to get back to its feet.

The *Grasshopper* rose into the air on silver jets of super-heated plasma. As it crossed the street, the Lancers 'Mech changed trajectory and settled down at the street entrance. The *Grasshopper* bathed the downed *Scarabus* in laser light, amputating its left leg at the knee and its right arm at the shoulder. Kilojoules of scarlet and emerald energy raked across the *Scarabus*. It stopped struggling once the lasers' hellish caresses burned through its engine shielding and collapsed into a burning heap atop of the car it had crushed.

As the *Grasshopper* jumped back toward cover, a FedCom *Axman* charged around the corner of a building near its burning lancemate. The massive Luxor Devastator-20 autocannon mounted in the 'Mech's right shoulder roared, vomiting a hail of fire and metal. Windows in the nearby buildings shattered from the percussive blasts as the stream of depleted-uranium shells walked up the *Grasshopper's* right leg and across its torso.

Armor shards dropped like rain while the pilot fought to keep the airborne 'Mech balanced. Its arms wheeled in circles as it tilted to the left, drifted back behind the cover of a building, then crashed into the ground. The *Axman* ducked back into cover to prepare a new ambush. Evelena breathed a sigh of relief when the Lancers *Grasshopper* showed signs of life, slowly crawling back to its feet.

"Lancer, this is Cav Actual," said Baxter. "This is taking too long. We have to push these Fedrats out of the city and finish them off before their reinforcements arrive. If they keep up their pace they'll start pouring in tomorrow."

Evelena rolled her eyes. "What do you suggest?"

"The only way to get them out of the city is to go in after them. We use our larger numbers and storm the city quickly. They're weak enough that they won't be able to push us back. We will take *some* losses as they spring their ambushes, but if they stand and fight, they'll

drop quickly. We all go in on my mark. Try to keep collateral damage to a minimum.”

“Copy. Standing by for your signal.” Evelena opened a channel to her battalion commanders and filled them in on the plan. “Command company, on me. We’re going to move up to join the rest of the regiment so we don’t get left behind when the assault begins.” After receiving various acknowledgments, she pushed the throttle forward and her *BattleMaster* began moving toward the city.

Immediately after receiving Colonel Baxter’s attack signal, the Twenty-First Centauri Lancers charged into He Min. Initially the fighting had been fast and furious. They had indeed taken some losses as the initial FedCom ambushes were sprung, but the Lancers’ pressure had quickly proven too much. The FedCom ‘Mechs retreated deeper into the city and set up a smaller and more easily defensible perimeter. Then the fighting bogged down. There were very few avenues of approach to the enemy positions, and not enough room to attack them in force once they could.

Evelena watched as a Lancers *Tempest* reeled, armor littering the pavement after trying to push around the corner of the building near the intersection ahead. The ‘Mech stumbled backward several steps, tripped over a parked van, then fell into a building on the opposite side of the street. Concrete, steel, and glass gave way to 65 tons of BattleMech as it settled into the now wrecked building at a forty-five-degree angle.

“Welland, Thompson,” she said, “jump over that building. Get behind whatever is doing the shooting. We’ll move around the corner a few seconds later. Either way they move, someone will have a shot at their rear.”

“On it, Colonel.” Two *Grasshoppers* leapt into the air and disappeared from sight as they sailed over the building on silvery plumes of fire.

Three...

Two...

One...

“Now!”

Her *BattleMaster* lurched forward, but not before Ryan Searcy’s *Berserker* charged past. As she rounded the corner, his 100-ton ‘Mech barreled into a FedCom *Bushwacker*. Seeing the enemy ‘Mech topple and Searcy raise his massive hatchet at an enemy *Centurion*, Evelena settled her crosshairs on the wide silhouette of a 65-ton *JagerMech* facing the two *Grasshoppers* that had landed behind it. She squeezed her triggers and was rewarded with scorching heat and sweat stinging her eyes.

Two bright blue beams of charged particles and four emerald lances of laser energy tore into the *JagerMech*. The thin rear armor turned to slag and ran like water, then the incredible energy stabbed into the ‘Mech’s interior. The XL fusion engine breached in multiple

places as both particle beams raked across it. The four medium lasers searched for vital internals through the smoke now roiling out of the *JagerMech*'s ruined back.

The 'Mech rocked forward as the explosive force of multiple bins of autocannon ammunition detonated, leaving a trail of golden fire and oily black smoke leading to the *JagerMech* corpse now lying in the street.

Struggling to breathe in the searing heat of her cockpit, Evelena took stock of the situation. Catching glimpses through the thick black smoke blowing through the street, she saw the enemy *Bushwacker* lay on the ground unmoving, minus an arm and a leg. Searcy's *Berserker* was pulling its massive titanium hatchet from the remains of the *Centurion*'s crushed head. One *Grasshopper* stood over the burning remains of a FedCom *Enforcer*, which itself lay atop the ruined form of the second *Grasshopper* near the shattered carcass of the *JagerMech* that lay burning in the street.

"Nice work, people." *Christobal's Regiment should be hitting the other side of these guys any time now.* Evelena switched to the MAC command frequency. "Cav, Lancer actual. Requesting status update."

Silence.

"Cav, Lancer Actual. Status update please."

Again nothing but the static and hiss of dead air came through her earpiece. She opened her mouth to repeat herself again when Baxter's voice finally came through.

"Lancer, this is Cav actual. Keep up the attack. When the FedCom forces fell back into the city, they left their spaceport wide open. Christobal's Regiment seized the opportunity and are making for the spaceport at full speed. Keep the enemy tied up there."

"That wasn't the plan, Cav."

"The plan has changed, Lancer."

Evelena closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then exhaled. *Then you leave me no choice.*

She opened her eyes and pressed a button on her comm panel, opening a channel to all frequencies on the planet. "From the time we entered atmosphere, you have used the Lancers as nothing more than meat to throw into the grinder while you pretend to fight. We've done most of the fighting for you. I don't know what kind of game you're playing, but *we are done.*"

She paused for a second, blinking stinging sweat from her eyes. "Come to think of it, I do know what kind of game you are playing. I'd bet my life that this whole plan was put up by Sun-Tzu Liao. I bet you were originally supposed to take this planet by yourself, and when good ol' Sunny Boy saw we were nearby, he couldn't wait to finally get some payback. How close am I, Baxter?"

"Colonel Haskell, I have no idea what you are talking about. *His Celestial Highness would never—*"

"You bet your ass he would. *Mutiny. I say again... Mutiny.*"

The entirety of the Twenty-First Centauri Lancers pulled back into cover as they reacted to the code word Evelena had passed down to her officers after the failure of McCarron's Armored Cavalry to fully engage the Grenadiers on the previous day. After conferring with the Lancers' battalion and company commanders, she had devised the plan in case the MAC tried to use the Lancers again. The Lancers' DropShips would be buttoning up, then lifting off any second now to come pick them up.

"Attention commanding officer of the Kestrel Grenadiers, this is Colonel Evelena Haskell, in command of the Twenty-First Centauri Lancers. Please respond." She paused, praying the FedCom commander would reply. Several moments later, she did.

"Colonel Haskell, this is Marshal Agatha Stromp, Kestrel Grenadiers. What do you want?"

"As of this moment, we are no longer hostile. I repeat, we are no longer hostile and are standing down. I'm sure you heard what I just told the Cavalry. We're done being used as cannon fodder. At this time, you've got a nearly untouched MAC regiment approaching the spaceport. I will pull my people out of the city and let your people go. I'm sure your DropShips would love their help."

Static filled her headset for several seconds, then the marshal replied. "I don't really have much choice. Very well."

Evelena shut down her 'Mech, then eagerly opened the canopy in anticipation of fresh cooler air.

She cursed as the forty-degree-centigrade heat washed over her. *I hate this place.* She extended the chain ladder from the 'Mech's chin, then climbed down to the pavement below and turned around.

The massive dish of the He Min HPG array filled her view. She strode up to the front gate only, to be stopped by several Word of Blake guards armed with nasty looking automatic rifles. "Excuse me, gentlemen, I have a priority message to send."

The guards stared at her, then looked at each other. One of the men stepped away behind the massive ferrocrete wall, saying something Evelena couldn't quite make out into his helmet mic. After a short delay, he walked back over to the other guards and nodded. They shouldered their rifles and stepped back to their spots near the gate.

She walked up the stairs that led to the entrance to the building, then proceeded through the door. Terrified acolytes in white robes peered from underneath desks, behind doorways, and other places they had used as cover while battle raged outside.

A large heavy wooden door creaked open, and a heavysset man stepped out. "Greetings. I am Precentor Hesby. I've been monitoring the action from a...safer area deeper in the facility. I understand you have a message to send?"

"Yes. I have two top-priority messages. The first is to Thomas Marik. The second is to the Mercenary Review and Bonding Commission. I don't care how much it costs."

The precentor smiled and gestured to the door he had just come through. "Certainly. Right this way please."

Seated at the recording terminal, Evelena ran her fingers through her hair in an attempt to tame the unruly mess, then pressed the RECORD button. "Captain-General Marik, greetings from the lovely planet of New Canton. It has been our pleasure to serve the League over the last forty-odd years. As you know, the commitment period of our contract ended two years ago, and we have been operating on a month-by-month basis ever since. Effective immediately, the contract between the Twenty-First Centauri Lancers and the Free Worlds League is hereby terminated." She put on the biggest fake smile she could, then sarcastically said, "If you want to know why, ask your friend Sun-Tzu. Until next time."

She pressed the STOP button, waited several seconds for the terminal to save the message in storage, and then began her second message. "This is Colonel Evelena Haskell in command of the Twenty-First Centauri Lancers. Our contract with the Free Worlds League has just been terminated, and effective immediately, we are available for a new contract. We will be leaving the New Canton system in several days and will head for Outreach, where I will be available to negotiate new contracts. Please ensure potential employers are aware of the Lancers' status, and of our impending arrival."

She pressed the STOP button, got up from the terminal, and walked back to the precentor. "Charge the messages to our account. Thank you for accommodating me, Precentor Hesby. Take care."

Evelena Haskell turned around and strode out the door.

OUTREACH SPACEPORT

OUTREACH

SARNA MARCH

30 NOVEMBER 3057

Ryan looked up as Evelena entered the officer's lounge aboard the *Storm Talon*. "Come to join us, Colonel?" The number one rule of the *Talon's* officer's lounge was to relax. Formality was not welcome here.

She pulled up a chair, turned it around, and sat down, resting her arms on the backrest. Battalion COs James LeMonds, Katherine Li-Smith, Ty Van Trahn, and Joshua Ling stared daggers at Ryan.

Katherine raised both eyebrows and leaned forward. "Well? What've you got?"

Ryan grabbed the cigar from his mouth, exhaled smoke, and set his hand down on the table. "Full house." Everyone at the table groaned. "Yeah, yeah, quit your bitchin'. Hand it over, guys, hand it over." He reached out with both arms and raked in the various forms of currency that covered the center of the table. He took another drag from the big cigar, exhaled, and looked at Evelena. "How'd it go?"

Evelena grinned ear to ear. "Come January 3058, ComStar will be paying the bills, ladies and gentlemen! We're going to Terra." The lounge erupted in cheer and applause as she waved everyone back to their seats.

"Wait. Terra?!" Katherine laughed and clapped her hands with joy. "I've never been! Ryan, do you have any more of those cigars?"

"Sure." He pushed his chair back, then rushed to a cabinet, from which he pulled a cigar box.

"Anyone else?"

Evelena snatched one of the cigars from Ryan's hand and grabbed a matchbook from the table. One match strike and several puffs later, she exhaled and nodded to the officers. "Finish up your game, boys and girls. All passes are revoked as of now. Get everyone on board and packed up. We're leaving tonight. It's gonna be all good things from here."



SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Shrapnel is the market for official short fiction set in the *BattleTech* universe.

WHAT WE WANT

We are looking for stories of **3,000–7,000 words** that are character-oriented, meaning the characters, rather than the technology, provide the main focus of the action. Stories can be set in any established *BattleTech* era, and although we prefer stories where BattleMechs are featured, this is by no means a mandatory element.

WHAT WE DON'T WANT

The following items are generally grounds for immediate disqualification:

- Stories not set in the *BattleTech* universe. There are other markets for these stories.
- Stories centering solely on romance, supernatural, fantasy, or horror elements. If your story isn't primarily military sci-fi, then it's probably not for us.
- Stories containing gratuitous sex, gore, or profanity. Keep it PG-13, and you should be fine.
- Stories under 3,000 words or over 7,000 words. We don't publish flash fiction, and although we do publish works longer than 7,000 words, these are reserved for established *BattleTech* authors.
- Vanity stories, which include personal units, author-as-character inserts, or tabletop game sessions retold in narrative form.
- Publicly available *BattleTech* fan-fiction. If your story has been posted in a forum or other public venue, then we will not accept it.

MANUSCRIPT FORMAT

- .rtf, .doc, .docx formats ONLY
- 12-point Times New Roman, Cambria, or Palatino fonts ONLY
- 1" (2.54 cm) margins all around
- Double-spaced lines
- DO NOT put an extra space between each paragraph
- Filename: "Submission Title by Jane Q. Writer"

PAYMENT & RIGHTS

We pay \$0.05 per word after publication. By submitting to *Shrapnel*, you acknowledge that your work is set in an owned universe and that you retain no rights to any of the characters, settings, or "ideas" detailed in your story. We purchase **all rights** to every published story; those rights are automatically transferred to The Topps Company, Inc.

SUBMISSIONS PORTAL

To send us a submission, visit our submissions portal here:

<https://pulsepublishingsubmissions.moksha.io/publication/shrapnel-the-battletech-magazine-fiction>

BATTLETECH ERAS

The *BattleTech* universe is a living, vibrant entity that grows each year as more sourcebooks and fiction are published. A dynamic universe, its setting and characters evolve over time within a highly detailed continuity framework, bringing everything to life in a way a static game universe cannot match.

To help quickly and easily convey the timeline of the universe—and to allow a player to easily “plug in” a given novel or sourcebook—we’ve divided *BattleTech* into six major eras.



STAR LEAGUE (Present–2780)

Ian Cameron, ruler of the Terran Hegemony, concludes decades of tireless effort with the creation of the Star League, a political and military alliance between all Great Houses and the Hegemony. Star

League armed forces immediately launch the Reunification War, forcing the Periphery realms to join. For the next two centuries, humanity experiences a golden age across the thousand light-years of human-occupied space known as the Inner Sphere. It also sees the creation of the most powerful military in human history.

(This era also covers the centuries before the founding of the Star League in 2571, most notably the Age of War.)



SUCCESSION WARS (2781–3049)

Every last member of First Lord Richard Cameron’s family is killed during a coup launched by Stefan Amaris.

Following the thirteen-year war to unseat him, the rulers of each of the five Great Houses disband the Star League. General Aleksandr Kerensky departs with eighty percent of the Star League Defense Force beyond known space and the Inner Sphere collapses into centuries of warfare known as the Succession Wars that will eventually result in a massive loss of technology across most worlds.



CLAN INVASION (3050–3061)

A mysterious invading force strikes the coreward region of the Inner Sphere. The invaders, called the Clans, are descendants of Kerensky’s SLDF troops, forged into a society dedicated to becoming the greatest fighting force in history. With vastly superior technology and warriors, the Clans conquer world after world. Eventually this outside threat will forge a new Star League, something hundreds of years of warfare failed to accomplish. In addition, the Clans will act as a catalyst for a technological renaissance.

**CIVIL WAR**
(3062–3067)

The Clan threat is eventually lessened with the complete destruction of a Clan. With that massive external threat apparently neutralized, internal conflicts explode around the Inner Sphere. House Liao conquers its former Commonality, the St. Ives Compact; a rebellion of military units belonging to House Kurita sparks a war with their powerful border enemy, Clan Ghost Bear; the fabulously powerful Federated Commonwealth of House Steiner and House Davion collapses into five long years of bitter civil war.

**JIHAD**
(3067–3080)

Following the Federated Commonwealth Civil War, the leaders of the Great Houses meet and disband the new Star League, declaring it a sham. The pseudo-religious Word of Blake—a splinter group of ComStar, the protectors and controllers of interstellar communication—launch the Jihad: an interstellar war that pits every faction against each other and even against themselves, as weapons of mass destruction are used for the first time in centuries while new and frightening technologies are also unleashed.

**DARK AGE**
(3081–3150)

Under the guidance of Devlin Stone, the Republic of the Sphere is born at the heart of the Inner Sphere following the Jihad. One of the more extensive periods of peace begins to break out as the 32nd century dawns. The factions, to one degree or another, embrace disarmament, and the massive armies of the Succession Wars begin to fade. However, in 3132 eighty percent of interstellar communications collapses, throwing the universe into chaos. Wars erupt almost immediately, and the factions begin rebuilding their armies.

**ILCLAN**
(3151–present)

The once-invulnerable Republic of the Sphere lies in ruins, torn apart by the Great Houses and the Clans as they wage war against each other on a scale not seen in nearly a century. Mercenaries flourish once more, selling their might to the highest bidder. As Fortress Republic collapses, the Clans race toward Terra to claim their long-denied birthright and create a supreme authority that will fulfill the dream of Aleksandr Kerensky and rule the Inner Sphere by any means necessary: The ilClan.

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