

SHRAPNEL

ISSUE #6 THE OFFICIAL BATTLETECH MAGAZINE

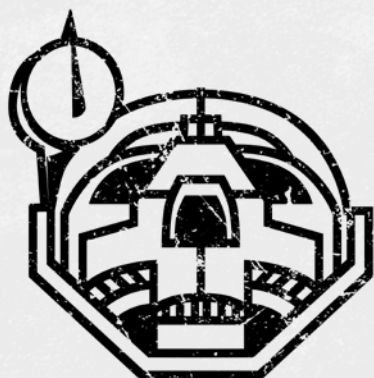


BLAINE LEE PARDOE
CRAIG A. REED, JR.
E. CLARK AVERY
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SHRAPNEL

ISSUE #6

THE OFFICIAL BATTLETECH MAGAZINE



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THE OFFICIAL BATTLETECH MAGAZINE

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COMMANDER'S CALL

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

At ease, MechWarriors!

Due to the nature of the job, I don't consciously plan an overall theme for each issue of *Shrapnel*, because the wonderfully varied talent and points of view of our authors gives us so many different aspects of the *BattleTech* universe that it's nearly impossible to lean toward any one direction for a given issue. But as I was assembling this one, it occurred to me that, much like an undercover Maskirovka agent, this issue developed a theme while I wasn't looking.

There are a few stories in this volume that make a point of looking to the future: moving ahead instead of looking back. For example, Blaine Lee Pardoe's "One Door Closes" shows us the paths of a few characters those who have read of *Hour of the Wolf* will recognize, and it poses the question of "What do we do now that the Battle of Terra is over?" The story that closes this issue, Daniel Isberner's "Moving Forward," gives a glimpse of where the Scorpion Empire is heading in the ilClan era, after their assault on the Hanseatic League in the Deep Periphery. (In case you want to catch up on what happened on Terra and in the Scorpion Empire, *Hour of the Wolf*, *ilClan*, and *Operational Turning Points: Hanseatic Crusade* are all available at store.catalystgamelabs.com.)

Furthermore, in an effort to look toward the future ourselves, we've got some new surprises in this issue. The first is the beginning of a new serial novel: Part 1 of *Vengeance Games*, by *BattleTech* veteran Craig A. Reed, Jr. (If you haven't done so already, check out his most recent *BattleTech* offering, the novel *Icons of War*, for some action in the Clan Homeworlds!) *Vengeance Games* dives into the BattleMech arenas and seedy underbelly of Solaris VII, the Game World, where a veteran from the Word of Blake Jihad is tracking down a fugitive murderer at any cost. You'll want to stick around for all four parts, because the explosive conclusion will be well worth the wait!

The second new thing in this issue is two brand-new pieces of art from Natán Meléndez, which were commissioned specifically for the stories they accompany. For the record, I absolutely *love* Natán's style, as it evokes memories of classic black-and-white *BattleTech* art from the '80s and '90s, but it also lends to a modern approach that I think you all will appreciate as much as I do. Be on the lookout for more pieces like these in future issues!

For fiction, we have short stories from five new authors in this issue. Mark Hill's "Paper Tigers" introduces some rather peculiar Star League-era relics; E. Clark Avery's "Almost Sounds Like the Guns Themselves" takes us to a veteran's struggles with PTSD in the aftermath of the civil

war in the Aurigan Coalition; M. W. Hayden's "Diamandis' Dogs" follows a local militia unit caught in the middle of conflict on their homeworld; Alexander J. Roth regales us with another tale from the Cracked Canopy in the Clan Invasion story "The Devil's Luck"; and last but certainly not least, the commander of Ace Darwin's Whiplts tells an amusing yarn in James Bixby's "Ace Darwin and the Sidewinder Canyon."

For game-related content, we have a look at the many ways in which plasma is utilized in battlefield technology; an analysis of uncommon but effective poisons useful in covert ops; a technical readout for the ClanTech version of the venerable *Victor* BattleMech; and reports for the Draconis Combine's Succession Wars-era raid on Barlow's End and the Capellan Confederation's Dark Age-era attempt to breach the Fortress Wall around Terra. Also, to coincide with the recent release of my *BattleTech* novel *Hunting Season*, this issue features some content that focuses on the Free Worlds League: a guide to navigating League politics to secure the necessary Parliamentary votes for the cause you are championing; a *MechWarrior: Destiny* Mission Briefing set on a planet seeking to gain independence from the League; and a *Chaos Campaign* scenario about the exploits of Sir Miguel Lobos Plumados, one of Thomas Marik's Knights of the Sphere.

As always, if you've got a story or a piece of art to share, send it our way! We are always looking for new writers and artists who want to share their vision of the *BattleTech* universe.

Philip A. Lee, Managing Editor



PAPER TIGER

MARK HILL

HARMONY OUTSKIRTS
CRUZ ALTA
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
27 APRIL 3012

Carmichael couldn't tell who was shooting at him. Usually it was obvious: pirates were voluminous but erratic; Lyran Commonwealth Armed Forces troops were disciplined but uncreative; and mercenaries were skilled but sometimes willing to switch to words. Lyran intelligence agents, on the few occasions he'd attracted their personal attention, would fire a couple disdainful potshots before letting their underlings handle the rest.

Nine years ago one of those underlings had clipped him in the shoulder, so he'd spent the next seven in a frigid penal colony becoming intimately familiar with the nuances of Lyran mining equipment. It was payback for all the odd jobs he and his crew had run for the Circinus Federation; a heist here, some backwater sabotage there. It had paid well, in both C-bills and Circinus watering-hole reputation, but not well enough to risk another seven years freezing his ass off.

So Carmichael had gone clean, had settled on Hardisey's Haven, and opened a small bar with one of the nest eggs the Lyrans hadn't been able to dig up. When he wasn't slinging drinks he would pilot his *Crab* in the local fight pits, where he'd be sure to let the crowd know that a free autograph came with their first beer. It had gone well, for a time. But when Duclair found him two years later, his 'Mech had been shot to scrap and he was drinking away his profits.

**THE CROOKED CRAB
HARDISEY'S HAVEN
CIRCINUS FEDERATION
22 MARCH 3012**

"This autograph offer still good?"

Carmichael looked up from behind the bar to see Duclair tapping the faded sign that spelled out the terms and conditions. It took him a minute to recognize her. The last time he'd seen Duclair, she'd been scampering away from his impending arrest.

"Not for you." Carmichael scowled, annoyed to see her out of the blue and annoyed at himself for not thinking of something clever to say.

Duclair just snorted and turned to survey the bar. "I like what you've done with the place, but how do you handle the nonstop rush?"

After Carmichael's *Crab* had fought its sad, anticlimactic final battle, he had stripped away whatever he could convert to decor. Armor plates adorned the walls, and the barrel of the well-worn small laser was mounted above his pool table. Outside, the *Crab*'s iconic pincer arm had been jammed into the dirt at no small expense, then draped in lights and a sign that displayed the bar's latest specials. Little touches like that had not helped to attract more than a couple of customers that evening, and they were more interested in the dartboard than the menu.

"What do you want, Michelle?" Carmichael asked, fingering the little needler pistol he kept hidden under some old rags.

"Got a job you might be interested in. If you're not too busy." Duclair ran a finger across the bar, then blew the dust she picked up in Carmichael's face.

"Pass." Carmichael, searching for an excuse to not look at her, began cleaning an already clean glass.

"Come on, it's a milk run. At least hear me out. And at least make me a whiskey ginger." Duclair sat on a bar stool and laughed when it creaked under her slim frame.

"If it's so easy, why do you need me?" Carmichael made a show of choosing the cheapest whiskey and underpouring it into a dirty glass. Duclair noticed, but didn't comment on his pettiness.

"Figured I owe you one," she said, spinning her glass around before downing the drink in one gulp. "I felt bad about how I left things."

"Didn't know you had feelings."

"Leave the jokes to me." Duclair pointed at her empty glass, a gesture Carmichael ignored. She sighed, plucked out an ice cube, and rolled it around her mouth as she spoke.

"Mendez got word of an old Star League warehouse on Cruz Alta. Now, before you open your mouth—I said before, so shut it—it's supposedly only civvy crap. But remember Bethany, our old Circinus

contact? She's done quite well for herself. She'll pay us to check it out, and she'll pay us more if there's anything worth grabbing for her personal collection. It's not exactly top kroner, but, uh..." Duclair made a show of looking around the bar again. "It seems like you could use every C-bill you can get."

"So you want me to help pick up some Star League staplers." Carmichael sighed. "Why doesn't Mendez just do it himself?"

"He just signed on with some merc outfit, and they're not about to take a detour on the rookie's behalf." Duclair pointed at her glass again, more emphatically this time. Carmichael refilled it with ginger ale but held the whiskey, earning him a pout.

"Yeah, no kidding. Mendez's intel was always spotty," he said.

"You're thinking of Marcel's. Remember when he sold us on some routine garrison duty, and then we spent three weeks under siege? Mendez's was accurate, he just liked to squeeze us on his cut."

"You're really selling me on this. And *you're* thinking of Morris. *His* intel was spotty, but Marcel would two-time us. How he's stayed in business so long, I have no idea. I guess the trick worked on everyone once, and most of them wouldn't live to complain."

"Whatever." Duclair drained the ginger ale, then leaned over the bar to give herself a refill. "The point is, Mendez's intel is solid. Worst-case scenario, you get a paid vacation to the exotic jungles or mountains or whatever the hell Cruz Alta has. Best case is an easy payday."

"No, the worst case is I get shot. The best case is I see you get shot first." Carmichael put the soda gun out of reach before Duclair could grab it again. "I still don't understand why you need me. You've never done a thing out of the goodness of your ostensible heart and, in case you somehow missed the sign, my 'Mech's not exactly in fighting condition. What do you want me to do, carry your luggage?"

Duclair put her hands up in mock surrender. "All right, all right, you caught me. My last gig put my *Jenner* in as many pieces as your poor old *Crab*, and I'm not walking into this without a 'Mech."

"I thought you said it was a milk run."

"Yeah, well, it's a lot easier to deliver milk when you can run seventy clicks an hour and gun down any rival milkmen, isn't it? And since my address book is a little thin these days..."

Carmichael let out a bitter laugh. "Oh, I get it. You've burned so many bridges that you need my seal of approval to convince anyone on our old crew to come aboard."

"Don't be so cynical. You're just better at keeping touch than I am. How's Ainsley doing these days, by the way?"

Carmichael shook his head. "Ainsley's got kids."

"Bauer?"

"Bauer got religion."

"Smitty?"

"Smitty got his brains splattered against a Capellan prison wall."

Duclair let out a low whistle. "What about Shu? Does he still have that ridiculous *Panther*?"

"As far as I know." Carmichael smiled at his recollection of the ludicrous 'Mech, then caught himself and shook his head. "But I have better things to do than be your gofer."

"You can turn a girl down without lying to her." Duclair smirked, then turned serious. "Look, I'm not going to blow a bunch of smoke up your ass about the good old days, especially after how I left things. But you were always the better tactician, so if I'm walking into something screwy, I could use you. And I don't want to come back here twenty years from now to find a dump run by an old man telling anyone who'll listen about how his last big job was a failure. The galaxy's got more than enough of those already."

Duclair threw some C-bills on the bar and turned to leave, but looked back when she reached the door. "So, did I convince you? I've always wanted to give a dramatic speech like that. Did I nail it?"

Carmichael rolled his eyes. "Get the hell out."

"All right, all right. But the next outbound flight isn't for a few days, so I'll be at the spaceport. Just think about it, okay?"



Carmichael had every reason to ignore Duclair, and one good reason to tip off the Lyran Intelligence Corps on her whereabouts. But when he slept that night, he dreamed of his last fight in the local pit, when he'd sizzled his large lasers over the head of some punk kid in a *Blackjack*. The returning autocannon fire had found thin spots in his battered armor and shredded his gyro, and it had all gone downhill from there.

He woke up before dawn, hungover, hands twitching like he was back at the controls. Cursing, he realized Duclair was right. That was the story he'd be stuck telling disinterested drunks for the rest of his life. No one cared about the little random victories in the middle of your career; they wanted to know whether it had all ended in dramatic glory or dramatic failure.

He asked Shoemaker, his least sleazy customer, to watch the place while he was gone, and five weeks later he and Duclair arrived at their destination.

HARMONY OUTSKIRTS
CRUZ ALTA
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
27 APRIL 3012

Cruz Alta was an agrarian backwater kept afloat by Lyrans farming subsidies. Once a Periphery breadbasket, farming continued more out of a sense of nostalgia than from any real economic sense. For every little hamlet, there were a half-dozen ghost towns that hadn't been populated since the Star League days.

Shu had arrived before them, and one look at his *Panther* made Carmichael smile. A dozen years ago Shu had impulsively ordered it painted in tiger stripes, having confused the two animals in a drunken haze. The ragged orange-and-black machine was equally garish on every battlefield, but at least opponents couldn't help but remember it.

They picked up a half-dozen local contractors, farmers who knew the terrain and were happy to take a little extracurricular work. They provided an armored personnel carrier with a jury-rigged medium laser poking out of its front, a pickup truck hastily turned technical, and a bizarre mishmash of weapons that included machine guns, a hunting crossbow, and a shoulder-mounted inferno-missile launcher. Carmichael didn't ask where it had come from.

Their little convoy hit the pothole-riddled road to a warehouse on the outskirts of Harmony, a small clump of abandoned buildings being reclaimed by nature. They skirted around the dead town, leaving the road in favor of the open plain that had been farmland before one conflict or another had turned it to arid scrubland.

After a three-hour drive, they found the warehouse right where they'd been told it would be, although it was easy to see how scavengers had overlooked it. It had been swallowed by a copse that McKinley, one of the locals, theorized had been maintained as a little slice of wilderness during Harmony's glory days. With no one left to care for it, it had grown into a full-blown forest, and trees had knocked holes in the warehouse's walls, punched through the roof, and otherwise hidden the building away.

Inside, Carmichael and Duclair found what everyone in the Inner Sphere dreamed of finding: a lance of pristine Star League-era 'Mechs.

The only problem was that they were made of wood—immobile parade displays probably used in some long-forgotten local celebration whenever the real deal hadn't been available. The craftsmanship was impressive and, to a civilian eye, probably quite convincing. Even Carmichael had done a double take. Then he had to talk one of the locals out of their frantic belief that they were suddenly all billionaires.

But even wooden 'Mechs were worth good money to their Circinus contact, if they could figure out how to transport the ridiculous things. They'd revealed two of the ersatz machines—a *Griffin* and a stately *Orion*—from beneath the giant tarps meant to protect them from the elements before they realized movement would be a problem. The locals had been too busy admiring Shu's adroit use of his *Panther*'s hand actuators to carefully remove the tarps, and Carmichael had to admit he'd been gawking, too. He didn't realize the problem until Duclair sarcastically asked if any of their contractors had piloting experience, then laughed when two put up their hands.

Carmichael had a quick, whispered conversation with McKinley, who had struck him as the most professional of the lot. Probably ex-merc or retired LCAF, not just some farmer looking for an excuse to shoot guns and drink cheap beer. He had a couple friends back in town who could rustle up big flatbeds and, just as importantly, be trusted to keep their mouths shut. It would take a little time to make the equipment available, but what could go wrong?

So they sent the driver of the technical back to town, and they put two men in the APC to establish a picket near the most obvious route to the warehouse. Five hours later, the APC returned at top speed with a warning that another convoy was on its way. Two light 'Mechs, a tank that, based on the frantic description, sounded like a Galleon, and two APCs that were bigger and more professional looking than their own, all done up in red and black.

"You know," said Duclair, with an embarrassed look on her face, "maybe it *was* Mendez who double-dipped."

"You don't say," said Carmichael. He dug a flask from his boot and took a long pull.

"I think that might've been Morris," said Shu, who had exited his *Panther* to devour two chicken sandwiches and chug a bottle of water.

"Hell, who can remember? This is why I brought your keen mind." Duclair hopped up on an empty metal box and began checking her laser rifle, prompting their contractors to start inspecting their weapons too. They, aside from McKinley, looked terrified.

Carmichael guessed they had about twenty minutes to prepare, having been told the foreign convoy wasn't moving at full speed and that, mercifully, it hadn't spotted their recon vehicle. He had already ordered all of the warehouse's detritus—empty shipping containers, rusted forklifts, and the like—formed into a barricade near the front entrance, but with the firepower described on its way, that would only give them a chance to surrender instead of immediately being blown to pieces.

Carmichael glanced around the dilapidated warehouse, looking for something he'd missed. There wasn't much to see. Aside from all

the crap they had formed into their firing line, there were the wooden 'Mechs, two of them still covered up for protection during a transport that now looked unlikely. Another four tarps lay strewn across the ground, implying a second display lance had once been stored here. Carmichael had been wondering where it might have gone but now, looking at the tarps again, he smiled.

"Hey, Shu," he said, tossing him a two-way radio. "You want to give those hands of yours a real test?"



"Feeling nostalgic?" Duclair asked as bullets slammed into their barricade. She was hunkered in a reinforced shipping container while Carmichael crouched behind an overturned forklift. A small laser sizzled over his head as he responded.

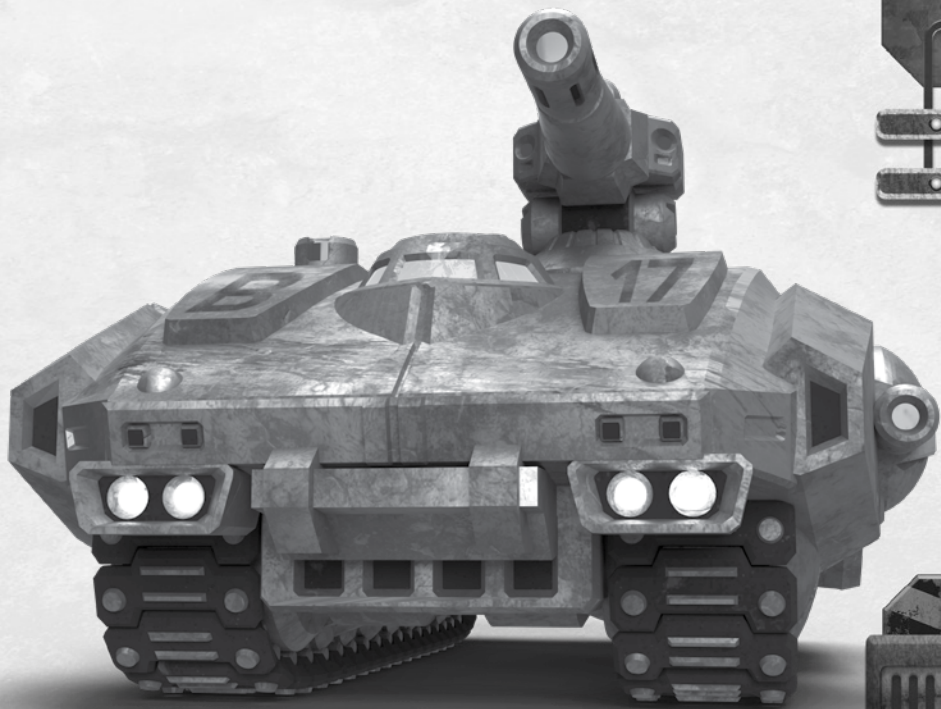
"For the time you abandoned me? Not really." He poked his laser pistol over the forklift and fired off a few shots at nothing in particular.

Carmichael had ordered his small crew to lounge around outside, to scramble back in when the foreign convoy arrived, but not before they were certain they had been seen. He wanted them to look amateurish and nonthreatening, which most of them were. The man sitting next to him, a local named Wright who'd spent much of the drive bragging to Duclair about his precision aim, had been petrified with fear since the shooting began. Another of their recruits, Sloane, had admittedly been brave in standing up and unleashing from a nasty-looking assault rifle, but his entire magazine had flown high and he'd spent the next several minutes struggling to reload it while return fire whizzed toward him.

Sloane had been trying to hit the half-dozen soldiers that poured from one of the two red-and-black APCs. Carmichael had ordered his barricade built close enough to the warehouse entrance that their mystery opposition could enter and be dazzled by the transition from blazing Cruz Alta sunset to dour interior, but not so far away that their line was thin enough for the attackers to simply blast through their obstacles and pump bullets into their undefended rear. He had also ensured the wooden *Griffin* and *Orion* were visible behind them, maybe to trick their foes for a second, but mostly to keep them from damaging the merchandise with their big guns.

"Any idea who these assholes are?" Carmichael asked, trying to catch another glimpse through a crack in their barricade. The uniforms meant nothing to him. They had the blunt, regimented tactics of the LCAF—unload ammunition at the problem until it went away, more effective but complicated solutions be damned—but their movement was a strange mix of confident and clumsy. They were acting like crack troops who rarely got the chance to prove it.

"Nope," Duclair responded. "Is it going to matter?"



Carmichael shrugged. "Probably not."

Their script was obvious, but effective. The Galleon had rolled in first to spot targets, sniff out traps, and maybe make a trigger-happy trooper with an anti-Mech weapon waste their big chance. Carmichael had smiled when the Galleon screeched to a halt at the sight of the two "Mechs" and fired a panicked medium laser at the *Griffin*. But the wild shot missed, and the driver hadn't been fooled for long. With no unusual threats in sight, an APC disgorged its troops. Together they unloaded on the barricade, trying to shock Carmichael into submission. When that hadn't worked, the real 'Mechs entered the building.

A *Locust* and an *UrbanMech*—both on the lighter side of the scale, but each could easily annihilate Carmichael's little barricade like it was target practice. Wright's face had turned to sheer terror upon their arrival, and Carmichael couldn't blame him. Being on the ground near enemy 'Mechs was always an unnerving experience.

The *Locust* squatted down and ripped a volley of machine gun fire over their heads. It was a purposeful miss, but the message was clear. Carmichael signaled for his squad to stop shooting, and return fire stopped a moment later.

"Identify yourselves," declared a stern voice through a megaphone.

Carmichael peeked through the barricade and saw a middle-aged man dressed in black leather, a dark red cape, and black gloves and cap. He had emerged from the second APC and, flanked by four more of his soldiers, looked like a cheap holovid villain. His hat was adorned with a red *B* held aloft by gold wings and, after a moment of racking his brain, Carmichael placed the image. Bowie Industries, a Steiner armaments conglomerate a tier below the big boys, but still more than capable of throwing money and power around.

Carmichael raised his hands above the barricade, then slowly stood to reveal himself. "I'm Vincent Alfredsson, of Alfredsson's Irregulars," he shouted, using the first fake name that came to mind. "You?"

"Captain Reinhold Bisset. Throw down your weapons and prepare to be arrested."

"Sorry. Orders."

"Whose orders?"

"Doesn't matter. I'm taking these things with me."

"That's a bold assertion, considering I could order you to be stepped on." Bisset gestured at the 'Mechs standing on other side of him, as though Carmichael somehow couldn't see them. That their weapons, each one capable of reducing him to a fine mist, had been pointed in his direction was hard to miss.

"Yeah, well, I'm told I'm a good negotiator." Carmichael leaned down and shouldered the inferno launcher Wright had brought along. While the inferno missile was the scourge of 'Mech pilots for its ability to cook them alive in their own cockpits, Carmichael turned and aimed it square at the wooden *Griffin*.

Bisset raised an eyebrow. "You would destroy a precious relic of the Star League simply to deny me it?"

"Sure. I'm guessing whatever Bowie C-suite schmuck ordered a strike team to the ass end of nowhere for this thinks of himself as a scholar of history because he listens to a few audiobooks between board meetings. Maybe he even has a couple museum wings on Alarion named in his honor. How would you like to tell him that you let a precious piece of history burn to ash? If I take them he can eventually buy them, or steal them, or otherwise get his grubby mitts on them. But if I pull the trigger, he'll have nothing, except a sudden and overwhelming desire to fire you for gross incompetence."

Bisset's eyes narrowed. Carmichael understood the expression, the irritation that a simple job had suddenly become complicated. Carmichael had seen it a lot, often because he was the cause of it.

"He doesn't have to know we lost one. Five is an odd number, anyway. If you pull that trigger, you're a dead man, and I'll still have a trophy lance."

"You think I'm stupid?" Carmichael ignored Duclair, still crouched in her shipping container, mouthing "yes" at him. "I've got four men back here ready to take their own shots. We could burn up your whole payday in seconds."

"That's a lazy bluff," said Bisset.

"Maybe. You want to take that chance?"

There was no response, so Carmichael moved his finger toward the trigger. Bisset watched, then threw up a hand.

"You've proven your point," he said. "I will allow you and your... *troops* to withdraw in peace."

"That's actually what I was going to offer you."

Bisset snorted. "You're willing to die over parade floats?"

"Sure. Are you? You look like someone who owns a nice home, enjoys the finer things in life, maybe has a spouse and a Captain Reinhold Bisset Junior or two waiting for your safe return. All of my money's going toward alimony and a dive bar where I drink myself to sleep with some local swill called Heat Sink Hefeweizen."

"Inspiring," whispered Duclair, prompting Carmichael to kick at her.

"It sounds like we should put you out of your misery," said Bisset. He sounded frustrated. Carmichael hadn't really expected to talk his way out of this, but an annoyed opponent could make mistakes. He hoped that would be enough for what came next.

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you." Carmichael hit the deck as Shu's *Panther* roared to life behind him. Shu had been listening to the negotiations over the two-way, and with the talking over, threw aside the tarp he'd hidden himself under.

The tarp's centuries of dust and grime made Shu's already weathered 'Mech look like it had spent some hard time sleeping on a scrap heap, but the PPC on its right arm was as dangerous as ever. It swung around and blasted hot lighting at the *UrbanMech*, knocking it flat on its ass as it tried to react. Sweat beaded on Carmichael's forehead as the heat of the weapon, confined by the warehouse's walls, washed over him.

The *UrbanMech's* autocannon sounded off as it fell, its pilot unable to get a bead on Shu in time or perhaps just squeezing the trigger in a panicked accident. Either way, the slug ripped into the warehouse roof, sending cement and rebar falling. The chaos scattered Bisset's troops, and the captain himself took cover behind his APC.

Carmichael was suddenly the last thing on their minds, so he popped back up over the barricade, took careful aim at the Galleon, and fired the inferno. With its three lasers blazing at Shu's *Panther*, it was almost as if it didn't notice the hit at first. But, as the flaming gel did its work, the lasers abruptly stopped and the Galleon's hatch popped. Carmichael was already turning his attention elsewhere, but he was relieved to see the crew drag themselves out of the tank. That was no way to go out.

The *UrbanMech* tried to haul itself to its feet, but Shu continued to pour fire on it, unloading his short-range missiles into the downed machine. The barrage punched a hole through its torso, then hit something in its guts, which spewed smoke through the wound. The 'Mech shuddered, fell back to the ground, and lay still.

But that still left the *Locust*, which peppered Shu's *Panther* with laser and machine-gun fire. The bullets were little more than a distraction, pinging dints into its weathered chassis like hail, but the laser was sloughing off chunks of armor. Shu's ambush had been effective, but it must have generated a hellish amount of heat. Carmichael could picture him sweating buckets. In no position to return fire, and with little room to maneuver in the warehouse, Shu could only turn, use his left arm as a shield, and hope he cooled a little before the *Locust* did some serious damage.

Then there was the screech of tires, and the final part of Carmichael's plan fell into place. He had sent McKinley around the back of the building in their APC, and told him to return when the shooting started. And now he was peppering the *Locust's* thin rear armor with the APC's laser.

The APC's own protection was crude—a concentrated barrage from Bisset's infantry could have crippled it—but Duclair was keeping their heads down with withering suppression fire. Wright, Sloane, and the other local recruits even showed basic competence in helping her, the turning tide doing wonders for their morale.

The *Locust* was trapped. The narrow confines of the warehouse had stripped away its greatest asset—its devilish speed—and it couldn't try to take the fight outside without exposing its thinning rear armor to Shu's terrifying PPC. It couldn't even maneuver around the little semicircle they'd pinned it in without the risk of stepping on its comrades.

Carmichael felt a pang of sympathy for the *Locust's* pilot, as seeing your back melt away could shake even the most hardened MechWarriors. This MechWarrior appeared competent enough as they tried stepping carefully backward over their panicking ground troops, looking to squish McKinley with one of its giant feet. But McKinley was too quick behind the wheel, and after a couple of close calls, enough heat had dissipated from the *Panther* for Shu to level his PPC at the *Locust's* head. At that

range, there would be no missing. The pilot got the obvious message, lowered their weapons, and popped their canopy.

"Captain Bisset? You alive?" Carmichael shouted through the smoke. Between the destroyed *UrbanMech* and the still flaming Galleon, the warehouse was filling with it.

A pause. Then a strained "Yes" came out of the man's megaphone. He sounded as though his psyche had been dealt a grievous wound, one that would take quite some time to heal.

"You want to call it here? I have a bar to get back to, you know."



They rounded up Bisset and his troops, Shu's looming *Panther* preventing any dissent. Two men had been killed as they'd exchanged fire with Carmichael's line, and one of the Galleon's crew members had suffered nasty leg burns as they'd escaped the flaming coffin, but the rest had only minor injuries, and seemed happy they weren't risking worse over wooden 'Mechs. On Carmichael's side, Wright had taken a nasty shot to the shoulder, which looked like it would end his supposed marksmanship days, and Shu looked like he'd sweated off five kilos, but otherwise they'd all escaped with scrapes and bumps.

Negotiations were swift and one-sided, Bisset spending more time glowering than talking. He would return to town with Carmichael's crew, where he could acquire transportation and retrieve his stranded troops. Any trickery, and the board of Bowie Industries would be receiving an anonymous message about how embarrassing his defeat had been. Their mutual intelligence source could be blamed for the debacle, some story about an overpowering enemy Bisset had escaped by the skin of his teeth invented.

"You know," Bisset said, "there could be a second payday in this for you. That woman you're with, I heard her bragging about how this was all her idea. Something about you being her 'assistant.' My employer will pay handsomely for her name, and he certainly won't hold anything against *you* for following orders."

"Do you believe her?" Carmichael asked.

Bisset shrugged. "Does it matter? Capturing someone involved would help my reputation and your bank account."

Carmichael looked at Duclair, who did indeed seem to be boasting to anyone who would listen. Surviving a battle—and they had survived many together—always made her boastful. He thought about his seven years slaving away in a Lyran mining camp, and rolled the vengeful image of Duclair taking his place around his mind for a while.

Finally, he spoke. "Next time, I suggest not ordering your fastest 'Mech to pin itself down. Just a little advice, from one professional to another."

Bisset scowled. "Very well. But I warn you that Alfredsson's irregulars have made a powerful enemy today."

Carmichael choked back a laugh.

THE CROOKED CRAB
HARDISEY'S HAVEN
CIRCINUS FEDERATION
8 JUNE 3012

Carmichael didn't end up making too much money. The wooden *Orion* had taken a few wild shots that lowered its value; transportation had not been cheap; the locals got their well-earned cut, and McKinley had earned a bonus; and Carmichael and Duclair had insisted on paying Shu's repair costs, given that his *Panther* had saved their lives. Carmichael would not be retiring to a luxurious mansion, where beauties waited on him hand and foot. But he would pay his bills and get by for a while.

The bar had survived his absence, and the captured *Locust* now loomed over it. Carmichael had offered to draw straws with Duclair, but she had told him to keep it, a mea culpa of sorts. It had felt good to pilot it out of the warehouse, but he'd also felt some rust he didn't think would ever shake off. But he already had plans to install a rumble seat and take patrons out for a ride, maybe let them slag some wrecked cars and stacks of tires if they paid extra.

During Carmichael's absence, Shoemaker had only drunk a case of cheap beer meant for cheap customers and one bottle of whiskey from Carmichael's private collection, which was less of a loss than anticipated. "How'd it go?" he asked from behind the bar when Carmichael returned.

Carmichael sat down and gave Shoemaker a smile. "Well," he began, "I couldn't tell who was shooting at me..."





VOICES OF THE SPHERE: THE REPUBLIC ARMED FORCES

ERIC SALZMAN

**Opinions and Commentary
from around the Inner Sphere: November 3151**

For a half-century, the Republic Armed Forces (RAF) were the hammer Devlin Stone used to forge and enforce his Pax Republica. Built around a core of Jihad veterans, they proved their mettle in conflicts with the Capellan Confederation and territorial expansion campaigns contested by elements of the former Free Worlds League. Passionately loyal to the ideals of the Republic, given the same advantages of short internal lines of logistics and communications that helped the Terran Hegemony secure its borders during the Age of War, and armed with cutting-edge Clan technology, the RAF appeared unassailable.

But when the Blackout hit in 3132, the entire organization was revealed as a paper tiger. Stone's aggressive demobilization and the Military Material Redemption Program had gutted the assets of the Republic Standing Guard and the Principes Guards, leaving them with equipment billed as "cheaper to maintain" and "sufficient for anti-pirate operations." Marauding gangs of opportunistic or ideology-driven bandits were allowed to run rampant through the Republic while the RAF seemed to stumble over its own feet, proving incapable of defending Terra against a Steel Wolf raid without help from Countess Tara Campbell's Highlanders, and certainly proving no match for the Jade Falcon desant.

In 3135, when the Fortress Republic protocol was announced and Exarch Jonah Levin pulled his best troops back inside the Wall, it was widely assumed that the RAF would use its impenetrable defense to get organized, raise and train new combat divisions, and mass-produce

cutting-edge war machines, then return with overwhelming force to crush the warring factions that had bled their strength battling over the abandoned Republic worlds. When it came, however, the RAF's Operation Eruptio in 3149 successfully bolstered the Federated Suns' stance against the Draconis Combine, but failed to put much of a dent in the advancing Clan Wolf or Jade Falcon toumans, nor held back the advancing armies of the Capellan Confederation and Draconis Combine's Unity Pact.

With the arrival of couriers from Terra bringing word that the Republic went down to total defeat on Terra, its most heavily fortified and garrisoned stronghold, we asked people around the Sphere for their insights on how and why the RAF failed in its mission to safeguard the Republic:

Wang Ah Lam, Truth (Capellan Confederation): The ever-victorious forces of the Capellan Confederation defeated the RAF rabble for one simple reason: we Capellans fought for justice, to reclaim worlds stolen from the people of the Confederation and to restore their rightful culture. The RAF soldiers realized they sought to hold what did not rightfully belong to them, and were quick to break and run, removing their stain from the Inner Sphere.

Lucinda Morwen-Davion, Markesan (Federated Suns): The RAF showed it still had teeth during Eruptio, liberating Robinson and knocking the Dragon back on its haunches for a spell. I feel guilty that maybe they used up too much of their strength helping us, and that we didn't return the favor when they called for aid. Still, with the Combine in control of New Avalon, I think the First Prince didn't have any other choice.

Bron van Osterbrook, Svinngarn (Lyran Commonwealth): I don't think the RAF is really dead and gone. This is almost certainly one of Devlin Stone's long-range gambits. According to the rumor mill, many RAF units and key leaders went missing during the final collapse of the Republic and the fall of Terra. My guess is Stone planned an exodus to a secret fallback point where the core of the RAF could gather its strength and strike back once this so-called ilClan gets complacent. Who knows, maybe in another three centuries we'll see Clan Stone boil out of the rimward Periphery on a quest to reclaim Terra. It's happened before.

Aakil Khan, Aitutaki (Free Worlds League): The RAF was always a cult of personality. When they had Stone at their head, nothing could stop them—not the Blakists, not the Capellans. But once he exited

the picture, they lost their way. They were a mix of clashing cultures from the very start, and without his strength to pull them together, they fractured—split off to follow other charismatic leaders, joined up with the Senatorial secessionists, or turned bandit. We've got some experience with that sort of thing hereabouts, so I know it when I see it. Even when Stone returned from the deep freeze, from all accounts he didn't have the same fire, and couldn't overcome the troops' feelings that he'd abandoned them. Plus, his actions after returning didn't have the mark of a master strategist, unless he was trying to lose. Cryostasis can't have done his cognitive capacity any favors.

Radu Tepes, Sighisoara (Draconis Combine): The RAF demonstrated their strength in the field during Eruptio, but relied overmuch on deception and speed to strike where they were not expected, rather than facing their foes directly. When forced into a defensive posture, the RAF troops lost the initiative and could not muster the fortitude to meet our samurai in battle. I presume the situation on Terra was much the same—no amount of fortifications or technological trickery can compensate for a fundamental lack of honor.

Oxford Oshika, ArcShip Titanic (Clan Sea Fox): I can assure you that it was not the RAF's equipment that led to their downfall. Our merchant factors concluded a mutually beneficial exchange that gave the Republic the capability to manufacture weaponry to Clan standards, placing their soldiers on an even footing with the Wolves and the Jade Falcons. The reason for their failure, then, lies in their training, unit cohesion, and strategy—all areas where they failed to measure up to those bearing the banner of Kerensky. I generally dislike speaking ill of a client, but since the Republic account is now closed, I can note that their obsession with acquiring our technology may have served them poorly. Our products are the best on the market, but they do require exotic materials by Inner Sphere standards and are expensive to produce—though well worth the price, I assure you. In their unique situation, however, on defense without having to worry about interstellar transportation, the RAF might have been better served mass-producing more cost-efficient, lower-technology units, and then drowning the Wolves and Falcons with swarm attacks.

Viclean "Vic" Nevastuica, Galatea (Galatean League): The RAF ain't gone—they're comin' outta the woodwork all over the Mercenary's Star. I'm an agent, see, runnin' recruitment for merc outfits, and half the mokes that cross my doorstep are packin' RAF service

papers. Seems like they got tired o' dyin' for a dream what already went kaput, y'know? Wanted to make some coin once the stones stopped hittin' their accounts. Thing is, the RAF went down so hard and fast, it's trouble to find outfits what want 'em. Even the ones what say they was a "Knight o' the Sphere" get the stink-eye nowadays. Anyway, if y'want some cheap cannon fodder, gimme a call. I got RAFFers up to the rafters. [guffaws at his joke]

Dienna, Phecda (Wolf Empire): The Republic Armed Forces were worthy foes, and the warriors of the ilClan gained great glory in their defeat. The Republic deployed exotic new weaponry, new combat formations, and towering fortifications, but they simply could not stand against the destiny of Kerensky's heirs. They fought for a dream of peace and imposed their Pax Republica on an Inner Sphere shellshocked by the destruction wrought during the Jihad. But their dream had existed for only a handful of decades, while for centuries, we of the Clans have focused our every waking moment on realizing the visions of the Great Father. Against such determination, especially with First Lord Alaric Ward at our head, no opposition could long resist.





POINT OF VIEW

JASON SCHMETZER

JUDEA JUNGLE
TOLAND
FEDERATED COMMONWEALTH
20 MARCH 3050

The strategic-scale inset in her HUD was small, more like a button than a screen, but it was good enough to show Elemental Bitter that the battle had already moved away from them. She kept most of her attention on the landscape around her as she advanced with the rest of her Point, but the strategic screen had already told her the story she cared about.

There was no glory to be won left for her.

And her Point Commander, Keefer, idiot that he was, still had them chasing a 400-year-old *Stinger* through these damned woods.

The Jade Falcons had come all the way back to the Inner Sphere, all the way to Toland, and what did they find? Mercenaries too cowardly to fight. Money-soldiers who broke at the first exchange, leaving their comrades to die. Freebirths, one and all.

She would not earn her right to challenge for a Bloodname in this battle.

Of that she was certain.

"We are gaining on it," Keefer said. His radio was dialed down to the Point channel, too low-powered to go much farther than the dispersed five Elementals could hear inside their powered armor. There was little chance of it being detected. The armored infantrymen were spread apart in roughly pentacular formation, far enough apart that a lucky strike wouldn't damage them all, but close enough to support each

other when faced with a 'Mech. Her flamer could shoot concentrated fire 90 meters, and her short-range missiles three times that.

Bitter made sure her microphone was muted before muttering, "It is twice as fast as we are." A *Stinger* was a scout 'Mech, armed usually with lasers and machine guns. It would be deadly to normal, unarmored infantry. But to her battlesuit, an annoyance if she was stupid enough to let it hit her. This was one of the rarer models with two lasers instead of machine guns, but that didn't concern her.

The MechWarrior inside was a coward. They'd proven that by running away.

"You can see how fresh the breaks are by the way the sap falls," Keefer went on.

Bitter rolled her eyes. None of the trees in front of her were even broken. The 'Mech was barely three meters wide. She'd destroyed machines like it in training. It could pick its way through a forest like this if it had to.

Her Cluster, the Ninth Falcon Talon, had landed with the Turkina Keshik itself, the personal Cluster of Khan Vandervahn Chistu. Bitter finally had a chance to prove her worth to the second-in-command of Clan Jade Falcon himself. The bid had placed them on the Keshik's flank, but that was only proper. And then Keefer—the idiot—had bid their Point to pursue a *Stinger* that had cut and run when the rest of the Trinary butchered its company. The bulk of the mercenaries had taken flight, except their Point. They'd stayed here, stalking a coward who'd run from battle.

That had been fifteen minutes ago.

And already Keefer thought he could read the sap of a tree he'd never even known existed twenty minutes before.

In her mind's eye, she already saw herself challenging him to a Trial of Position and taking command of the Point from him. As soon as they were back aboard the ship and she could draw the Circle of Equals.

Blinking, once, long and hard, Bitter shook the doubt from her mind. She brought the right gauntlet of her suit up high enough that she could see the soot-blackened cone of her flamer. If there was glory to be had here, she would find it. She was the product of centuries of selective breeding, trained from birth to bring the wrath of Clan Jade Falcon to the barbarians of the Inner Sphere. It was time to act like it.

"I will take point, Point Commander," she said, lengthening her stride. "My sensors got a flicker this way."

The Great Father must be smiling on me, she thought a moment later as she came across the trail of what could only be a 'Mech: broken branches and deep footprints in the jungle's soft loam.

"And now I have the trail as well, *quiaff?*"

"Aff," Keefer said. "Flush him out for us, Bitter." An update sent by his suit to hers and the others showed the order of movement twisting to follow her suit on her tac map.

"Aff," Bitter said, trying to keep her voice level.

Him. He *might just as easily be a she, you idiot.*



Sergeant Pablo Benito knew his hands were shaking. He could see it jittering the targeting crosshairs in his HUD. Because the damned techs hadn't dialed down the sensitivity of his controls like he'd asked them to a thousand times! He clenched his hands on the sticks, giving them a good jerk, a sort of full-body clench that even went to his feet where they rested on the pedals that controlled the *Stinger's* turns.

The 'Mech lurched left, bouncing off a two-meter-thick tree bole and scraping a great hunk of purple bark free. The meat of the tree underneath was sickly yellow.

"I *hate* this planet," Pablo muttered. He'd hated coming to Toland, hated every moment of living on it. He *really* hated that someone apparently expected him to *die* for it.

The speakers in his neurohelmet were quiet. He'd had to turn them off. It got to be too much, listening to the screams and curses of everyone else in the company as they died. These damned invaders didn't know how to fight like mercenaries. They were just killing *everyone*.

That was no way to run a war.

Just killing everyone led to atrocities.

The colonel told them that all the time. He didn't know where the colonel was now, or Captain bin Xemal. He'd turned and run when whatever the hell that giant Jade Falcon 'Mech was hit the captain's *Quickdraw* with four PPCs at once. The captain had gone down hard, with two limbs blown off his 'Mech. Pablo didn't look back after that. Not even when Lieutenant Mukerji threatened to fire into his back.

Right before the Jade Falcons killed Mukerji, too.

That was when he'd turned the speakers off.

Professionals fought to win, not to kill. Professionals knew when the fight was lost. Professionals preserved their equipment for the next battle if they knew they couldn't win this one.

Which was how he had gotten here.

Wherever the hell *here* was. He was lost somewhere in the Judea Jungle. He knew that much. But where he was in that jungle, he had no clue. The *Stinger's* compass knew the direction to Toland City, but Pablo had never stepped through these cursed woods before.

His sensors were almost blind. The trees must leach heavy metals from the soil, because they all gave off magscan hits. He'd had to turn the magnetic scanner off.

Pablo had keyed in the emergency rendezvous as soon as he cleared the tree line. It was all the way back in Toland City. He didn't know if he could make that, but he'd try.

He was a *professional*.

The reticle jiggled again. Pablo ground his teeth together, let go of the gunnery controls, and shook his hands like he was shaking water off. The tips of his fingers tingled. He felt niggles of pain in his thumb joints. When he gripped the controls again, his hands felt steadier.

"Professional," he whispered.

The *Stinger's* right shoulder shoved a tree half-over. The soil clumped to the exposed roots ran like sand. It was the most disgusting orange Pablo had ever seen. He pressed down on the left pedal but resisted the urge to dial the throttle back. He had to keep moving if he was going to make the rendezvous.

A light flickered on the edge of his HUD. For a moment he wasn't sure if he'd actually seen it. He'd seen a lot in the last little while.

Another light flashed. A red icon flickered, then vanished. It was right along the edge of his 360-degree vision strip; almost right behind him.

Red in his HUD was an enemy.

They were after him.

He pushed the throttle forward to the stop.

Pablo knew his duty. His duty wasn't to die in a hopeless battle. His duty was to preserve his 'Mech and himself for the next battle. The Twelfth Star Guards had not survived the centuries since the end of the Star League by fighting when they knew they wouldn't win.

The colonel would be proud to see him at the rendezvous.

He knew it.

The fact that his hands started shaking anew didn't have anything to do with it.

That was when his *Stinger* tripped. Its foot went into a moss-covered depression and got caught beneath the heavy downed tree bole. Pablo screamed as the 'Mech went down face-first.



Bitter froze as the audible alert flashed on her screen; the armor automatically recorded all its inputs into the ROM. She blinked the recording up and played back the prior few seconds. It sounded like a train crashing. Bitter grinned wolfishly as she blinked the audio closed and triggered her armor's integral jump jets. That sound was a BattleMech falling. Nothing else quite sounded like it.

Acceleration pushed her down as jets in her back and calves launched her off the ground and flung her 90 meters forward. She bent in flight, shoulder down, as her armor smashed through branches

and leaves. She banged off one too large to break, but she landed in a shuffling fall that she immediately rolled up from, flamer leveled.

The tracks here were fresher. There was a scar high up on a thick tree. The bark was sloughing down where its integrity had been broken. She'd already noticed the trees were oddly matrixed; rigid but fragile. Like Keefer.

"I am closing," she sent the rest of the Point. The team commo system would have told them of her leap.

A thumping, clashing clatter announced Mijj landing nearby. Like Bitter, he tangled with the trees and landed rolling, but came up ready to fight. "Which way?" he demanded.

Bitter laughed. "Follow me, hatchling."

Eyeing the tracks, Bitter leaned left and jumped again as soon as the jets were recharged. This time she led with her flamer out. The 'Mech was close.

A red icon burned to life on her HUD.

Very close.



Pablo Benito wanted to spit the blood out of his mouth, but he couldn't. The faceplate of his neurohelmet wouldn't open. He made a face, braced himself, and swallowed it. The water from the drink nipple was tepid as always, with a dusty aftertaste from too long in the too-old tank, but it helped him get the mouthful of blood and spit down.

The *Stinger* lay sprawled on the forest floor. Pablo dangled from his five-point harness. He switched the 'Mech's controls to dexterous and brought its hands under it to push itself back into a crouch. The 20-ton 'Mech's legs automatically gathered beneath as it as the gyro sought balance. He felt myomer muscles strain to lift it back to its feet.

He felt okay.

Right up until the first SRM impacted against the *Stinger's* back.



Bitter screamed in ecstasy as the missile exhaust washed across her armor's faceplate. Only one of the blind-fired missiles struck, but it was enough. First blood in this hunt belonged to her! No matter what else happened in this fight, her ROM and Mijj's ROM would prove it was she, not Keefer, who had brought the *Stinger* to battle.

Mijj landed a few meters away and triggered his own SRMs, but both flew wide, exploding in the forest behind the spinning 'Mech. It had just recovered from falling down, with bright orange dirt smeared across its front torso.

Bitter dodged left, trying to get a tree between her and the 'Mech while her missiles cycled. A few good hits would be all it took to breach the *Stinger's* armor, and then she could get in close, put her flamer's nozzle into the breaches, and burn the barbarian MechWarrior's machine out from under him.

"Wait for the rest of the Point!" Keefer roared. His armor was not yet in sight.

"Glory waits for no one!" Mijj replied.

Bitter just grinned.

The *Stinger* hit Mijj with one of its medium lasers. He screamed.



Pablo had toggled the controls back to combat at some point. He didn't remember doing it, but long hours of practice and simulation paid off. He tagged one of the toad-like Jade Falcon powered suits with his left-arm laser before he even had the 'Mech fully turned.

"That's right!" he yelled. He tried to get the right-arm laser around, but the damned armored infantryman got up and ducked behind a tree before he could get it in line. The other one was already hidden. He reversed the *Stinger's* throttle, backing away, trying to keep the range open as his laser cycled.

Only two. Two infantrymen. The day a MechWarrior couldn't take two infantrymen, no matter how well armored, was the day Pablo Benito quit being a MechWarrior.

Three more red icons appeared out of the trees, as if the ugly leaves had laid hellspawn eggs. Pablo bent the crosshairs toward them.

The instant his lasers swung out of line the first two reappeared, stepping around their trees and leaping toward him on jump packs. He struggled to get the lasers back in line.

Behind the first two, the new trio bounded forward also.

Pablo's crosshairs trembled again.



Bitter ignored Mijj's moaning on the Point channel. The painkillers from his suit should kick in soon. She concentrated on her landing, accepting a rougher touchdown to save even half a second of recharge time on her jump jets. The laser rangefinder in her helmet confirmed what she felt: she was within eighty meters of the *Stinger*. If it didn't move too quickly...

"Bones of the Founder but that hurt," Mijj whined.

"Your armor took the worst of it," Bitter spat.

Elemental armor was proof against most Inner Sphere weaponry. Indeed, Mijj's armor could take another shot just like it had already taken and survive, though it could not take a third.

"I order you to wait for the Point!" Keefer screamed.

"First blood is Bitter's," Mijj growled, "and I have been struck. Keep up!"

Bitter grinned. Mijj was good, but there was no way such disrespect would not end in a Circle of Equals after the battle.

Her grin widened. Assuming both Keefer and Mijj even survived the battle...

The jump jet indicator toggled green. Bitter aligned her crosshairs, triggered her final pair of SRMs, and leaped, all in the space of a second. Mijj was maybe half a second behind her.



Pablo had never fought five opponents at once before, and that's what this felt like. The little bastards were fast and almost as heavily armed as a *Wasp*. One of them just punched out two more SRMs before he had a chance to do more than goggle, and both hit. One struck the *Stinger* dead-center in the chest, and the other bit into the armor over the 'Mech's left thigh. Neither was worrisome on its own, but they hit even when they fired while moving.

And now two were rocketing straight at him.

Pablo stepped on the right foot pedal reflexively, trying to avoid the incoming enemies, but his mind had forgotten he was reversing. The *Stinger* lurched into a giant tree strong enough that the 20-ton 'Mech bounced. He swore, fingers adjusting the throttle.

The *Stinger* shook once, twice, and the metal of the 'Mech's armor and structure transmitted two hard *clangs* to his cockpit.

"Oh no," Pablo whispered.



Bitter's blood sang as she hung from the rent her SRM had made in the *Stinger's* thigh. She toggled the control that locked the armor's battle claw into an alloy-tight fist and savored the sensation. First blood, and now first mounted. She clenched her shoulder muscles, telling the armor's musculature to lift even as her heavy boots scrabbled for purchase on the *Stinger's* knees.

"I am on!" Mijj called. Bitter looked up, saw his boots above her.

There was a shadow.

"Mijj!" screamed Nunca, from somewhere behind them where the remainder of the Point still chased.





The *Stinger* MechWarrior brushed his left-arm medium laser across Mijj's armor like a giant flyswatter. The heavy barrel snapped Mijj's armor at the shoulder and he fell, arm amputated. His screaming filled Bitter's helmet.

Fury for her Pointmate's injury burned into Bitter's breast.



Pablo frowned as he brought the laser away from the *Stinger*'s chest. The readiness light burned red and the weapon indicator was crosshatched; he'd damaged it scraping the interloper off.

"Fair trade," he muttered.



"SRMs!" Keefer called.

Bitter screamed in frustration. Four or five impacts shook the *Stinger* as the rest of the Point fired. All hit above her. Seeing her opportunity, Bitter scurried up the 'Mech, boots and battle claw finding purchase in the new damage her Point had inflicted.



Pablo felt the *Stinger* lurch. He leaned forward, trying to see past the HUD in his cramped cockpit to the small transpex viewport. There was movement on his 'Mech's chest.



Bitter halted her battlesuit when her helmet was about where the *Stinger*'s chin should be. She jammed her flamer into a patch of broken armor and held down the trigger.



In an instant Pablo's damage board went red even as his HUD was obscured by smoke. He slammed his feet down on the foot pedals. The *Stinger* leaped into the sky, straight up, driven by its jump jets. If he couldn't shake this Jade Falcon infantryman off—

—the *Stinger*'s jump jets cut out at the apogee of his jump. The indicator went crosshatched.

Pablo's scream filled the cockpit as the 'Mech fell from 180 meters in the air, with nothing to cushion its landing.

Worse, the out of control 'Mech tipped over to fall headfirst.



Bitter let go when she heard the roar of the *Stinger*'s jump jets cut out and felt herself falling. She burped her own jets, letting the flaming

'Mech fall back into the jungle beneath her, then angled to land with a final burst near Keefer's motionless suit.

Behind her, the wreckage of the *Stinger* burned.

"That kill is mine," she said to her Point Commander. "And the moment we return, I challenge you to a Trial of Position."



VICTOR C**Mass:** 80 tons**Chassis:** HildCo Type V**Power Plant:** Fusion 200**Cruising Speed:** 43 kph**Maximum Speed:** 64 kph**Jump Jets:** HildCo Model 12**Jump Capacity:** 120 meters**Armor:** Durallex Heavy**Armament:**

1 Omega 12-coil Gauss Rifle

2 Series 2f Extended Range Medium Lasers

1 Smartshot Mk. V Streak SRM 4 Launcher

Manufacturer: Field Refit**Primary Factory:** None**Communications System:** Opus III Highbeam**Targeting and Tracking System:** MaLandry 34

The *C* series of BattleMechs occupies an intermediate technological stage between Inner Sphere legacy equipment and new designs built with Clan technology. First seen in the Inner Sphere, when the Clans retrofitted *isorla* BattleMechs for use by garrison forces charged with holding newly conquered territory, the refurbished *C*-class 'Mechs had comparable Clan-tech weapons grafted to existing mounts in standardized configurations across the invading Clans. This was likely due to the technician caste relying on conversion protocols dating from the Golden Century, when similar conversions were performed on remaining SLDF stockpiles with then-bleeding-edge innovations in weapon design grafted onto 'Mechs that retained their original armor and internal structure. This reliance on established protocols meant that mostly older, low-tech equipment received the *C* upgrade, while *isorla* that had been upgraded with new or rediscovered technology was deployed as-is with Spheroid bondsmen and *solahma* garrisons. To achieve Clan performance levels, most Spheroid *isorla* required extensive systems upgrades and the installation of extra heat sinks to deal with the heavier heat load, but some of the more rugged designs were considered ready for action after being quickly rearmed.

While many Star League-era models were converted, a select handful were particularly favored, including the *Victor*, a common model within the Federated Commonwealth, Draconis Combine, and Free Rasalhague Republic. Requiring only basic upgrades to its weaponry and extra heat sinks taken from Spheroid salvage, *Victor Cs* were among the first to be deployed against their former masters in the invasion

corridor. Clan Wolf particularly appreciated the symbolism of turning the Steiner-Davion heir's namesake against his people. Subsequent Clan defeats made their weapon systems available to Spheroid commands, and the *C* configurations proved popular field refits throughout the Inner Sphere between 3050 and 3080, for those able to get their hands on Clan-tech weaponry.

Capabilities

The *Victor C* retained the original's performance profile and simply slotted Clan weaponry into existing mounts, showcasing the Clans' "good enough for *solahma*" attitude toward the refits. The missiles were upgraded with Streak targeting systems, and the lasers were longer-ranged and harder-hitting, while the massive Pontiac 100 autocannon was swapped for a Gauss rifle, retaining most of the hitting power and vastly increasing the effective range. After operators reported overheating problems, two extra standard heat sinks were added to manage the strain of the Clan laser weaponry.

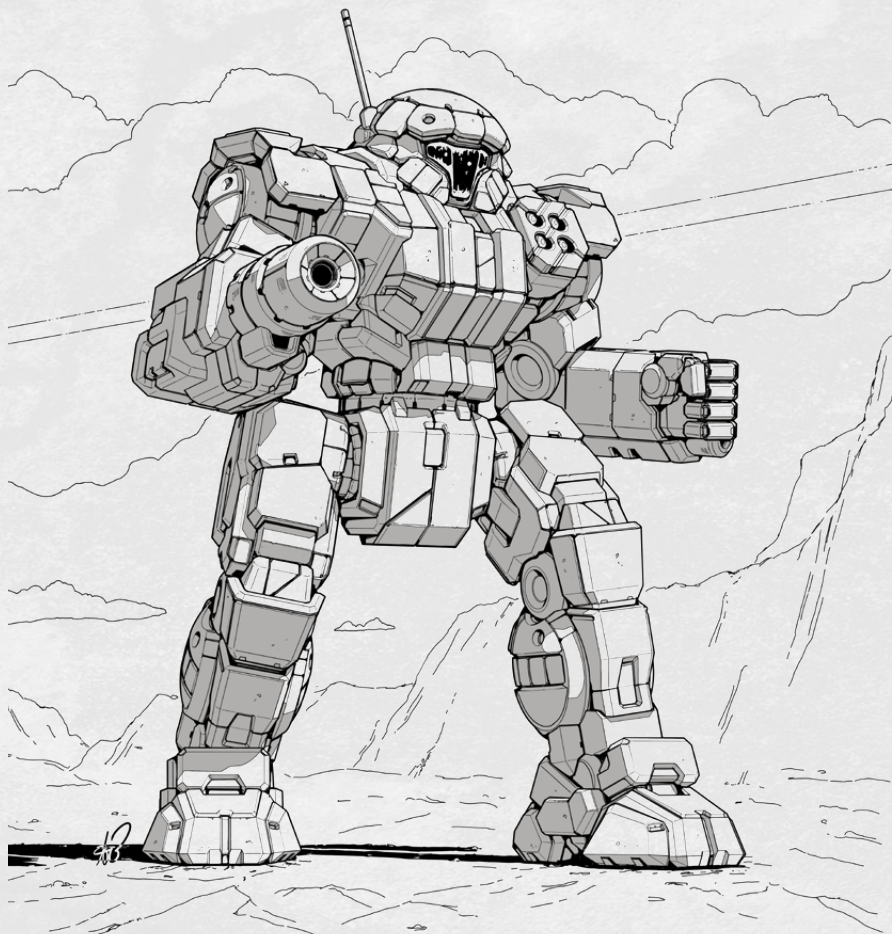
Battle History

Most of the *Victor Cs* in the Inner Sphere were *isorla* conversions, appearing throughout the second-line forces of the invading Clans. Their ammunition-dependent configuration proved a liability to those Clans that failed to defend their supply trains on Tukayyid, and many were overrun by the Com Guard advance with their missile racks and ammo bins empty. When Wolf Khan Ulric Kerensky bid his entire *touman* against the Jade Falcons in the Refusal War, much of Clan Wolf's second-line equipment went with his Crusader-dominated battle group, reserving the bulk of the more advanced OmniMechs for Phelan Ward's exiles. Wolf supremacist *Victor Cs* distinguished themselves at the battle of Semore Chasm on Evciler, using their jump jets to quickly escape the kill zone of the Jade Falcon ambush, then regroup and counterattack.

Notable 'Mechs and MechWarriors

MechWarrior Mallory: A *solahma* warrior from the Sixth Wolf Garrison Cluster, Mallory had won through heavy fighting against the Hell's Horses, Fire Mandrills, and Ice Hellions in his SLDF-vintage *Victor C* and escaped the carnage of the Wars of Reaving to rejoin the Crusader Wolves in the Inner Sphere, only to have the misfortune of being deployed against Katherine (née Steiner-Davion) in her Trial of Position. Hanging back according to *zellbrigen* protocol and allowing the smallest 'Mech to approach her *Warhawk* first, MechWarrior Mallory was still passively awaiting his turn to engage when Katherine abruptly shifted her aim and decapitated his stationary *Victor* with an alpha strike.

MechWarrior Ubanner: Already teetering on the edge of *solahma* status, Ubanner was shot out of his *Highlander* on Tukayyid while repulsing a Com Guard assault on Wolf supply lines. After Wolf medtechs regrew his left arm and eye, he was issued a *Victor C* converted from *isorla* taken off the Cusset Militia by Epsilon's Ninth Elemental Star, and was assigned to Sevren with the rest of the Choyer Garrison Cluster. When elements of the Twelfth Falcon Regulars issued a Trial of Possession for the former Federated Commonwealth base at Mount Ripchuk in 3054, Ubanner was bid in its defense. Feeling his age, and desperate to achieve distinction before being declared *solahma*, he threw himself at the foe in a frenzied assault and added the defeat of Jade Falcons Velthurn and Nan to his codex before being slain in single combat by Trent Hazen. To honor his achievements, Ubanner's ashes were used as nutrients for future *sibkos*.



Type: **Victor C**

Technology Base: Mixed Inner Sphere (Experimental)

Tonnage: 80

Role: Skirmisher

Battle Value: 1,925

Equipment

Mass

Internal Structure:

8

Engine:

320

22.5

Walking MP:

4

Running MP:

6

Jumping MP:

4

Heat Sinks:

17

7

Gyro:

4

Cockpit:

3

Armor Factor:

184

11.5

*Internal
Structure*

*Armor
Value*

Head

3

9

Center Torso

25

30

Center Torso (rear)

15

R/L Torso

17

20

R/L Torso (rear)

10

R/L Arm

13

15

R/L Leg

17

20

Weapons and Ammo

Location

Critical

Tonnage

Gauss Rifle (C)

RA

6

12

Ammo (Gauss) 24 (C)

RT

3

3

Streak SRM 4 (C)

LT

1

2

Ammo (Streak) 25 (C)

LT

1

1

2 ER Medium Lasers (C)

LA

2

2

Jump Jet

RL

1

1

2 Jump Jets

CT

2

2

Jump Jet

LL

1

1

Notes: Features the following Design Quirks: Rugged (1).

Download the free
record sheet for this 'Mech at:

bg.battletech.com/shrapnel/





ALMOST SOUNDS LIKE THE GUNS THEMSELVES

E. CLARK AVERY

**LORD TAMATI MEMORIAL SPACEPORT
CORDIA CITY, COROMODIR VI
AURIGAN COALITION
30 NOVEMBER 3025**

The very last of the pills had washed out of Walther Suydam's system by the time the shuttle entered Coromodir VI's atmosphere. As he and the other workers trudged down the gangway, the first natural light he'd seen since watching the sun go down through the window of the spaceport express bus back on Itrom nearly three weeks ago stung his eyes like cheap shampoo. The noise of the port, the announcements on the tinny speakers, the crying children, the distant thunder of another shuttle taking off down the other side of the tarmac and always, always the constant murmur of the crowds, assaulted his ears like the spray of a *Locust's* Sperry Brownings into a throng of protesters.

There was nothing between him and the world anymore.

Walt was relieved as Coromodir disappeared behind one of the thick, gray clouds of ejecta that lingered in the sky while he carried his luggage to the bus stop. As the bus chuffed toward the curb, snowflakes descended one by one, melting as they touched the pavement to leave nothing behind but tiny wet dots and the anxiety of the locals about this year's harvests.

It should have been spring in this hemisphere, but it was not. A Taurian Concordat officer mad with vengeance for the death of his son and a centuries-old Star League drone control AI whose motives—if such a thing was capable of having them—were known only to itself

had ensured that spring would not come for many more years. Even with the atmosphere scrubbers and other terraforming *Iostech* the Coalition had managed to scrape together from derelict ruins or wrangle from lopsided trade agreements with uncooperative, so-called allies, the Little Ice Age caused by the *Iberia's* spectacular demise was forecasted to last to the end of the decade at least.

Walt might have thought it served them right, had he not known it would serve the rest of the Coalition even worse. He knew how these things went. House Arano couldn't be bothered to lift a finger to help Itrom clean up the radlands since the founding of the Coalition, no matter how many people in the supposedly safe regions south of the Cherenkov Ridges came down with leukemia and worse year after year from the strontium winds. And now that their own planet was in trouble, they were going to bleed the rest of the Founding Worlds dry just to keep their own on life support.

And now Walt was part of it.

He slung his bags into the overhead compartment at the back of the bus and settled into the scratchy blue felt of a window seat looking out onto the urban sprawl of Cordia City. Off in the distance, partially obscured by office blocks and construction cranes, he could see the spires of Arano Palace gleaming like stalagmites of quartz in the choppy, furtive sunlight.

In that light, he caught a glimpse of the two *Shadow Hawks*—actually just the thinnest outer layer of external armor welded to vaguely man-shaped arrangements of steel beams—that stood in the palace square, their shoulder-mounted cannons glinting in the sun like the fangs of some monstrous beast.

Those 'Mechs were just one of many, many things he'd hoped never to see again.

**MINERAL SILO ALPHA
NORTHERN RADLANDS, ITROM
AURIGAN DIRECTORATE
7 APRIL 3025**

It came stomping toward them out of a gap in the ridges, silhouetted in the blowing trinitite dust. As the radionuclide-impregnated sands thinned and the massive shape solidified, it took Walt a moment to realize what he was looking at.

The autocannon was there, as was the arm-mounted laser and firing ports for missiles recessed into the right-hand side of its upper body, but the rest of it was like nothing Walt or any of his comrades

in the garrison had ever seen. The *Shadow Hawk's* normally boxy, utilitarian form was ensconced in overlapping plates of ablative armor decorated with wicked metal spikes in a manner that would remind the few people in the Periphery with any knowledge of Terran paleontology of an ankylosaur. When the blowing sand had subsided entirely, the immense war machine gave off an almost surreal glitter as sunlight peeking through the ash clouds above caught nicks in the hastily applied bluing on the 'Mech's weapons and the large pieces of what appeared to be scrap-metal piping and grating that braced the more questionable seams in the rat-rod up-armor.

Most striking of all, though—perhaps literally—were the hands. The humanoid hand actuators, whose complex and delicate mechanisms were often the first things to go on a 'Mech as time and endless warfare took their toll, had been replaced with twin-thumbed, chameleon-like grippers which were crudely adorned with three dangerous-looking claws above the main "fingers," in imitation of the spiked knuckledusters so beloved of low-level hab gangs and merc-bar brawlers. There was no way this 'Mech belonged to House Arano's regular forces. This was the 'Mech of a pirate or mercenary, probably some combination of both.

Walt had little time to consider their opponent's origins, however. Lieutenant Vanzant's voice crackled over the comms, ordering the garrison to intercept the incoming enemy before it could reach the mineral silo. Walt sprang into action, his *Commando* rushing out in front as Hazama traversed his *Blackjack's* turrets toward the foe and Sergeant Delahoya barked at Wilders to bring their missile carrier around.

The feet of Walther's *Commando's* deftly navigated the large ice patch still lingering from the nighttime freeze as he moved to outflank the larger BattleMech. Vanzant spoke into the comm again as his *Griffin* crested the ridge behind the silo, advising his men to target the *Hawk's* weapons first. They were a known variable as opposed to its nonstandard armor, especially considering the intermittent rad-storms playing hell with their sensors.

The *Commando's* targeting optics clacked and whirled as they doggedly scoped out the autocannon against the medium 'Mech's shifting bulk and the haze of blowing particulates that surrounded them as another gust of toxic wind blew down from the Glass Mountains. As the crosshairs achieved something approximating stability over the point of the gun's emergence from its armored carriage, Walther raised the light 'Mech's arm and let loose a screaming pilum of charged photons that shone an intense nitrogen blue through the atomic dust that filled the rapidly ionizing air.

He, or the *Commando's* lowest-bidder targeting system, had made a slight miscalculation, however. The *Shadow Hawk* dug in its heels as the laser rammed ineffectually into the shoulder shield on its left

arm, leaving thick, black scorch marks but little else. Walt braced for a counterattack, but instead of turning its weapons on him, the *Hawk* lived up to its name, taking to the skies on wings of flame spewing forth from its jump jets. Walt tried to get a fix on the enemy's trajectory, but it was too late.

He heard it before he saw it.

Delahoya had just chimed in on the comms that he'd gotten a fix on more enemy contacts coming in from the east when the channel became awash in horror. The screeching of twisting metal and shattering glass. The squelching of bursting bodies. The mercifully brief screams of Sergeant Emilio Delahoya, Lance Corporal Sergei Momoa, and Private First Class Abdul Wilders.

That wasn't even the worst part, though. It was the way that hulking, spiny monstrosity, still standing in the burning wreckage of the missile carrier, coldly and methodically turned the small antipersonnel laser bolted onto its forearm toward what had once been the cab, and fired into it as bloodstained glass tinkled onto the rock and dust.

Like it was pissing on the ruins.

**MIGRANT WORKER TRANSPORT BUS
CORDIA CITY, COROMODIR VI
AURIGAN COALITION
30 NOVEMBER 3025**

A large, pale man settled into the seat next to Walt. A knowing look crossed his face, the right side of which was a web of burn scars, as he noticed Walt's fingers digging anxiously into the armrests. He declined to say anything, and spent the entirety of the bus ride reading a paperback biography of Thomas Kearny. The burned man's eyes—one pale blue, the other likely a cheap, secondhand glass replacement so dark brown it appeared to be all pupil—never strayed from the book.

There's always a certain tension to meeting a fellow veteran after a civil war. What do you say to a man who might have fired the shot that killed somebody you'd slept next to every night in the barracks? What do you say to a man who might share responsibility for destroying the entity that ought to have paid your pension?

What do you say to a man who might be one of the faces you see every time you close your eyes?

The whole ride out to the impact site, Walther wondered if he would be able to handle the job. He might have wondered if he made the right choice, but really there was no choice at all. With his mother ill and his younger sister, Marlene, struggling to pay for her education,

even after obtaining one of House Cunningham's coveted Periphery Outreach scholarships to the far-flung NAIS, Walther could not overlook his duty to provide for the family. There was no one else. His father, Isaka Suydam, had perished not long after Marlene's birth. When pirates raided the mineral storehouse he worked in, Isaka and the other workers scrambled to evacuate, and he had been vaporized by a stray missile fired from a *Jenner* engaging the facility's security forces.

The Suydam family had worked in and around the mining industry on Itrom almost as long as humans had lived on the planet. Walther's late father had come from a long line of heavy-equipment operators, and Walther had followed in his footsteps. His mother had been so proud when he'd been selected, straight out of school, on the strength of his high marks on the heavy-equipment exams and his family's record of service to the ruling House, as an operator for House Gallas' pride and joy, a Sitwell *Powerman* IndustrialMech, perhaps the only one in the entire Rimward Periphery. The *Powerman* was an invaluable treasure, one of the very few IndustrialMechs not cannibalized for parts during the Succession Wars, owing to its utility to the mining industry in Itrom's harsh environment. Even with such a great responsibility granted to him, young Walther often dreamed of far greater glory, and it wasn't long before he saw the opportunity to grasp it.

When 3022 rolled around, and House Espinosa assumed control of the Aurigan Reach, the call had gone out for more soldiers as the new Aurigan Directorate built up its forces, including new MechWarriors. When Walther had been fast-tracked to the position due both to his experience as an IndustrialMech operator and the Directorate's desperate need to replace pilots lost in the coup, his family's negative reaction shocked him. Still, despite his mother's protests that it was too dangerous and she couldn't bear to lose him after already losing his father, Walt couldn't wait for the chance to put his skills to work at the controls of a real BattleMech. Young and eager to prove himself, Walt considered it something of a disappointment that he'd spent most of the subsequent three years performing uneventful patrols of the mineral silos in the desolate northern radlands, with only the occasional suspicious vehicle or dissident encampment to break up the tedium. He could count on one hand the number of times he'd fired his weapons.

Back then, Walt would have given anything to see some action. He had no clue just what that "anything" might turn out to be.



The low tract housing and industrial blocks of outer Cordia gave way to graying, sun-starved farmland as the bus rolled down the highway. There wasn't a single cow in the pastures whose ribs weren't visible. It wasn't a scene of total devastation, however, at least not yet. In many

of the fields, construction crews and their equipment had replaced the farmers and their tractors, erecting hydroponic greenhouses to try sealing off as much arable land from the bitter cold and dark as they could. Walt watched construction vehicles in Perennial Diversified colors ramming posts into the ground and hefting enormous panes of glass toward the completed parts of the structure before a heavy cargo truck sidling up alongside the window, also in PD livery, obscured the scene. When the truck finally pulled away after several minutes, Walt caught his first glimpse of it. Part of it, at least.

The *Iberia*.

The fragments of the *Fortress*-class DropShip had come down in what was once an orchard. What remained of the charred husks of peach trees lay on their backs, radiating out around them like ripples in a pond made of deadwood. The blackened skeleton of the farmhouse lingered forlornly next to the prefab foreman's office and the port-a-johns. As twilight encroached, geysers of sparks flew up against the darkness from a modified trencher using its immense, diamond-toothed industrial cutter to carve up the chunks of scattered magnetohydrodynamic piping sitting defiantly at the center of that dead land.

Walt turned his head away from the sparks, leaned back into his seat and tried to rest. Only a temporary respite. Soon, he knew he would be out in the noise and the sparks and the blinding light.

Just like old times.



MINERAL SILO ALPHA
NORTHERN RADLANDS, ITROM
AURIGAN DIRECTORATE
7 APRIL 3025

Sparks flew up into the *Commando's* cockpit, scorching Walther's leg as the 'Mech's right torso burst under the onslaught of the *Centurion's* missile barrage. Staggered by the impact of the explosion, the *Commando* skidded on the ice, and Walt struggled to bite back the pain of the molten metal seeping into his ligaments and to bring the machine under control.

In the end it wouldn't have mattered, as the *Centurion* followed up with a burst of autocannon shells to the light 'Mech's knee. The solid layer of ice cracked with a hideous sound like a hyena's jaws breaking through bone as his toppling giant plowed through it and onto the hardened soil below, the force of the crash ripping off what remained of its crippled right arm.

Hazama stepped in to defend Walt as he vainly tried to right himself, his *Blackjack* firing off all four of its lasers toward the mercenary at once. Two were absorbed by the thick ablative armor on its left arm and another went wild, but one managed to penetrate a good distance through the armor of the *Centurion's* gun arm, causing the 50-ton 'Mech to abruptly begin loping back toward the ridge.

With the *Shadow Hawk* now tied up dodging blows from Lieutenant Vanzant, the garrison was still holding out, despite their losses. At least it was until Hazama's *Blackjack* exploded.

IBERIA CRASH SITE
COROMODIR VI
AURIGAN COALITION
30 NOVEMBER 3025

The main worksite had been set up in the shadow of the largest remaining piece of the *Iberia*. The massive, jagged hulk of twisted alloy and charred ceramics looked for all the world like a broken teapot the size of a baseball stadium. Even with the extensive damage the DropShip had sustained in its uncontrolled descent into the atmosphere, the warm earth tones punctuated by angry red of Taurian Concordat livery were still visible amid the burn scars and exposed metal. For so much of the massive craft to still be recognizable even after significantly altering the climate of an entire planet, the *Fortress* class truly lived up to its name.

The bus rolled to a stop at the end of a dirt road hastily scraped out of the fulgurite surrounding the impact site. Boxy prefabricated structures, mainly quarters for the migrant workers, dotted the landscape. With most of the native labor force occupied with salvaging the planet's agricultural base in the wake of the damage caused by the *Iberia's* crash, Coromodir VI had been forced to call on workers and equipment from around the Coalition and its allies for the task of salvaging the *Iberia* itself.

That was where Walther came in.

The workers disembarked the bus and queued up to receive their assignments at the intake tent at the foot of one of the many industrial light poles now illuminating the site. Walther's breath was visible in the chill of the night, and he quickly regretted not dressing warmer, still wearing the denim jacket and pullover he'd found sufficiently warm for the forecasted temperature when he'd disembarked the shuttle in Cordia. A chill wind whipped down the plain, fluttering the edges of the tent. The cold penetrated into the scar tissues of his bad leg especially deep, and Walther grew increasingly anxious to get his papers settled and get indoors. It was already getting to be too much. The bright lights overhead, the cold wind sucking the thermal energy out of his body, the two women in line in front of him chattering to each other in Star League English that sounded to his Aurigan Creole-accustomed ears like strings of firecrackers going off in their mouths, the heavy boar-breath of the burned man standing in line behind him.

He needed the pills. He needed them, but he couldn't have them. He couldn't be allowed to pilot anything with them in his bloodstream. Couldn't take the job and make nearly four times what he'd been making working the counter at the truck stop on the Old Ore Road, the only place that would hire him after the war. Making change for unwashed, red-eyed long-haulers in between stays at the charity clinic. Doc Kala'iki said his therapy wasn't progressing well enough to cut off his meds and fly off to another solar system, but he wasn't going to let his family down. Wasn't going to tell Marlie she couldn't make the trip to New Avalon. Wasn't going to tell Mom she couldn't go to Canopus for the operation, and she'd be in the chair 'til she died.

Never.

Never.

Despite the bitter cold, Walt was sweating by the time he got to the front of the line and addressed the man at the pressboard table inside the tent a bit too loudly, struggling to hide the shame and fear that they'd know something was wrong and send him back. The bored functionary barely seemed to notice as he flipped through and stamped Walt's documents with the soulless automatism that has typified government bureaucracy since scribes chipped Hammurabi's laws into

stone tablets. Walt was instructed to head for room 7 of barracks 4, which was reserved for heavy-equipment operators. Once there, he would deposit his belongings in the footlocker and wait for the section chief to give the new arrivals their orientation.

Barracks 4 was divided into a dozen bunkrooms with two beds each and a common room with a kitchenette and a head at the far end from the entrance. The rush of warm air as Walt stepped through the door was a great relief from the bitter cold outside. The relief didn't last long, however, as he entered his assigned room and saw the burned man, who would be sleeping in the cot next to his, pulling off his jacket. Hanging from a chain around his thick neck was a medallion shaped like the golden Cormorant of House Arano, its jagged wings snagging on the patch of graying chest hair visible above the neckline of his white, sleeveless shirt.

Section Chief Carioca, a man with oily hair and a prominent nose, strode into the barracks to herd the workers toward the viewscreen in the common room, to show them the same workplace-safety videos and give the same dry orientation speech they'd all seen and heard at every other job site before. Then on to business. The workers would be spending the next three months dismantling the main body of the *Iberia*, then—assuming all went according to plan—they would be reassigned to whatever secondary impact sites remained, until all usable materials had been collected and reclamation of the affected land could begin in earnest. The tour of the facility for the new arrivals would begin at six o'clock sharp the next morning, so they were advised to get started on their rack time as soon as the briefing ended.

Walt was reluctant to sleep. He knew the nightmares would be waiting. He was off his meds and living on a strange, new planet full of people who'd fought on the opposite side of a bloody civil war, people who'd probably run the nearest sharp object across his jugular the moment they thought they could get away with it, and probably earn a slap on the wrist even if they didn't. More to the point, he was going to be sleeping four feet away from one of those people for the next three months.

Assuming he lasted that long.

MINERAL SILO ALPHA
NORTHERN RADLANDS, ITROM
AURIGAN DIRECTORATE
7 APRIL 3025

The *Blackjack*'s cockpit blew out from the inside as the rapidly vaporizing shrapnel from the cooked-off shells and the star-hot steam from the breached reactor turned Cuervo Hazama—who had been Walt's bunkmate since being assigned to the garrison; who always drank Walt under the table at that disgusting, radiotrophic mold-encrusted trucker bar when they had leave together; who was so anxious to see his parents again—from a hopeful young man into a cloud of fog tinged with charred organic chemicals. The MechWarrior in the *JagerMech* who had fired the fatal alpha strike from the southeast side of the ridge clearly had a good grasp of the *Blackjack*'s design, as they had known just where to aim.

The smoke and steam from the collapsing *Blackjack* fogged the *Commando*'s optics as Walt scrambled to stand back up before the *JagerMech* could get another shot in. In the shifting haze filling his viewscreen, the shadows and mist resolved into a human figure banging against the cockpit, begging to be let in. Crying that it was too hot as their fists slammed against the polarized ballistic glass, only to burst back into steam at the impact. Crying out of the sunken hollow where Cuervo Hazama's easy smile had once been as his friend screamed in terror.

**IBERIA CRASH SITE
COROMODIR VI
AURIGAN COALITION
1 DECEMBER 3025**

Walt was exhausted as the foreman showed him and the other operators around the worksite. He'd barely had two hours of sleep. Hazama had been his best friend in the world for three years, but Walt had grown to hate him. The bastard could never leave him alone. Even when Walt was awake, he thought he could hear his voice sometimes, or see him out of the corner of his eye.

Things were better when they finally got to the hangar. Walt's eyes drifted up to it standing in the maintenance gantry: the *Powerman*. Even after all these years, they had kept it in working order. The only difference was that it was now painted in the silver-gray and sickly yellow-orange of Aspero-Dinton Minerals, the *Iberia* salvage operation's main contractor.

When Walther climbed into the cab that sat on his *Powerman*'s shoulders, he felt a comforting sense of familiarity. The seat felt just the same as it had before the war. Walther glanced around the cab and recognized the particular scuff marks on the aging rubber of the control

sticks. There was the mess of scratches on the bottom-left corner of the status panel that looked like a child's drawing of a porcupine, the way the paint on the radio dial was only worn away on the 5 and 10, the same old coffee stains above the switches. The techs hadn't even replaced the headlight button with the big scratch on it. Hardly surprising, as even with as valuable as the IndustrialMech had been to Itrom's mining-based economy, BattleMechs would always be a priority in this unstable age.

Like the House Guards' personal BattleMechs, the *Powerman* was among many assets seized by the Directorate in the name of consolidating the Aurigan Reach's resources. When House Arano had retaken power, the *Powerman* was among the Directorate assets that High Lady Kamea had opted to privatize to refill the Coalition's war-ravaged coffers rather than simply return to the other Founding Houses, just one of many bones of contention threatening the stability of the newly re-formed government.

As he walked the *Powerman* out onto the blasted ground of the *Iberia* crash site, Walt felt a sense of optimism he hadn't felt since the last time he'd sat in that fraying, duct-tape-covered seat. He was back in the saddle, and nothing was going to stop him from helping his family.

And then a piece of nearby scaffolding collapsed, and the sound—the sound Hazama's autocannon had made clattering to the hardened atomic dust of the radlands as his *Blackjack* was ripped apart from inside by its own rupturing fusion engine—yanked Walt right back to Itrom, right back to the Aurigan Civil War.

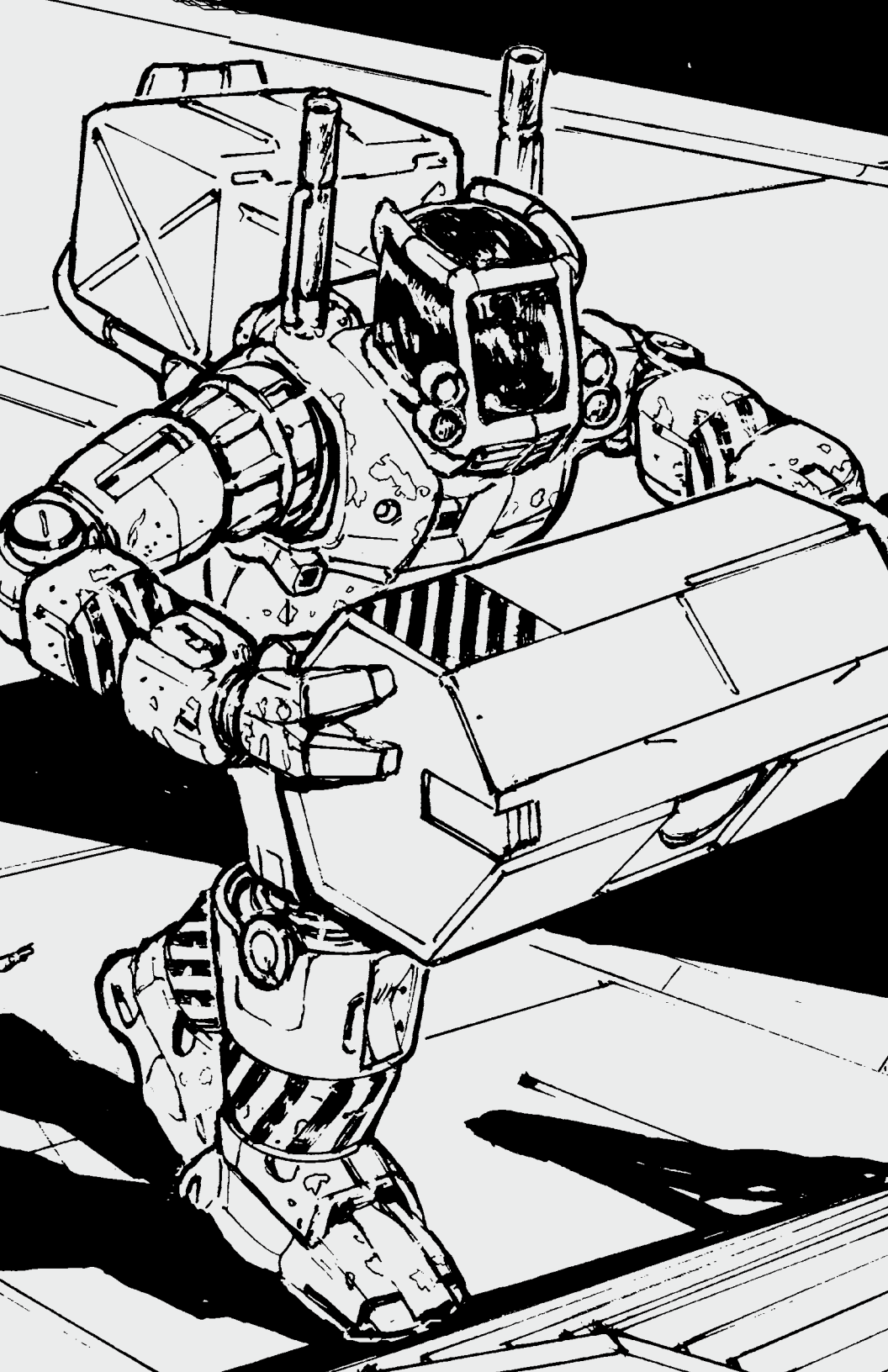
His eyes raced as he tried to find weapons that weren't there or cover from enemy fire that had long since come and gone. The ground shook lightly as he traversed the 'Mech around, desperately scanning the devastated landscape for threats.

Walt struggled valiantly to regain control against the electrons running a gauntlet of scar tissue through his hypothalamus. Just when he thought he was back to himself, the shock ran through him again as the foreman barked at him over the radio for wheeling the 'Mech around like a maniac.

The job was turning into a nightmare, and Walt hadn't even started yet.



The job mostly consisted of him pulling down and breaking up pieces of the *Iberia*'s hull and carving them up into sections of standardized dimensions for the trucks to haul away. It was repetitive, mind-numbing work, but it would have been bearable if not for the noise. Even through the thick windowpanes of the *Powerman*'s cab, insulated against the impact winter cold, Walt could hear everything. Demolition



charges were the missiles exploding in his *Commando's* face. Metal screeching as it was wrenched from the *Iberia's* carcass was the cab of the missile carrier coming down on Delahoya, Momoa, and Wilders, turning well-trained bodies that seemed so tough into soft, wet, slopping chuck. Whistling steam was Hazama being vaporized in his *Blackjack's* fractured cockpit.

It was all Walt could do, day in, day out, to remember the breathing exercises Doc Kala'iki had taught him, and power through to the end of the shift. To keep his clenching fists at his sides when the foreman cursed him out again and again for making such poor time loading up the alloy wagons. To ignore the jeers of the Arano loyalists in the commissary at lunch hour.

Most of the vehicle operators at the worksite were vets like Walt, and divisions were already making themselves known between those who had fought on opposite sides of the civil war. Walt just tried to keep his head down and ignore both sides, but it was getting harder and harder. Every night at lights out, he tried not to make too much sound or meet the mismatched eyes of the burned man, whose name was Yuri Warren.

Warren, for his part, barely acknowledged Walt at all.

CORDIA COACH TERMINAL
CORDIA CITY, COROMODIR VI
AURIGAN COALITION
14 DECEMBER 3025

Walt took the bus back to Cordia City on one of his infrequent days off. Once there, he used the bus station payphone to call various medical centers offering treatment for PTSD. The Veterans Administration hospitals were, of course, giving priority to those who had fought under the Restoration, and none of the charity clinics had any openings for psychiatric outpatients. Private hospitals would not be an option if Walt wanted to be able to send money back to his mother and sister.

Walt hung up the phone, walked to the Trade Partnership Financial building visible through the bay window of the terminal, and applied for a 10,000 C-bill life policy, which he obtained at a surprisingly low premium. Working in heavy industry was ordinarily considered a significant risk factor, but under Aurigan law, temporary positions lasting less than a standard year were not required to be reported on insurance forms. As far as Trade Partnership Financial was concerned, Walther Suydam was a food-service worker currently on sabbatical.

As he rode the bus back to the site, Walt felt like a great weight had been lifted from him. His family would be all right. All that remained was to find a way to make it look like an accident, or perhaps a homicide.

Trade Partnership Financial adhered to the typical two-standard-year moratorium on payouts for suicide. Walt was not going to live like this another two years.

**IBERIA CRASH SITE
COROMODIR VI
AURIGAN COALITION
16 DECEMBER 3025**

The opportunity Walt had been looking for soon presented itself; not on the job, but in the commissary. The main entrée that day was chicken almondine. Somebody at the loyalist table made a remark comparing the scent of almonds to the cyanogen gas House Espinosa had used in the Perdicion Massacre. Somebody from the Directorate table threw something at the crowing loyalists, and a fight broke out.

Walt, who had tried to stay as far away from conflict as possible, threw himself into the fray. He saw Yuri Warren coming through the men's room door, wiping some vomit from his scarred face with a paper towel, and plunged the fork he was holding straight into the pink and white burns on Yuri's cheek. The man barely made a sound as he grabbed Walt's head and slammed it into a plastic cafeteria chair, its cheap aluminum legs buckling as his burly arm carried Walt and the cracking polymer all the way to the smooth, off-white floor. Walt was still conscious when his hairline-fractured skull hit bottom and Yuri brought his fist down again and again.

Walt would have said "Do it" if his mouth weren't full of blood.

The fatal blow he so desperately wanted never came, however, as a security guard in full riot gear sailed through the air like an *Atlas* on aftermarket jump jets and tackled Warren away. Another guard pulling Walt up caused something to dislodge inside his cranial vault, and he lost consciousness.

For the first time in two years, he was able to rest without seeing his old comrades die again.

IBERIA CRASH SITE
COROMODIR VI
AURIGAN COALITION
19 DECEMBER 3025

Walt lay in the infirmary, waiting for the axe to fall. When he was declared fit enough to stand, a foreman from another section came in and told him to get dressed. They were going for a ride.

Walt and the foreman rode the open-topped cart through the bitter cold across the plain to a secondary worksite around a hunk of cargo deck embedded in the earth. A still-functional hatch led down into a buried compartment, and the foreman led Walt through. Inside the warped walls, dimly lit by strings of industrial lamps, stood a small crowd of a dozen or so workers. Among them was Yuri, gauze on his cheek where Walt had stabbed him.

When the larger man reached out toward him, Walt was sure he'd been brought there so Yuri could finish what he started, but instead he only patted Walt's shoulder. When Walt expressed confusion, Yuri told him that all would be explained now that everyone was here.

At the end of the room stood a man dressed in a tattered Aurigan Directorate officer's jacket. He stood on substandard prosthetic legs with the aid of a cane, and his face was even more heavily scarred than Yuri's.

The Directorate officer, Captain Alistair Haust, explained he was there on behalf of Ibex Rampant, an organization of former Directorate personnel. Walt thought he recognized Haust's name from a memorial the new recruits had been forced to attend for those killed in the initial fighting when House Espinoza seized power. Haust scoffed at this. A mere clerical error: after an alpha strike fired from Lady Kamea's own *Kintaro* had felled his *Wolverine*, he had been clinically dead for several minutes before field medics succeeded in reviving him. He was fond of saying that the great ibex, too, had once been extinct, just as Haust himself had felt death's cold embrace. The great ibex had suffered many stillbirths before the scientists dedicated to restoring it had achieved success, but now the hills and valleys of Coromodir V teemed with them. So too would Ibex Rampant survive through the perseverance of those dedicated to correcting the shortsighted mistakes of the past.

Walt struggled not to roll his eyes wondering how long Haust had spent coming up with that speech. At least some of House Arano's propaganda about the Directorate's profligate use of "enhanced interrogation" obviously held true, as he was certainly torturing that metaphor.

Haust's plan, at least, was somewhat more coherent than his speeches. It all hinged on the fact that the *Iberia's* main weapon, a Long

Tom artillery cannon, had survived the crash mostly intact. The personnel loyal to the Directorate had been smuggling it in pieces, disguised as lengths of industrial piping and pressure vessels, to be reassembled at one of the secondary worksites. Once complete, they would aim the gun toward Cordia City and use it to obliterate Arano Palace.

Because Walt had so savagely attacked a man he believed to be a former Restoration soldier, the members of Ibex Rampant believed they could count on him and his IndustrialMech to expedite the plan. He would be reassigned, through their people in the main office, to the Long Tom's hiding place, a site entirely staffed by Directorate sympathizers, where they could finish assembling, loading, and aiming the gun in peace. With Walt on the job, the palace would be rubble come the weekend.

Walt thought for a moment. If he refused, they would probably kill him right then and there. Wasn't that what he wanted? And yet, the resolve he'd felt when he abandoned hope of treatment, when Yuri's fist had been about to come down on him one final time, had passed. Some selfish gene drove his sense of self-preservation onward, and Walt found himself agreeing to the clearly unbalanced former officer's scheme, no matter how harebrained he thought it was.



When they were back in the bunkroom, Walther finally spoke to the burned man, whose name was not Yuri Warren. The real Yuri Warren, a combat engineer for the Restoration, had been on a *Leopard* shot down in the Battle of Coromodir. Because House Arano had stipulated that physical remains be required to finalize a death certificate, Yuri Warren was declared MIA, and his technically still-valid ID papers—along with those of many others whose remains would almost certainly never be collected from orbit—had wound up on the black market in the postwar chaos. The burned man had bought them because both the Coalition and the Concordat wanted him for war crimes. Walt didn't have to ask why.

But he couldn't help but ask why the burned man was doing this. If he knew the Directorate had really done such a terrible thing, that it wasn't just propaganda, why continue to fight for them?

The burned man said it had to mean something. If he stopped now, all those people had died for nothing. Maybe if he could still win, the nightmares would stop.

It was then that Walther knew why he had decided to live a bit longer.

**MINERAL SILO ALPHA
NORTHERN RADLANDS, ITROM
AURIGAN DIRECTORATE
7 APRIL 3025**

Walt got his *Commando* to its feet just in time to see an unusually pristine *Highlander* firing some strange weapon he'd never seen before into the round face of Vanzant's *Griffin*. The sonic shockwave blew out the panes of its canopy and sent Vanzant himself shooting through the exit wound in a spray of pink mist, as if the BattleMech were a flesh-and-blood man clad in 55 tons of armor. An early-renaissance knight in full plate having his first and last encounter with a handgunne.

It was just Walt now. He was all that was left.

Only one thing left for him to do.

**SECONDARY WORKSITE, IBERIA CRASH SITE
COROMODIR VI
AURIGAN COALITION
22 DECEMBER 3025**

The fateful day came at last. Walt's *Powerman* hoisted the colossal gun barrel, now smattered with welds and rivets that would only need to hold for one shot, until its position agreed with the calculations. With his three-pronged gripper, he then hefted the shell from the unmarked transport truck and deposited it into the Long Tom's chamber, which he had finished rigging up himself, and closed the hatch up tight.

Captain Haust looked on his team's handiwork so proudly from behind the jury-rigged command console put together by the burned man, standing there next to him and running through the preliminary checks. He didn't have to be there himself, but he wouldn't have missed it for the Inner Sphere.

As the countdown crackled through the *Powerman's* radio, Walther could hear the burned man's voice, the last voice he would ever hear, saying that soon it would be finished at last. Soon the nightmares would end.

"Yes," Walt said. "For both of us."

**MINERAL SILO ALPHA
NORTHERN RADLANDS, ITROM
AURIGAN DIRECTORATE
7 APRIL 3025**

The mercenaries weren't close enough to the silo to be seriously damaged by the explosion, but at least they wouldn't get their hands on it. At least they hadn't won. At least it would be worth something. Not just the lives lost, but all the time Walt had spent in the cockpit, all the things he had learned on the job, both as a worker and a soldier, that had been leading up to that moment. Things like how use a 'Mech to lay demolition charges.

Walther pressed down...

ARANO PALACE
CORDIA CITY, COROMODIR VI
AURIGAN COALITION
23 JUNE 3027

...on the detonator.

The Capitol Police found the recording Walther had made before heading out to the Long Tom for the final time. He had omitted a few details about the length of his involvement in the conspiracy, but everything else he had learned was there. The recording ended with an apology for not notifying the authorities sooner, for fear of being caught by the conspirators. Several members of Ibex Rampant who hadn't been killed in the blast were rounded up; still more would soon perish in a last stand at the Directorate outpost on Gaucin at the hands of the newly minted Rampart Company.

The Suydam family was awarded a full military pension as befitting a soldier who had faithfully served House Arano and the Aurigan Coalition. Beatrix Suydam spent her last five years hiking, gardening, and doing other things she had always loved before a sudden stroke finally claimed her. Marlene met her husband at the NAIS and stayed on after earning her degree. When the Helm Memory Core found its way to the Institute, Dr. Marlene Suydam-Scott was serving on the research team that would bring its lost secrets back to the benighted Inner Sphere.

And as for Walther Suydam himself, at the small ceremony in his honor at the palace he had sacrificed so much to save, when High Lady Arano bent down to the level of his wheelchair to place the medal around his neck after his year and a half in the hospital, she told him through the sign-language interpreter that no expense would be spared in the bionic surgeries needed to make him whole again. Walt, with his one remaining arm, signed that she should give her money to people who really needed it. Like the people living downwind from the radlands

back on Itrom, maybe. Walt doubted it would get through her myopic skull, but at least he could say he tried.

When it was all over and the Palace Guard was shuttling him to the spaceport for the flight back to Itrom, Walt signed to his nurse that the phantom pain from his missing leg was back, and she placed the pills in his open hand. Walt had no reason to abstain, now that he wouldn't need to worry about having to drive an IndustrialMech again. With the *Powerman* destroyed in the worksite blast, it would be many decades yet before another would be seen in the Periphery again.

The sun no longer hurt Walther Suydam's eyes as it shone through the dissipating ash clouds and into the window as the city streets raced by. No noise dragged his troubled mind back to that terrible war.

There was nothing between him and the world anymore.





PLASMA, PLASMA, AND MORE PLASMA

WUNJI LAU

**Lecture by Dr. Daronna Suzuki, 3 February 3144
Federated Youth Academic Vacation Camp at the New Avalon Institute
of Science**

[Begin Transcript]

Morning, campers! I hope you had fun on yesterday's WorkMech ride-along. Today, it's back to the books, and we'll continue the 'Mech theme and learn some neat new facts!

You've probably seen a bunch of holovids like Immortal Warrior, where characters yell about BattleMechs and plasma, usually while 'Mechs launch themselves into space, explode in nuclear fireballs, or in last year's award-winning release, crack open their reactor chamber to warm a hot tub for fourteen supermodels on a frozen planet.

Now, I know you know that's just the movies, but did you know that in real life, our brave MechWarriors and their BattleMechs actually use not just one kind of plasma, but many different kinds?

Plasma is often described as an ionized gas, and it's one of the fundamental states of matter, along with solids, liquids, and gases. In fact, plasma is by far the most common state of basic matter in the universe! Plasma is notable for its interactions with electromagnetic forces, such as generating electric currents or being movable by magnetic fields. Also, just like the other states of matter, plasma can be extremely complex. Saying "plasma technology" is a lot like saying "solid food": there are countless compositions, variations, and preparations, and I'm sure you kids wouldn't want to get your dessert mixed up with your salad!

[Slide 6: Reactor Plasma]

Most of you probably already know that fusion reactors, including the ones in BattleMechs, fuse hydrogen atoms into helium to generate heat, and that the mixture inside the reactor is a hot plasma of ions of those elements. However, this reactor plasma isn't the kind of high-density, high-energy plasma useful for weaponry. It's incredibly hot, but removing it from its precisely balanced, vacuum-insulated environment and exposing it to the air causes it to dissipate almost instantly (which is why fusion engines don't actually explode in mushroom clouds like they do in the holovids). In fact, a lot of the weight, power requirement, and heat burden of 'Mech systems (like jump jets and energy weapons) that "tap reactor plasma" are dedicated to components that borrow from the reaction-mass reservoirs and electrical systems outside the reaction chamber to generate the correct type of plasma for a specific application.

For example, jump jets make their superheated plasma from a variety of sources, usually whatever's in the ambient atmosphere, but also internal reserves of mercury or hydrogen when necessary. This plasma is volatile and disordered, since its only purpose is to eject outward at maximum velocity to apply thrust. This, by the way, is why jump jets make poor weapons: although they make a directed, superheated blast strong enough to push a 100-ton 'Mech into the sky, that energy disperses so quickly that it's deadly only if a target is dumb enough to get right up close and plug the end of the nozzle with their cockpit canopy.

So, to do real damage with plasma, you've got to make the right kind of plasma, and get it to your target with its vast energy intact.

[Slide 8: Flamers]

Fusion-powered flamers have existed for over a thousand years, with little improvement to their performance until the last half of the 31st century. While fusion-based flamers are commonly said to tap directly into the fusion reactor for their plasma, they actually make use of the reactor's inert reservoirs to generate their own supply of dense, high-energy plasma at the moment of firing. While traditional fuel-based flamers still launch a stream of ignited fluid just like their ancient forebears, fusion flamers use an advanced electromagnetic controller (similar in some ways to PPC control systems) to concentrate and accelerate the plasma into a continuous beam that can be swept over a large area.

Even under high acceleration, the plasma dissipates very quickly, making the weapon useless outside of about ninety meters, but inside

that radius, the heat transfer is intense enough to ignite swaths of most building materials and plant life, and cause severe burns to living creatures. Most other energy weapons concentrate their energy so much that they simply punch holes in buildings and explode individual trees, which is dramatic, but unlikely to start a sustained blaze. While a 'Mech doesn't take much real damage from a flamer, its heat-sink vents and radiators do experience a brief loss of efficiency that can be critical in the, ahem, heat of battle.

[Slide 12: PPCs]

While most PPCs create bundles of charged particles for use as projectiles, I should mention one particular model. The Parti-Kill Cannon (most often seen on the common Manticore tank) occupies an odd area between a fusion flamer and a true plasma weapon. Rather than using a self-contained generator, it taps into the 'Mech's main plasma injection system (not the reactor chamber itself, but the divertor and other ancillary devices that control the flow of protium and waste helium into and out of the chamber) for its supply of charged particles. Compared to a flamer's plasma output, the Part-Kill's amount of plasma is tiny, so the reactor isn't affected by the draw. When this diffuse plasma is magnetically bottled into a dense mass and accelerated to relativistic speeds, the impact energy at the target is enormous.

This so-called plasma PPC has no real improvement or performance differences from more common PPC designs, making its continued use more of a triumph of marketing than technology. In essence, to use plasma as a long-range weapon, this extremely complicated and expensive system has to squeeze, stretch, and twist it until it's just another PPC bolt (and although the relationship between plasma and particle beams is close and complex, that's best discussed next year, once you kids have more solid footing in post-secondary mathematics).

[Slide 16: Plasma Weapons]

So, now that we see how difficult it is to use plasma as a weapon, how do we make actual plasma weapons? The answer is that we don't actually make the plasma until it gets to the target. Easy, right? Well, not actually that easy, or someone would have done it before the 3060s. Plasma weapons require extremely precise rangefinders, stabilization, and motion control, and wouldn't have been possible without recent advances in in PPC and Gauss software, mounts, and servos (including, yes, things we learned from the Clans when they first invaded).

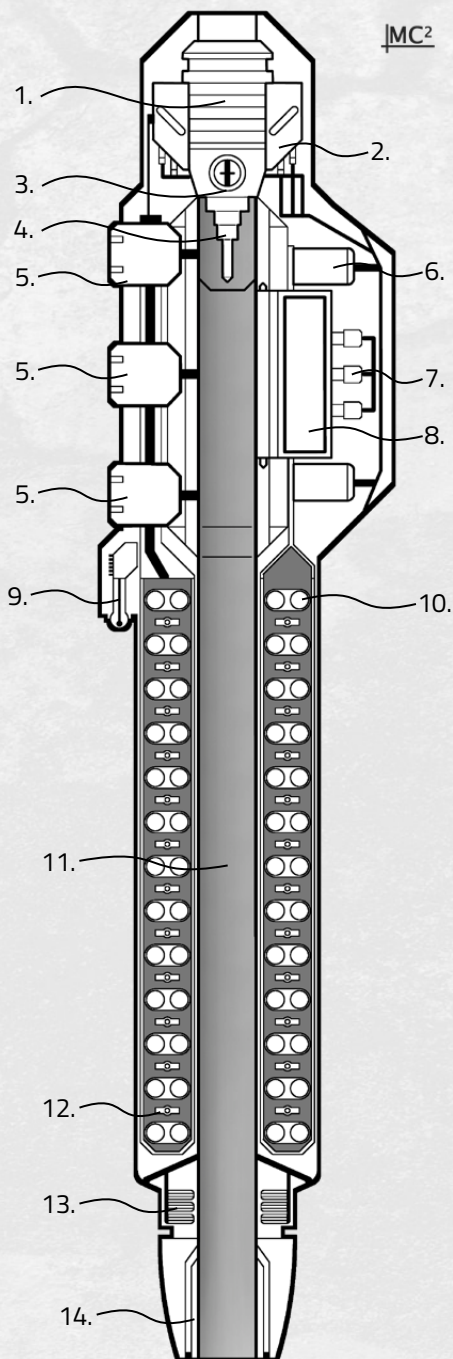
The plasma rifle (a bit of a misnomer, since its barrel lacks any actual rifling) combines centuries of weapons development into what

SLIDE 17:

FlameTech

Inferno Plasma
Rifle Breakdown

1. Primary Lasing Module
2. Laser Control and Power Modulation
3. Laser Core
4. Laser Emitter
5. Primary Coolant and Power Feed Interconnects
6. Primary Capacitive Storage
7. Loading Actuators
8. Ammunition Feed vPort
9. Independent Redundant Targeting System
10. Mass Accelerator Coils
11. Smoothbore Barrel
12. Coolant Regulation Vanes
13. Secondary Trajectory Adjustment Coils
14. Recoil Reduction Channels



is, in a sense, a laser cannon inside a mass accelerator controlled by a PPC. A plasma rifle round is often called a “plastic foam cartridge,” but each projectile is actually composed of a variety of exotic materials (including certain plastic resins) arranged in precise layers, designed to absorb a specially tuned laser beam’s energy and convert it to plasma at exactly the right moment in its trajectory. Both the weapon and its ammunition are inert and inexplosive, a valuable consideration even in this age of improved containment cells.

When the weapon is fired, a magnetic accelerator propels the round while a specially tuned laser starts to convert the projectile into its plasma state. While the round is in the barrel, the conversion provides a small amount of plasma to aid in electromagnetic acceleration. The remainder of the round remains aerodynamically stable (and thus accurate) out to about 500 meters, but by the time it reaches its target, it has converted into a relatively dense mass of superheated plasma.

Against an armored target, the cartridge is fired at high velocity and is laser-fused into a single superheated penetrator that delivers all of its energy to a single point. On impact, the round transfers enough kinetic and thermal energy to severely damage hardened surfaces. The plasma matrix then spreads over a small area. Though the adhered mass has little further effect on heavy armor, it is able to melt exposed vehicle components or force ‘Mech heat sinks to work overtime.

Against unarmored or widely dispersed targets, the activated round splinters into hundreds of superheated fragments, covering a radius of about fifteen meters. The effect of plasma weapons on humans isn’t the splattery disintegration you see in the holovids, but it’s still no fun. A plasma rifle cartridge fragment is specially designed with adhesive properties, to maximize energy transfer to the target. Imagine having a lit welding torch stuck to you for several seconds, and you get the idea. It’s seldom outright fatal, but it’s more than enough to put the average soldier (or their equipment) out of a fight and ruin their comrades’ morale.

The Clan-tech plasma cannon is a refinement of the technology, with longer range but only a single firing mode (similar to man-portable plasma weapons). Its rounds use larger fragments to retain effectiveness against infantry while also being able to severely damage vulnerable spots on vehicles. While the plasma cannon is ineffective against ‘Mech armor, its spread pattern has a much greater effect on ‘Mech heat exchangers than the plasma rifle does.

Okay, that’s enough lecturing for the moment. Now that we’ve talked a bit about the super high-tech and dangerous side of plasma, let’s do something fun with it, instead. Who wants to make a Tesla globe?

[End Transcript]



ONE DOOR CLOSSES

BLAINE LEE PARDOE

PACO'S
TOLEDO, NORTH AMERICA
TERRA
29 MAY 3151

Jack Traver and Mia Fowler sat in the back of the old bar, nursing their drinks. A week earlier, ilKhan Alaric Ward had been made First Lord of a rekindled Star League after Clan Wolf's hard-fought victory over Clan Jade Falcon. At that time, Jack and Mia—former *Ares* crew members for the Republic of the Sphere, then members of Clan Wolf—had done the unthinkable: they had walked away from the Wolves. The decision had been less impulse and more necessity. While Clan Wolf had been reveling in its ultimate victory, Jack and Mia found it harder to embrace their role in matters. Since their decision to depart, they had been trying to determine their next steps.

Things were changing, and Jack could see and feel it. All vestiges of the Republic were disappearing, replaced with the Star League's new modified Cameron Star logo. Some things, like statues, were left in place, but he wondered how long that would be allowed. Alaric wasn't erasing the Republic the way Malvina Hazen, Clan Jade Falcon's former Khan, had threatened to do, but he was establishing the new order with the Star League and Clan Wolf at the top of the pecking order. He clearly wanted Terra's inhabitants to understand who now ruled them.

Jack and Mia had come to Paco's because it was said to be a hangout for former Republic Armed Forces fighters who had been recently paroled from their POW camps. Clan Wolf had taken their former enemies' word that they would not take up arms against them or the Star League, but Jack knew most of them would say anything to

get out of prison. There was no love for the ilClan or the Star League... that phrase had been tossed about often over the decades. *There's a lot of anger and sadness with the fall of the Republic, and that can't be pushed aside with mere words.*

A mix of patrons sat in the dark and dingy bar. Some were Clan, but the majority were RAF veterans. Both Jack and Mia hoped to see a familiar face in the crowd through the haze of cigarette smoke mixed with the aroma of spilled beer. They had come on other nights, but had no luck. They had told their commander, Star Colonel Kalidessa Kerensky, they were planning to leave Terra, but had not had any success in finding a way off-world yet. It put them in a state of being unattached...not wanting to be with Clan Wolf, but no longer part of the RAF. For Jack, it was a lonely feeling, one forged by their own decisions.

There was another reason they'd come here for a drink. The news had recently broadcast a report on the death of Exarch Devlin Stone. He had died of a stroke in a hospital just hours before Alaric had been named First Lord. According to the report, the First Lord had brought him to Puget Sound to get him the best medical care the Clans had available, but Stone's body was simply too frail.

The news had been a gut punch to both Jack and Mia. It was as if the last bit of what remained of the Republic had been taken from them. *It was probably too much for him to bear, the thought of Clan Wolf holding Terra. Thankfully, he died in his sleep.* Stone's death ensured that the Republic was truly dead as well.

Coming to Paco's did give them time to talk, namely about what to do next. Jack and Mia had settled on selling their services as mercenaries. Given their combat experience and unique background of having fought both against and for the Clans, they thought it was their best chance. So far, they had not figured out how to leave Terra, but Jack felt the chance would present itself before long.

Mia had been an *Ares* engineer. The Wolves had classified her as a warrior, since she was one of the superheavy 'Mech's crew, but to her that was a technicality. She did not want to be in battle ever again. "Wherever we end up," she said, "I want to be a tech. I've seen enough fighting for a lifetime."

Jack understood where she was coming from. The loss of Corporal Tina "Cheetah" Charms, their experienced gunner, during battle against the Jade Falcons had hit them both hard, Mia probably hardest. Jack still had nightmares of that battle, of ramming the crippled *Ares* into the *Dire Wolf* that came after Colonel Kerensky. He often jerked awake in sweat with the image of Cheetah's body pierced by a piece of the *Dire Wolf's* armor...her open eyes staring right at him. He didn't talk about it, even with Mia. Some burdens he simply was not up to sharing.

Mia leaned back in the booth, making the old leather seat creak. "You notice the number of folks wearing RAF gear?" she asked. "It's up from the last time we were here."

"By quite a bit," Jack replied. "I never thought that would make me nervous, but I have to admit, I am a little." Eyes from the crowd seemed to glare at him, as if seeking targets. There was no celebrating in the bar, only the drowning of sorrows and saluting the dead.

Mia sipped her beer. "We aren't wearing our Wolf colors or anything, but yeah, I know how you feel."

It wasn't entirely true. Under his light jacket, Jack wore his BloodRibbon on his gray uniform shirt. It was hard to say why, but he did it often when he went out. Some of it was he *was* proud of defeating the Jade Falcons. He touched the jacket and felt the pin underneath.

"The problem is with this many former soldiers milling around, suddenly out of work, their government gone...well, it's going to lead to problems," Jack observed.

As he finished, he found several people at the bar staring in his direction—one woman squinting. *Almost as if on cue...*

The trio rose and slowly walked toward their booth. Mia stiffened in her seat, but Jack did what he could to portray calm. The woman looked familiar, though her hair was a wild dishwater-blond mess, and the anger in her face made placing her difficult. "You're Major Traver, aren't you?" Her tone was not kind, but accusatory. "I remember you from the Redburn Guards."

"I'm Jack Traver," he replied.

The burly man next to her spoke up. "We've heard of you. You turned traitor to the Republic. You fought for Clan Wolf." His words were loud enough to get several other patrons to get off their seats and glare in his direction. A few put their drinks down.

"I'm no traitor," Jack said putting down his own glass and rising to his feet. He stepped out of the small booth so he had room to maneuver. "I never betrayed the Republic, nor did I ever fight against the RAF. Yes, I fought with Clan Wolf, but only against the Jade Falcons."

"Fighting for the Wolves makes you a traitor," the woman spat back. He suddenly remembered her face...a tech in the Guards. Feet shuffled in the bar as a few other former RAF soldiers started heading toward the conversation. The odds were definitely not in their favor, and there was no egress point from the coming fight.

"We fought to make sure Malvina Hazen didn't kill us all, you included," Jack said, nodding at the woman. "We kicked the Jade Falcons' asses too."

Mia rose to her feet. While shorter than Jack, she was every bit as much a fighter as he was, if not more. Cheetah used to refer to Mia as a

"gerbil on amphetamines." He hoped she would keep her fury in check. There was still a chance this situation could be defused.

"Funny," another man in the trio said. "You're the only one here that sees it that way."

"We don't want any trouble," Jack said. He knew it wasn't going to matter.

"We all lost a lot of good friends to the Clans," the burly man replied angrily. "So you have a lot of nerve telling us you don't want trouble. Seems like you already brought it down on yourselves when you flipped to the Wolves." The man slid a chair out of the way, clearing space for a fight.

Jack understood what was coming; he had been in a few bar fights in his career, none ending well. "We didn't come here to bother anyone. Clearly we're past that point. We'll just leave." He took a step toward the gap between the burly man and the woman.

The man used his big fist to shove Jack back toward the booth. "You ain't going anywhere, *traitor*."

Jack's ears pounded with the thunder of his heart racing. His fists balled up, and his stance lowered. "Step aside," he said through gritted teeth.

"Screw you!" The man pulled his big arm back and threw a haymaker at Jack.

Traver was nowhere near as strong as his assailant, but what he lacked in muscle bulk, he made up for in speed. He dodged the punch, going low, and landed two blows on the man's solar plexus. Mia used a chair as an impromptu weapon, landing it on the other man moving in on Jack. A bottle smashed, no doubt to turn it into a weapon. A jab to Jack's side, no doubt from one of the other patrons, or perhaps the woman tech, made him wince in pain. He heard something spill from his pocket onto the floor as he took the blow, a tinkle of metal.

Cheetah's codex!

The burly man hammered a blow down on the back of Jack's left shoulder, some of which he managed to deflect. Jack punched his foe's groin, hard enough to stagger the brute back. As he rose, a thrown bottle hit his temple and shattered, raining beer residue and glass everywhere. Blood streamed down his face; he could feel the warm coppery taste as it passed his lips. He had no time to acknowledge it as a kick hit the back of his left calf, hard, nearly toppling him to the floor.

Two of the RAF veterans slammed into Mia, disarming her of her chair and pummeling her with wild blows until she planted a solid gut kick to one of her attackers. Jack barely caught a glimpse of her in the melee as a fist slammed into his jaw hard, staggering him back into their table.

Suddenly, from the rear of the gathering mass, there came a flurry of activity, as if the fight had suddenly quadrupled in size. The RAF vets in the middle found themselves facing Jack and Mia and a new threat to their rear. Heads craned around to see what was happening, giving Jack the opportunity to land another strike, this one into the female tech who had recognized him, as her punch narrowly missed.

The crowd parted for a moment, and Jack saw what caused the commotion. Two Clan Wolf Elementals stood near the bar, a man and a woman. The woman punched an RAF pilot so hard that Jack could hear the bones in his face crack under the impact as he flew into a table and chairs before falling unconscious on the floor. The male Elemental grabbed two of the patrons by the front of their shirts, one in each hand, and slammed their heads together hard, leaving both dazed as he simply dropped them onto the concrete floor.

The two warriors had either entered the bar or had been in a booth in some corner that had escaped Jack's view. It didn't matter; all that counted was they were there.

"This ends now," one of them proclaimed.

The former RAF troops froze, realizing that the odds had suddenly and dramatically shifted from their favor.

"This doesn't involve you," the burly man said, one hand rubbing his groin in agony.

"We heard your words," the female Elemental said. "These are Wolf warriors. That all but mandates our involvement."

Slowly, carefully, the crowd put down their makeshift weapons and began to disperse. Several bent down and picked up the unconscious patrons and those too injured to move on their own.

Jack bent over and picked up Cheetah's codex bracelet. He had been carrying it with him since her death. It was a reminder of his lost comrade, of his decision that had cost her her life. He jammed the codex into his pocket...where it belonged.

Jack's muscles ached, and his breath was still ragged as the two Elementals approached. He saw their BloodRibbons and pressed two fingers to his heart.

Both saw his BloodRibbon through his torn jacket, and returned the salute. "The odds against you were unbecoming to even the best of us," the male Elemental said.

"Thank you," Jack replied, standing up, feeling the pains of the hits that had been done to him.

"I am Bethany," the female Wolf said. "This is Juris."

"Jack and Mia," he said motioning to his engineer. "Second Wolf Assault Cluster...detached."

Bethany nodded slowly. "Howling Furies...then perhaps the odds were not against you after all," she said with a wry grin. "You are welcome to join us." She gestured to a far corner of the bar.

It was tempting, especially since Bethany and Juris had probably saved Jack and Mia's lives. Something else tugged at Jack though, the words of the patrons that had attacked him. They had called him a traitor. Winning the fight didn't change that accusation.

Jack wanted to say no, but couldn't. The Elementals had saved them. "Thank you," he managed, and followed them to their booth. The scornful eyes of the remaining RAF veterans followed them across the bar, and he did his best to ignore them. *None of them understand the choice we were forced to make.*

The conversation was pleasant. The Elementals spoke of the ilClan Trial, of killing Jade Falcons. Mia explained to them how they had been *abtakha* warriors, piloting an *Ares*. That fascinated Bethany, who had a myriad of questions about the superheavy 'Mechs. Drinks were ordered, and the conversation went on for an hour. Jack was struck by one thing...he now seemed to have more in common with the Wolves than former Republic soldiers. *Things have changed...I have changed.*

The conversation became the retelling of war stories. "There was a squad of Jade Falcon infantry that rushed us," Juris said between long gulps of beer. "I grabbed one warrior, lifted him over my head, and tore his leg off."

Bethany grinned. "He used the leg as a club on the others. It was glorious...and disgusting."

"Why did you do that?" Mia asked.

Juris looked at her with a puzzled look. "I told you, they were Jade Falcons. If he did not want his leg ripped off, he should not have tried to engage me in hand-to-hand combat." Laughs erupted, and Jack could not help but chuckle at the response. Juris reminded him of DuJordan in the Furies.

"Why are you here in Toledo?" Jack asked.

"We are undertaking a sojourn," Juris replied. "Now that Terra is in our grasp, we are traveling it, seeing all we can. Many warriors of our Clan are doing the same thing. We fought our way across the planet, now we wish to enjoy it."

"Is that not why you are here?" Bethany asked.

It was tempting to lie, but the Elementals did not deserve that, and Jack wanted to be honest with them. "We are...taking our leave of the Clan for now," Jack said, measuring his words. "We are looking to get off of Terra."

"Why leave, we are ilClan now? If there is a time to be on Terra, it is now," Juris said, finishing his beer. "No doubt we will be summoned soon to defend the Wolf Empire."

"It is hard to explain," Jack said, getting a nod from Mia. "We fought with the Wolves to beat the Jade Falcons. We did just that. We saved Kalidessa Kerensky's life. We need something new, something different."

"I understand," Bethany said with a nod. "You truly are Clan. You have faced all comers and been victorious. Now you seek new challenges worthy of you."

It wasn't right, but it was an explanation that meant he didn't have to explain further. "Something like that, yes."

"Then go!" she replied with a booming voice.

"We do not have transportation," Jack said. "We've talked to commercial ships, but none are cleared to leave."

"Bah! You are a warrior of the ilClan," Juris said with a sneer. "You do not need to barter like some merchant-caste trader. All you have to do is go to a spaceport and *demand* transport off-world."

Is it really that easy? Of course it was—this was Clan thinking. We are warriors of the Clan that took Terra. Jack was almost embarrassed that he hadn't tried this. We have weight and authority we are not taking advantage of. "I...never considered just demanding transport."

"You are a Wolf warrior," Bethany added. "Act like it. We do not ask, we demand."

"We need 'Mechs as well," Mia threw in.

"I understand that the First Lord has granted the Sea Foxes much of the salvage from the trials as payment for their assistance," Juris said. "Claims for *isorla* are difficult to sort out, given that battles raged across the planet. Go to the Sea Foxes and claim what you earned on the field of battle. It is your right." He pounded his beefy fist on the table for emphasis.

Jack glanced at Mia, who offered him a thin smile. Bethany was right: the time had come to act like a Wolf warrior. Looking back at the female Elemental, he nodded. "You have proven to be most helpful," he said, extending his hand.

She squeezed so hard his entire forearm ached. "Safe travels," she replied. "Just remember, we will not be there the next time you get into a brawl such as this."

As Jack and Mia left, he could feel some of the patrons' eyes boring into him. *The Republic veterans see us as traitors...yet the Wolves invite us in as comrades. We live in strange times indeed.*



SEA FOX SALVAGE FACILITY #8
THUNDER BAY, NORTH AMERICA
TERRA
1 JUNE 3151

Jack was surprised by the sheer volume of mangled and battered war equipment assembled in long rows, over a dozen of them, stretching on for at least a half-kilometer. The area was secure, with fencing and guard towers to keep away souvenir seekers or those out to steal military hardware for sale. He whistled at the sight of it all, the smell of burnt metal and expended ammunition hanging over the long rows. The sight of all the damaged military machines spoke of the scale of the conflict for Terra.

He had Mia had prepared carefully. They had put on their Clan Wolf jumpsuits and had even rehearsed what to say in case the Sea Foxes resisted their demands. Mia, as a warrior, would claim *isorla* as well. While she had no intention of piloting her 'Mech, having two 'Mechs might help them when they reached the mercenary hiring halls of Galatea.

The Sea Fox chief technician in charge of the facility looked at his noteputer. "So you wish to claim *isorla* from the battle? I will tell you, finding the exact BattleMech or vehicle you are looking for will be nearly impossible. The best we can do is try to get you something comparable."

Jack nodded and held out his wrist, as did Mia. The technician scanned their codexes and nodded. "You destroyed four BattleMechs together during your time with Clan Wolf," he confirmed.

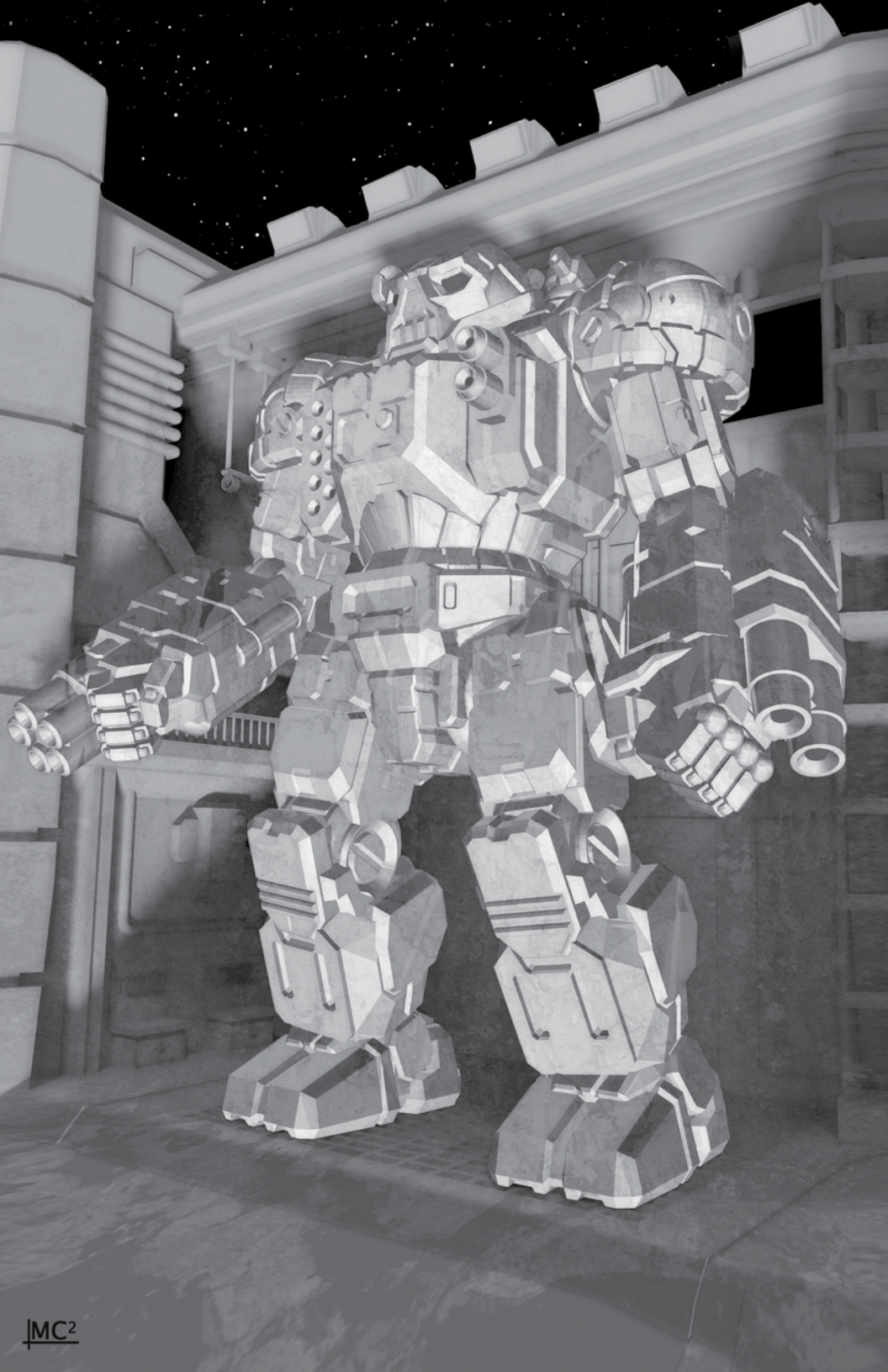
"Aff," Jack replied. "Our last kill was a *Dire Wolf*." It had cost him Cheetah's life. His jaw slowly set as he remembered the loss of his gunner in the collision and fall.

"We have a few of those, some in better shape than others." The merchant led them to a small hover skid and took off down a long row. "Of course we will get it operational for you—that was our agreement with the Wolves."

The skid arrived at one part of the row that had several blasted and battered *Dire Wolves*. All bore the differing shades of green common with the Jade Falcons. Some were total losses, that was easy to see. One had a dried brown smear down the side of the cockpit, no doubt blood from its pilot. Seeing the Jade Falcon 'Mechs towering over him, even in their blasted state, brought back dark memories of the fighting.

One was upright; its arms were missing and its legs were shredded of armor, but it looked repairable. "That one should suffice," Jack said.

Mia nodded, her keen technical eye approving of his choice. The technician tapped his noteputer several times, registering the *Dire Wolf* to Jack.



"We have a few *Onagers* as well," the Sea Fox said to Mia. He fired up the hover skid and cut through a gap between several rows.

As they progressed down one corridor of blasted BattleMechs, Mia patted his shoulder, spying one that stood out. "Stop, please."

Looming next to the hover skid was a primer-gray *Atlas II*. It bore no signs of battle damage, except for a few ancient laser scars that had been painted over.

"They found this in a Republic depot two days ago," the tech said. "It apparently had not been put in service. It seems to be in top-notch shape. Even its security system was wiped."

Mia looked up at it carefully. "Those are Clan ER lasers."

"Aff," the technician replied. "You have a good eye. Someone also removed the missiles this and replaced them with a nine-tube multi-missile launcher. There has been a lot of customization...even an anti-missile system."

Jack saw Mia's gaze was locked onto the older BattleMech in a look of admiration—almost like desire.

"It is in great condition, but its technology is unworthy of Clan warriors," the technician said.

But Mia was entranced. "That is the one I want," she said, not breaking her gaze with it.

"Are you sure?" the chief technician asked. "We have OmniMechs that would be of better quality than some old piece of Republic garbage."

Mia nodded. "This one will do," she replied. Jack understood. It was *because* it was a Republic BattleMech. It had meaning to her.

The technician shrugged and tapped his noteputer. "Very well, we will prep these over the next week or so, and contact you when they are ready."

They left the facility and took their hovercar on the long ride back to Detroit, where they had rented a small apartment. Neither spoke much on the ride back on the long, lonely highway south. *We have BattleMechs—now all we need is passage off-world.* Jack remembered Bethany's advice: "*We do not ask, we demand!*" Hopefully it would be that easy.

Jack had voiced his concerns about joining a mercenary unit, one of which had been highlighted by the bar fight two days earlier. They might not fit in. Fighting for Clan Wolf could be a highlight or a blemish, depending on who they spoke with. It felt as if their lives were in a constant free fall since the Clans had arrived on Terra. Much of that fell on his shoulders, which was why he stayed so close to Mia. *My decisions got us here. My decisions have to get us out.*

Adding to his silent contemplation, he acknowledged that they had no experience as mercenaries. The lifestyle was different, Jack understood that much, but the nuances of it were still somewhat a

mystery. Though he'd known some mercenaries in his career, he really did not fully understand how life in a merc unit would play out. *We can't stay in Clan Wolf...it isn't our home or our people. There's no Republic to return to. The only way out is to move forward. That either leaves us with retirement or finding some other army to fight in.*

As he drove down the highway, cutting through the forests heading south and into the darkness of the early morning, Jack finally shattered the quiet. "So, why did you pick that *Atlas*?"

Mia stirred in her seat for the first time in hours. "It was Republic hardware. I know we could've gotten more with an OmniMech, but getting parts makes us reliant on the Sea Foxes or worse, crap salvage."

"Okay, that makes sense. What else?"

She shook her head in the dark car. "I can't put my finger on it, but there's something about it. I feel like...I've seen it before."

Hearing her words, Jack realized he felt the same way. "That's weird. Me, too. It was also odd that it hadn't seen action. Makes you wonder if there are problems under the hood."

In the darkness of the car, he could barely see her shaking her head. "They would've scrapped it for parts if there was a major problem with it. You saw it, it was battle-ready."

"Well, tomorrow we'll go over to the spaceport and arrange for a ride out-system."

"Good," she replied with a yawn. "I'm not feeling the love from the locals. They probably would've killed us if Bethany and Juris hadn't jumped in."

Jack took one hand off the wheel and rubbed the crust out of the corner of his eyes. "I hate to say it, but I think you're right. A lot of the former RAF won't care that we didn't fire a shot against the Republic. They're going to label us as traitors anyway."

There were a few moments of pause before Mia spoke up. "Do you regret it...helping the Wolves?"

He shook his head, which helped shake off the feelings of sleep he had been fighting. "Hell, no. If we hadn't, we would have spent the rest of the war in a POW compound. We'd be like them—bitter, no place to go, no prospects. They have a right to be angry—just not at us. We have been inside a Clan. We know the differences between the Wolves and Jade Falcons. Many of them don't. They bought into the propaganda that the Clans are all evil. You've fought with Kalidessa... You know she's one of the best field commanders we ever served with. We tore through the Jade Falcons under her leadership. To be honest, I hate to think what would've happened if we hadn't become Wolf warriors. How many people might have died? Would the battle have turned out differently?"

"You are always looking at things in a good light," Mia said, repositioning in her seat again. "That's what I like about you."

Jack allowed himself a small grin. "Lie back and get some shut-eye. I'll get us back to the apartment."

Mia was breathing heavy with sleep in just a few moments. Jack angled the hovercar into the darkness, nursing his concerns about their future.



The next morning, Jack was awakened by the dull thud of someone pounding on their door. He cautiously walked to the door, as memories of the bar fight in Paco's were still as fresh as some of his fading bruises. Mia got up as well, her hair looking as if a tornado had torn through it, but she balled her fists in case it would be a confrontation.

Jack cracked open the door with the safety chain still on it. The man on the other side was of medium build, wearing a plain gray shirt and dark pants. His eyes were piercing, and he had a three-day beard of dark hair on his face. "Jack Traver?"

"Who wants to know?"

"I am Justin Hall—*Sir* Justin Hall. I was hoping for a few minutes of your time."

Sir—that meant a Knight...a Knight of the doomed Republic.

Jack unhooked the chain and opened the door. Hall entered, glancing over at Mia, who relaxed her combat stance ever so slightly. "I apologize for coming by so early, but I was hoping we could talk."

Jack closed the door and motioned to the small table that served as their dining area. Hall took one wobbly chair and sat down. Jack sat next to him, Mia across from him. She seemed to be studying his face.

Before Hall could speak, Mia's expression lit up with recognition. "I know you. They called you 'Cloud.' You're the Knight from Australia."

The name snapped Jack's memory back. Justin "Cloud" Hall had led a guerrilla operation against Clan Wolf when they landed in Australia. Clan Wolf had destroyed the town of Atitjere to discourage locals supporting such terrorism. *What is he doing here?*

The mention of Australia made Hall's face wince slightly, as if it were an old pain acting up. "Regrettably, yes. Atitjere is a burden I carry. While the loss of civilian life was minimal, the surviving people lost almost everything because a few of them gave me shelter." He sighed. "Former RAF blame me for what happened there when they learn who I am."

"We know the feeling," Jack replied.

"I heard about you," Hall replied. "RAF heroes who fought alongside Clan Wolf. People that do things like that...well, it gets around. Sure, there were others, a lot, but your names come up the most—probably because of the Howling Furies connection."

"Most folks see us as traitors," Mia said coolly.

Justin looked over at her. "And they look at me as a failure...the man who got a city razed. They seem to forget I was a Knight of the Sphere. People like to gloss over that I was doing something I had been ordered to do, and it was against Clan Wolf. To them, I screwed up and it cost a lot of people their homes and jobs." There was a weariness in his voice. "In addition to that, I'm like every other MechWarrior that was in the RAF—Dispossessed." Being a MechWarrior without a BattleMech was almost classified as a mental disorder for some veterans, and was one Jack understood.

Mia rose, went to the small coffee machine, and began to make a pot as Jack spoke. "What brings you to see us?"

The query seemed to rally Justin Hall's frame of mind. "I have out a lot of feelers, you know, people who bring me information. Intelligence is vital in times like these."

He still talks like a Ghost Knight. Jack nodded as Hall paused for a moment. "There were a number of RAF folks that fought for Clan Wolf. All of them either ended up dead in Canada or are still with the Wolves. Not you, though. You fought in one of the most storied units in Clan Wolf history. Then you did something out of the ordinary—you walked away from the Wolves. That piqued my interest."

"We did," Jack said, leaning back in the wooden chair. "We never fired a shot at any Republic soldiers. We fought against the Jade Falcons—that was what we signed up for. And once the Jade Falcons got their assess handed to them, we felt like we needed to move on."

Justin nodded. "So I heard. If you don't mind me asking, where are you going?"

Mia handed the Knight a cup of black coffee and sat down as Jack shifted in his chair. "For now, Galatea," he said. "We're hoping to sign on with a merc unit."

"Isn't that a step down from the ilClan?"

Jack cracked a sardonic grin. "We are still Clan Wolf. Our official status is 'detached.' The way we see it, the Clans are going to have to fend off a lot of comers, including some of their own people. What we did, we did to save the Inner Sphere. We put an end to Malvina Hazen. Helping Alaric hold onto what he won or to run off and build an empire, well, that isn't exactly our cup of tea."

Justin sipped his coffee, cradling the cup in his hands. "Do you have 'Mechs?"

"We do," Jack replied. "And we think we will be able to arrange to get off-planet. Why?"

Justin took another sip and set the coffee aside. "I'd like to go with you."

"Why?" Jack cocked his eyebrow slightly.

"I am a Knight for a realm that no longer exists," Justin said candidly. "I fought the good fight, but in the end, the Republic fell. Terra was never my home anyway. I'd lived a lot of my life in the shadows until the Wolves dropped on top of me. I'm done with that. I belong in a cockpit. The problem is, if I stay here on Terra, that's never going to happen. I'll end up like those idiots who went after you at the bar—bitter and drunk."

So he knows about the bar fight at Paco's? He has to be a Ghost Knight. "Look, no offense, but we just met you. I'm not sure about us arranging to get a non-Clan warrior off-world. We are not even sure *we* can pull it off."

"I may not have a 'Mech, but I do have a potential way to get some funds," Hall offered. "And given who you've fought for, having an ally with my, shall I say, unique skills, could be helpful."

"We don't need an ally," Mia challenged.

The former Knight grinned. "Don't you, though? You saw the reaction of those vets at Paco's. Wherever you go, there will be people who resent what you did with the Wolves. Having someone with my particular talents could come in quite handy."

"And you have no issues with our background?" Jack said, pressing his suspicions.

Justin shook his head and relaxed in his seat. "I'm a pragmatist. Being on the losing side of a war does that to you. I'm as *revered* as much as you are for what happened in Australia. I could offer my services to some House government, but I feel like that would betray who I am. I was a Knight of the Republic. With no Republic, I need to find a home with people who will understand and accept me. I won't find that here on Terra. That's why I sought you two out. We share a common bond—we carry a burden of having done what we thought was right. You fought the Jade Falcons, and the others hate you for it. I had a city erased from the map—for doing what I thought was my duty."

Jack said nothing for a half minute, contemplating. Hall was a man who had done what he thought was right—just like Jack and Mia. People talked about the atrocities of the war, and the destruction of Atitjere was one the people of Terra laid at the doorstep of Clan Wolf. The losers of the war, the RAF veterans, didn't want to hear Jack, Mia, or Justin's side of the story. They had already formed opinions of the three of them, and that was that. *It's a burden the three of us will always carry.*

Justin's face showed frustration and weariness, as if his force of will was being tested to the breaking point. Jack could see it in the darkness around the Knight's eyes. *People are making him out to be a bad person; that he somehow failed in his duty.* That was something Jack could understand and sympathize with. *We did our duty as we saw it too, but no one sees it that way.* In that moment, he realized that the three of them were, indeed, kindred spirits.

Other things came to him in those few seconds of thought. *We have no real money other than the pay we saved from the RAF—and that will run out soon. Hell, Republic currency is going to be worthless any time now, thanks to our victory. Hall was a Knight too, which is no small thing. Mia has no intention of piloting a 'Mech in combat—so we technically have a spare BattleMech.* The bar fight at Paco's had taught him that having additional allies could be useful.

He glanced at Mia, hoping for some indication from her. She nodded once, slowly.

"All right, Justin," Jack said. "Here's the deal. We have two 'Mechs, but Mia is more of a tech than a MechWarrior. Funds aren't a problem for us here on Terra, since we're still members of the ilClan. Once we get off Terra, though, we're going to be strapped.

"If you want to partner with us, you can pilot our spare BattleMech. But for us to take you on, you'll need to have to have enough funds for us to pay storage and maintenance fees until we find a unit to join."

The former Knight nodded and extended his hand. "Agreed. I don't have the money right now, but I can get it."

"What do you mean?" Jack asked as he took Hall's hand and shook it.

"I'll bring you along. It's a little complicated—but well worth it."

CLEVELAND PUBLIC LIBRARY
CLEVELAND, NORTH AMERICA
TERRA
4 JUNE 3151

Jack had ridden with Justin to the meeting with the former Ghost Knight's contact. Justin had been deliberately vague about his acquaintance, only that he was a potential source of income for the trio. There was something in the way he evaded questions about this whole business that told Jack it was best to let the topic go. The world Justin had lived in was not one that opened itself up to outsiders. Years of being the military had taught Jack there was a time to push questions and a time to sit back, listen, and learn. *He'll reveal all in due time.*

The ride in the hovercar gave Jack a chance to share more about himself, with most of the conversation involving the battle with the Jade Falcons. Talking about Cheetah's death was hard, but he managed to get the words out. Justin asked probing questions, the kind only someone with military experience could answer.

Eventually, he shared bits of his own story with Traver. He had been in the RAF when he was assigned a covert op against the Capellan

Confederation. That part was deliberately vague, but his success led to him being recruited as a Ghost Knight. Most of his time was spent outside of the Wall, but when Devlin Stone had summoned all Knights to return to Terra to aid in her defense, Justin, like so many others, had returned.

Oddly enough, he respected the Clans as combatants. "In a straight-up fight, Clan Wolf was tactically and strategically stunning to watch. Usually Clan warriors get all wound up in their little spats of honor, but somehow Alaric and that General Vickers of theirs managed to keep them focused."

Jack agreed. He had seen the Wolves as both enemies and as comrades. There was a cunning to them, a focus, as Justin had mentioned. *How will they thrive now that they have achieved that goal...now that they have become the ilClan?* That question remained unanswered.

"Alaric was brilliant to make a public spectacle about Atitjere," Justin confessed. "After that, no one wanted to give safe harbor or aide to guerrillas. He knows how to play people, and that makes him both a political genius—and dangerous."

The Cleveland Public Library was one of those public buildings common on Terra. It had been rebuilt, added onto, and upgraded so many times that its original architecture was buried under decades of renovations and modifications. Jack parked, and the two of them went in and snaked through corridors of books and reference materials to a small meeting room. Inside was a short man, slightly pudgy, with round eyeglasses and a tuft of gray hair on top of an otherwise bald head. He greeted Justin cordially, not like a friend, but with respect. His eyes swept Jack with a hint of suspicion.

As he took his seat, Justin introduced them. "Jack, this is Weatherbee. He is a...colleague of sorts. A bit of a kindred spirit, if you catch my meaning. He has strong attachments to the Federated Suns."

"That," Weatherbee said pausing for a moment, "is an allegation I can neither confirm nor deny." There was a haughtiness in his voice, a tone of aristocratic arrogance. He pulled out a small, black handheld device and waved it around the room and in front of them. It made a low humming sound. Seemingly satisfied, he tucked the device away.

"What was that?" Jack asked.

"Professional courtesy," Justin explained. "He was scanning for listening devices."

"He—" Jack turned to face the short man. "I mean *you* picked this place to meet."

"One does not work in my profession for as long as I have by being sloppy, Mr. Traver." There was a ring of pride in his words.

Jack smiled as he sat down, understanding. *So this is tradecraft.* "Is Weatherbee your real name?"

The short man grinned. "In my line of work, real names lead to real problems." Turning to Justin, Weatherbee adjusted his glasses. "My people said you were dead, Cloud. Word is a group of former RAF MechWarriors set off a car bomb and murdered you. Imagine my surprise to hear from you."

Justin grinned. "Your sources were wrong...at least for now."

Jack glanced from one man to the other. *Clearly there's more to that story...*

"Well then, why the mysterious summons?"

Justin leaned forward over the table. "What if I told you that Jack and I have a chance of actually leaving Terra?"

"How?"

"Jack here is a full Clan Wolf warrior. He and his associate are planning to leave Terra. They are part of the iClan...no one will refuse them. And I'm going with them."

Weatherbee turned and looked at Jack with a glimmer of respect. "Is that true?"

He nodded.

Weatherbee turned back to Justin. "I have been here on Terra since two years before that accursed Wall of Fortress Republic went up. After that, the Republic wasn't exactly allowing nonmilitary personnel off-world, for fear of us leaking military intelligence...prudent but frustrating. For fifteen years I have been gathering information that would be invaluable to my people. Even the events of recent weeks will be of incredible interest. My problem is that I have no way of getting my information out there, where it can be used. If I leave, there is a distinct chance I will not be able to return."

Those words made Justin grin broadly. "We're going. For the right price, we could take a data cube or two of information and deliver it for you."

"For the right price..." Weatherbee repeated, thinking deeply.

"I'm not making this offer to anyone else," Jack said. "You would have exclusivity on getting intelligence from Terra—at least for the short term. Surly that is worth something?"

"When do you leave?"

"We haven't arranged passage yet," Jack replied, keeping his voice low, "but in the next two weeks or so, I hope."

For a moment, it looked as if Weatherbee were solving a math problem in his head. He glanced upward for a few seconds, then turned his attention back to them. "I can get you the information in a few days. It will take time to assemble everything, but I can make that happen. As for payment, you will have to work that out with the recipient. I am

confident they will be more than willing to pay you handsomely for what I am providing.”

Justin turned to Jack, who nodded. “All right then. Jack will give you our address. You give the data to us, and we will visit an appropriate embassy to negotiate the payment.”

Weatherbee extended his small, sausage-fingered hand. “I appreciate your assistance in this. Of course, if either of you betray me, there is no place you can hide. MI6 has considerable reach and an even longer memory.”

Jack shook the man’s hand, slowly processing the threat.

OVERLORD-CLASS DROPSHIP STARDUST DRIFTER OUTBOUND FROM TERRA 6 JUNE 3151

Getting passage on a departing DropShip took some negotiating with the Sea Foxes. They were comfortable enough with Jack and Mia leaving, but their extra passenger was not Clan. Jack had been tempted to claim Justin was a bondsman, but he opted for a bolder approach instead. In the end, Jack remembered the advice Bethany had given him, and made an issue out of it: “We are warriors of the iClan! If we wish to bring this freebirth with us, we will. Who are the Sea Foxes to stand against us?” Mia, who was almost always looking for a fight, bolstered his bravado. In the end, the Sea Fox merchant acquiesced, and ordered their BattleMechs loaded onto the DropShip.

Mia insisted on inspecting the work done on their two ‘Mechs. The *Dire Wolf* only had a few of its original emerald armor plates remaining. The repairs the Sea Foxes had done met her approval, begrudgingly. She wanted to find faults, but the ones she did find were so minor, they only served to frustrate her.

As Jack settled into the cockpit, he caught the smell of bleach still hanging in the air. The armored canopy still showed signs of recently having been sealed—the ferroglass was still a little tacky to the touch. Then it came to him... *The last person who sat here is likely dead.* That thought made him eye the cockpit with a certain solemn reverence. He imprinted the battle computer with his own security identifiers, officially making the former Jade Falcon OmniMech his own.

As he finished and climbed down from the cockpit, he heard a call from Justin and Mia in the *Atlas II*. Jack headed for the berth of the gray, skull-headed BattleMech and climbed up to the side hatch. Justin sat in the command console, a huge grin on his face. Mia hovered behind him, her eyes wide.

"You are not going to believe this!" she exclaimed. "Remember when I said this 'Mech looked familiar?"

"Yes."

"It's an AS7-D-H!"

Jack shook his head. "I'm not a gearhead like you, Mia. I haven't committed every possible configuration of 'Mechs to memory. I take it this is special?"

Justin turned to face him. "Special? Look at the weapons loadout. This thing has got an Angel ECM suite, the controls for that are on the right—and a full AMS system."

But Jack merely shook his head. "And?"

"And I went out and scratched through the gray paint outside," Justin said, "just to be sure. Underneath it was black, with a skeleton pattern. We won't know until we strip all of the primer off, but the evidence is there."

"This is *Phantom*," Mia said.

That name resonated with Jack. *Phantom* was the personal BattleMech of Devlin Stone. "Are you sure?"

Mia nodded. "The paint under the primer, that's the colors of Stone's Lament. How many *Atlas* IIIs with this exact weapons configuration served in that regiment? Just one—and we're sitting in it."

Jack reached out and touched the top of the hatch opening, caressing it. This was the BattleMech Stone had piloted to defeat the Word of Blake and end the Jihad. "How did it end up in storage in Windsor, Canada?"

Mia shrugged. "We may never know for sure. Maybe Stone moved it from Geneva to England when he relocated there, then brought it to Canada when he was in Detroit. He probably had it repainted because it's one of the most recognized BattleMechs on Terra. Anyone piloting it against the Clans would have drawn a lot of unwanted attention... and incoming fire."

"It belongs in a museum," Justin added with a hint of reverence.

Jack looked about the cockpit, realizing the historical significance of the war machine. "No," he finally said. "While the Wolves are not erasing the Republic from history like the Falcons wanted to, they would not appreciate having this put up as a reminder of Stone's legacy." When Stone died, Jack remembered there had been no funeral or ceremony. The Exarch's body had been simply cremated, per his request. "We will keep it and use it. If nothing else, it will prove to a hiring officer that we came from Terra. Mia, if you would, strip the primer off it. Let people see it for what it is."

Justin rose from the seat. "Do you want to sit in it, Jack?"

Shaking his head, Jack waved his hand to cut off that discussion. "I don't want to reminisce about what was. I've spent enough time

doing that already. This entire reason we left Terra is about moving forward, not backward."

Jack got nods back from both Justin and Mia. *Finding Phantom*—*maybe it's finally a good omen.*

**HIRING HALL
GALATEA CITY, GALATEA
GALATEAN LEAGUE
9 JULY 3151**

Their journey had required transferring to a different JumpShip and making three hyperspace jumps to finally reach Galatea. Jack had studied the planet and the mercenary hiring process during their trip, but was still taken aback by the planetary capital itself. It was dark, grimy, more run-down than he'd expected.

They had berthed their 'Mechs at one of the dozen facilities around the spaceport and passed at least two small-time arenas for 'Mech combat...places where mercenaries tried to prove themselves. There were digital displays everywhere, for everything from strip clubs to armaments dealers. Galatea truly earned its nickname as the Mercenary's Star.

The trio registered with the hiring hall, which was packed when they arrived, with a lot of Republic uniforms in the mix. Leaning over to Justin, Jack commented, "It's like the entire RAF showed up."

"It's not surprising," the Knight replied. "Alaric must have allowed the message about Stone's surrender to reach the other systems the Republic still held. If you were a MechWarrior on one of those worlds, you weren't going to turn in your 'Mech and settle down for a little farming... You'd pack up and head here."

"You think this'll make it harder to get hired?" Mia asked, as the crowd seemed to close in on them.

Jack shrugged. "I don't know."

They checked into a nearby hotel, which was also packed. It wasn't a five-star accommodation, but Jack admitted it would suffice. In one of the neighboring rooms, the occupants were throwing a loud party that occasionally spilled out into the hall.



The next morning his communicator came to life. "Jack Traver? This is Morty Stern. I'm a mercenary broker here at the hiring hall. I saw your registration, and thought we ought to talk."

The three headed over to the midmorning meeting. Stern's office was next door to the hiring hall. He was former military—his short haircut and muscular build made that evident. His office was spartan, almost dull. A half-meter-long piece of twisted ferro-fibrous armor was displayed on a small wooden stand on his desk—no doubt a souvenir from his military service. He had two seats opposite his dull gray desk, so Jack let Mia and Justin take them while he stood.

"Thanks for reaching out to us," Jack said after shaking hands and making introductions. "Seems like business is hopping here."

"That's an understatement," Morty replied. "I feel like we just got invaded by the Republic." Justin turned his head slightly and shot Jack a thin grin. "Look, I saw you claim you came from Terra, and thought it was worth talking to you."

"We *did* come from Terra," Jack affirmed.

Stern nodded. "So, who won? All we got was Stone's order to surrender. Since then, Terra went black."

"Clan Wolf defeated the Jade Falcons and is now the ilClan," Jack said. He even heard a hint of pride in his voice as he said the words.

"Damn...I had my money on the Falcons. Well, if you're telling the truth, that means I still have time to flip the bet." That made Morty grin a little.

"Mr. Stern," Jack said, "will you be able to get us some interviews with mercenary recruiters?"

"There's good news and bad news," Morty said, leaning back in his chair. "The good news is hiring is on the uptick. The Federated Suns has been treating their mercs like shit for a while, but it appears they've finally gotten their act together. They're offering some sweet deals right now.

"The Lyrans—well, they're flanked by two Clans. and with the Kell Hounds going dark, they are hiring almost anyone who walks in. The Cappies have loosened their purse strings, too. Hell, even the reps from the Free Worlds League have open contracts."

"That's great," Jack said. "We are here with two assault 'Mechs and our own tech."

Morty held up his hand to curb Jack's enthusiasm. "That brings us to the bad news; we have a glut of people looking for employment. Now, I'm a broker, I can open doors, so business for me is good. But I want to be honest with you, the hiring units can afford to be pretty picky."

"We fought for the Republic and Clan Wolf," Mia said. "Surely that counts for something."

Morty grimaced at that "I'm sorry to say being ex-RAF doesn't help anyone's résumé right now. As for the Clan Wolf angle, I'll grant you, that will get some attention—but no one can confirm it, which makes it suspicious. Look, you all seem sincere enough, but I saw your

discharge papers. No one has ever heard of the Redburn Guards, for example. Things that are unconfirmed make your service suspicious." He paused to let Jack and the others take in his words.

Jack tried not to let his disappointment show. *We nearly died fighting for the Republic, but no one knows about any of that because the Fortress Wall is still up.* It was beyond frustrating. He glanced at Mia, who's expression mirrored his own.

"I was a Knight of the Republic," Justin said.

Morty shrugged. "And you're the tenth person I've heard that claim from this week. Look, it's not that I don't trust you, but everyone is pumping up their cred by claiming to be a Knight, which can't be verified now. No one has found an official roster of the Knights of the Republic of the Sphere in the last decade and a half. It's a good angle, but now some bad players are ruining it for the folks who really were Knights." His words made Justin's face flush with anger.

"Even so, you've got a good story," Morty continued. "Good enough to get my attention. As a broker, I make my living peddling good stories. I can work my magic, maybe get you interviews with a few units. I'll take a piece of the contract, half from you, half from the hiring unit. My ten percent is not negotiable."

Jack crossed his arms. "And if we don't work with you or another broker...?"

"Then you go to the hiring hall and try to get some face time on your own. You saw how packed that place was. Everyone is standing in a line just to get five minutes at a desk, if they're lucky. A lot of those jokers have been booted already, and are milling around, looking for people to partner with. It can be a bit cutthroat at times. With a lot of people hiring, it gets the money flowing, but there are more MechWarriors and techs than there are jobs...at least for now.

"I'm assuming you're telling me the truth," Morty said. "If that's the case, I still have time to flip my bet that the Wolves become the ilClan. The odds were against them, so the payoff is good. I will get you some face time with some units. It's the least I can do for someone giving me a good betting tip."

Jack didn't dislike Morty, but he didn't like him either. *I'm being forced into this. It feels just like when we were forced into being bondsmen, or forced to listen to Stone's surrender. I'm tired of being in situations where everyone is imposing their will on me.*

Jack surveyed Mia and Justin, then turned to Stern. Mia's face bore a dejected look, and Justin still seemed peeved at having anyone question whether he really was a Knight.

"All right," he said. "See if you can get us in."

MCCOMMON'S BAR AND GRILL
GALATEA CITY, GALATEA
GALATEAN LEAGUE
11 JULY 3151

The next day, they had four meetings with prospective mercenary units that were hiring. Colonel Michael "Gunny" Gibbs of the Grave Diggers was interested in hiring Jack, but not Mia or Justin—and for wages that were at the bottom of the pay scale. "Hey, it's a buyer's market," was Gibbs' only answer to Jack's astonished response about the pay. Another unit, Pennington's Pulverizers, wanted to purchase their 'Mechs and offer a six-month contract to Mia—but they didn't want Jack or Justin.

It was frustrating for Jack, but he understood the market. The sudden influx of RAF personnel, despite the uptick in demand for mercenaries, meant unit owners could keep the wages down. Captain Willy Pennington summed it up callously: "If you don't want the deal, someone else downstairs will take it. You be smart to cash out now." The recruiters had an arrogance that rubbed Jack the wrong way. *They don't respect what we bring to the table.*

The trio retired to McCommon's Bar and Grill, a hole-in-the-wall bar that made Paco's look like a penthouse bar. It smelled of decades of spilled drinks overlaid with hints of sadness and despair. Jack ignored that his sleeve stuck to the table they sat at, and he slammed back his drink, more in frustration than anything else.

Justin seemed to sense his mood. "Pisses you off, doesn't it? I can see it in your face."

Jack tried to rein in his exasperation but then stopped. He embraced the rage boiling in him as the warmth from the drink filled his chest. "I feel like the last few months have been me playing defense. Everything that happened made me react to it. First was the invasion of Clan Wolf. For a little time I felt in control—during the counterattack. Then I was made a bondsman. It was the best of two bad choices, but I lived with it. Then there was the trial with the Jade Falcons. Again, I was forced to dance to someone else's tune. Sure, we saved the life of Star Colonel Kerensky, but it cost me one of my crew." He didn't have to mention Cheetah to spur Mia into slamming the rest of her drink.

"I think I understand," Justin said. "I was a Knight. That was the pinnacle of my career. From there, everything has been going downhill. Even when I did what I was ordered to do, strike back at Clan Wolf, that got tossed back at me. I was painted as the bad guy, almost as much as Alaric was. It felt like things were just out of control. The more I tried to explain what happened, the less people seemed to care. They had already passed judgment on me. To them, the matter was closed."

Mia weighed in. "We come here and they treat us like we're refugees fleeing the collapse of the Republic. Those that don't look down on us look right through us, as if we don't matter. We might have been better off staying on Terra. At least there we had respect from the Clans." Her hand drifted to her chest where her BloodRibbon was pinned on, touching it lightly.

Jack absorbed their words and emotions, soaking them in as if they were a wave of suppression fire. "I am *done* with other people controlling my destiny. This whole system is rigged against us. We need to flip the situation, turn this around somehow."

"What'd you have in mind?" Justin asked.

"Everything here on Galatea is to the advantage of the hiring units. They determine who they will hire and who they won't. They even set the market price. The brokers...they just skim money for introductions. We came here to join a mercenary unit. We need to look at this differently. Rather than us begging for a slot, *we* need to be the ones hiring."

"You mean we form our own unit?" Mia asked.

"Why not?" Jack snapped back.

"Well, we know nothing about being mercenaries, for one thing," Justin answered.

"How hard can it be?" Jack said, driving his argument home. "Remember that female captain with an attitude, the one commanding the Sinister Sisters?"

"Mark-something?" Justin said, trying to remember her name.

"That's the one. When we were done talking to her, she didn't strike me as being particularly smart or having some insider knowledge. She had assembled a group of MechWarriors, gave herself a name, and was hiring. Remember how vague she was about where they were going to be deployed? I'll bet she didn't have the faintest idea. Odds are she was winging it."

Mia nodded. "Yeah...now that you mention it, I was wondering the same thing about her."

"We should form our own unit," Jack said with a ring of excitement in his voice. "Think about it. The core of a good merc unit is a tech, and with Mia, we have a full-fledged engineer. We've got a legendary *Atlas* and a *Dire Wolf*—that's a boatload of firepower. Justin is a former Knight, for God's sake! I was an RAF major and a Clan Wolf warrior. We have more going for us than a lot of these people we're trying to get jobs from!"

The faces of his two comrades seemed to catch his excitement. "Two 'Mechs doesn't make a unit, Jack," Mia said. "We'd need a company to be considered credible, and right now, we don't have a contract or the cash to pull together a unit."

Traver turned to his Ghost Knight colleague. "In reality, we don't know how much clout we have. I think it's time we find out. We've got

Weatherbee's data cubes and intelligence as to who is the ilClan and what went down on Terra between the Wolves and Jade Falcons—knowledge no one in the rest of the Inner Sphere has."

For a long moment, Justin said nothing. His response came in the form of a devilish grin that swept his face. "I think it's time to pay a visit to the Federated Suns embassy."

**FEDERATED SUNS EMBASSY
GALATEA CITY, GALATEA
GALATEAN LEAGUE
12 JULY 3151**

The embassy building was posh, much nicer than the drab office buildings surrounding its high-walled grounds. It had a large, formal garden behind it, more of a buffer between it and its neighbors than a botanical treat for visitors. The wall was topped with security fencing and an array of small monitors. The security guards were not the kind Jack had seen on Galatea thus far—these were *real* security personnel, armed and armored.

The trio paused across the street.

"So how do you want to play this, Justin?" Jack asked.

"Hey, this was *your* idea. You take point. If they try anything unkind, I have your back. Just remember, once we cross that threshold, we are on Federated Suns soil. There's not a lot of it left right now, and they are pretty sensitive about that. Also, this is intel data. You can let them scan it for verification *only*. If they score a copy of it, we have no bargaining chip. I say play tough and shoot high. We have nothing to lose as long as we don't create some sort of diplomatic incident...or the MI4 guys bag and tag us."

Mia and Jack looked at him with cocked heads and semi-shocked expressions.

"It's a joke," Justin said. "I'm sure they won't take us hostage." He paused for a moment before grinning again. "At least, I'm pretty sure."

Jack didn't respond, but was thankful one of them still had a sense of humor.

The guards at the entrance took their information as it started to rain. Jack said they had come from Terra, and were carrying intelligence information from a Federated Suns spy. They waited long minutes, and were partly drenched when they were ushered into the embassy compound. After presenting identification and submitting to a fast DNA scan, they were then escorted through winding corridors to an elevator. They went down at least four stories, under the belly of Galatea City.

The hallway they were led down was darker than the plush upstairs of the embassy building, far more utilitarian. Finally, they were taken to a small conference room. It wasn't a room for welcomed guests. This was the kind of room where people got interrogated—or worse.

A woman entered, slender, with short blond hair...attractive, yet with a face that betrayed no emotions. Her business attire was designed to deceive, Jack thought the moment he saw her. Under the suit, she had the muscles of a fighter.

She took a seat opposite of the three of them. "Very well," she began. "And you are?"

"Jack Traver and Mia Fowler," Jack said. "Formerly of the RAF, and most recently, Clan Wolf. This," he said, pointing to Justin, "Is Justin 'Cloud' Hall, former Knight of the Republic."

Tapping into her noteputer, the woman said nothing, not even giving them solid eye contact.

Jack decided to press. "And you are?"

"My name is Danielle," she replied curtly.

"Not your real name, I take it?"

She glared at him for three seconds in response. "I am led to believe you were on Terra and have information of interest to the Federated Suns."

"We were there," Jack said. "We were made bondsmen of Clan Wolf when they defeated the Republic. We fought with them against the Jade Falcons."

"So you claim," she said with a deadpan voice.

Jack held out his right arm and exposed his codex bracelet. "If you scan this, you'll find that my codex is complete." Mia stuck her wrist out as well.

Danielle looked at it and held her noteputer over their wrists. Her eyes darted down the screen. "Fascinating. So you know who became the ilClan?"

"Yes, we do," Jack replied. "We also met with someone named Weatherbee, one of your spies. He gave us these." Jack set two data cubes on the table in front of him. "He led us to believe that he may have been attached to DMI or some intel-gathering group for the Suns. He also indicated that if we delivered this information, we would be compensated for it."

Danielle's eyes locked onto his. "There is no spy named Weatherbee."

Jack glanced at Justin who nodded. *This is all part of the cloak-and-dagger shit.* "I think I understand," he replied.

She started to move her noteputer toward the cubes, but Jack pulled them back. "You may do a veriscan on them—but the data is ours until we work out terms."

Danielle's eyes narrowed to thin slits for a second, then she performed a light verification scan. She paused for a few moments, looking over the data. After setting the noteputer down, she crossed her arms and stared right into Jack with her piercing blue eyes. "All right, Mr. Traver, if that is what you go by now. I think we can arrive at reasonable terms for these 'tidbits' you have brought us. Obviously we have some passing interest in what events have unfolded on Terra in recent weeks."

Jack crossed his own arms and grinned back in response. "Passing interest? Let's face it, Danielle, if that is your real name—"

"It's not," Justin cut in.

"Right. Well, whoever you are, let's be blunt. You're in the dark about the ilClan trial and what followed. And this data we brought you from this Weatherbee guy, who doesn't exist, it's fifteen-plus years of intel data. These are not 'tidbits.' This is a twelve-course meal and a leg up on every other House in the Inner Sphere. I think if you're in Department of Military Intelligence, or whatever, you should be taking this a little more seriously. This is a gold mine."

"I never said I was DMI," she replied.

"She's DMI," Justin said in a low tone, warranting her to give him a short glare. "Otherwise, why meet with us?"

Danielle drew a long breath and summoned some composure. "How much do you wish for this information, Mr. Traver?"

"Enough to form a company of mercenaries."

"What does that have to do with this?"

"I want you to fund it." *Justin had said shoot big...so let's see the reaction.*

"That is outrageous. We are talking millions of C-bills."

"No," Jack said. "It's not outrageous. It's very reasonable, given the value of getting information before your competitors. You'll be able to offset the costs very easily, though. Think of this more as a loan than writing a check."

"How is that?"

"Because the Federated Suns is going to give us our first contract. We know you are hiring mercs. Everyone knows. We are good, Clan-good, Republic-Knight good. It should be an easy decision for you."

The DMI agent said nothing for a long moment. "I will need to speak with our recruitment team here on Galatea. It won't be easy."

"I'm willing to bet you can be persuasive," Jack said confidently.

"Indeed. I believe I can make the necessary arrangements for you," she finally conceded.

"Draw up the paperwork, and we will give you the data cubes and even an interview if you want," Jack said.

She shook her head. "Given the sensitivity of this data, I will have you remain here while I make the arrangements." She rose quickly and extended her hand. Jack stood and shook it back. "You have just gotten the Federated Suns to fund your unit, Mr. Traver. Good luck." Before he could respond, Danielle pivoted with military precision and left the room.

Mia almost burst into laughter. "Wow! I can't believe it!"

"Good work, Jack," Justin said, patting him hard on the back.

Jack smiled broadly, probably for the first time in weeks. "The time has come for us to control our own fates."

"We'll need a name," Mia pointed out.

"Traver's Terrors?" Justin offered. It instantly rubbed Jack the wrong way. He shook his head. "This isn't about me. Besides, there are a lot of units that tie in people's names. Our brand needs to be something beyond a person."

"Shadows of the Republic?" Mia asked.

Justin shook his head. "I think we should draw some distance between us and the Republic. Linking us to a defunct government just doesn't feel right. Besides, those days are behind us."

Drawing a deep breath, Jack thought back to the events that had brought them to Galatea. He flashed a smile and turned to his partners.

"The Cheetahs."

Mia said nothing, but nodded, as did Justin. Jack's hand drifted to his pocket, and he could feel Cheetah's codex still there, a reminder of the struggle against the Jade Falcons. *I have never forgotten you.*

The former Knight chuckled slightly. "I like it, but it's a bit misleading. I mean, cheetahs are fast, and we are starting out with a pair of assault 'Mechs."

Jack shrugged. "We'll get some lights and mediums, no doubt. Cheetahs also are hunters, and our assault lance will fit that bill perfectly—they have a powerful bite. There are plenty of former RAF warriors in that hiring hall, looking for redemption just like us. They're bound to have some 'Mechs that can give us the speed to live up to that name. We will treat them fairly. We will give them a new purpose...a new home."

And as he talked, Jack Traver realized he felt good for the first time in months.





PERSUADING PARLIAMENT: A LOBBYIST'S GUIDE TO ATREUS

STEPHEN TOROPOV

Transcript excerpt of Hologrid Learning Course, available on Atreus planetary infonet, published 1 January 3151. Presented by Callum Davis, former MP for Westover

Hello, and thank you for purchasing lesson two of our training course. In our first lesson, we began by exploring how best to convert your favored cause or measure into legislative language presentable to the greatest deliberative body in human-occupied space. Today, we will begin to explore the social and political landscape you will be introducing your bill to.

To convince Parliament at large of the evident justice, urgency, or profitability of your particular legislative priority, you could attempt to schedule meetings with each of the multitude of voting members of Parliament individually. Following that approach, by the time Parliament adjourns for the year, you may have waded through enough meetings with interns and middling staffers to have up to a dozen yea votes for your proposal. Instead, it pays to bear in mind the truth that politics is an equation of leverage, which means that to be successful in your political aspirations, you need to find the ideal place to bring your rhetorical force to bear.

The first and most important lesson of Parliamentary lobbying in the 32nd century is to remember that you are lobbying the Parliament of the 32nd century. While the Free Worlds League that re-formed under Captain-General Jessica Marik in 3139 is the clear successor to the Free Worlds League that helped build the Star League, it is a new entity in several important respects. Venerable tomes of lobbyist wisdom,

such as Arsine Borrel's 28th-century masterpiece *The Art of Stealing a Law*, must now be consigned to mere philosophic exercise rather than practical guidance. A new Parliament requires new approaches.

In such a new system, many elements of the eventual parliamentary status quo are still unsettled. You must maintain a clear awareness of particularly controversial issues of both policy and procedure, even if they have little to do with your own priority. Few things can torpedo a good bill as fast as a slip of the tongue from an advocate who inadvertently places them on one side of a bitter divide. Some of these lightning-rod issues may seem elementary, but nevertheless must be trod lightly around. As an example, you should avoid mentioning the total number of MPs generally, and you certainly shouldn't do so until at least two weeks into the legislative session. Each session will invariably begin with bitter debates over the credentials and rights of various contested seats, and the 3151 session looks to be more acrimonious than most. Aside from the usual crop of disputed elections, statements on the number of MPs will inherently cause you to stake out a position on thorny issues, such as the status of representatives from the recently repatriated Regular Fiefs and the worlds Duke Fontaine Marik conquered in his unsanctioned military operations against the Marian Hegemony. Unless your proposed legislation directly involves one of those seats in question, whatever minor rhetorical flourish your appeal to the exact number of MPs may provide is certainly not worth the instant opprobrium of those members whose political identities rely on these polarizing issues.

For industrial and military legislation, the most important MPs you can persuade may very well not technically be in Parliament any longer. When Jessica Marik's peace treaty with the Wolf Empire was ratified, it acknowledged Clan Wolf control of a number of planets that had been part of the Free Worlds League upon the signing of the Charter of Incorporation in 3139, and thus which had sent representatives to Parliament. Although Earl Conall Stewart was allowed to maintain the voting privileges of Stewart's Parliamentary seat due to House Stewart's traditional role in League politics, most of the representatives from the ceded worlds officially lost their seats and voting powers. As such, at a stroke they became a cause célèbre for those still-seated MPs who viewed the peace agreement as a humiliation. Informally led by Lady Irina Iwasaki, former MP from Keystone, this clique of exiles remains influential among Parliament's revanchist-minded MPs even a decade after being disenfranchised. Convince Lady Iwasaki or the other exiled MPs that your measure will strengthen the Free Worlds League Military or otherwise lay the groundwork for the League to reclaim their homeworlds, and very quickly you will find a significant chunk of Parliament much more amenable to providing you votes.

Conversely, this Irredentist bloc within Parliament sees opposition in the form of the loose-knit Consolidationist group. These are MPs, often from planets farther from interstellar borders, who would rather Parliament and the Captain-General focus on internally strengthening the League rather than pursuing foreign adventures, and so tend to vote against measures that risk major military entanglements. Though they lack a central rallying figure like Lady Iwaski, the opinions of reliably Consolidationist MPs like the Vasiliou brothers hold considerable swaying power. Victoras and Fazil Vasiliou hail from the world of Ling, and though the laws governing their world's Parliamentary seat forbid any single candidate from running for consecutive terms, they have such a hold on the electoral landscape that they have been trading off terms in Parliament for nearly six years. This longevity, combined with their habit of having the brother not currently in Parliament serve as the seated brother's chief of staff, has garnered them a reputation as dealmakers, always pushing their network of like-minded MPs to champion bills encouraging civilian economic development and the improvement of internal-trade networks. Lobbyists who can sufficiently flatter the brothers' self-described peerless political acumen will find them highly effective backers of economically advantageous legislation.

Mirroring the split between the Irredentists and Consolidationists on matters of military and economic policy, you should also be aware of the divide between Federalists and Charterists on questions regarding the League's new constitutional settlement. Pundits and scholars are still debating the exact nature and implication of the highly technical questions that define this conflict, and likely will do so for centuries, however the gist is that the Charter of Incorporation promulgated by Jessica Marik in 3139 is more centralist and unitary than the Documents of Incorporation that governed the League's original founding. While drawing largely on the old constitutional order, the new Charter of Incorporation does away with the ancient system of apportioning members of Parliament based on a member state's tax contributions to the federal administration in favor of a simpler calculation of one MP per planet. This single reform has drastically changed the face of legislative advocacy compared to the League of our ancestors. While MPs of the various duchies still invariably caucus together, gone are the days where convincing a single Duke's Legislative Whip would bring dozens of votes at a stroke. In general, representatives of the Duchy of Oriente, from which the ruling dynasty now hails, and representatives of independent worlds within the League, who are now less overshadowed by the voices of larger provinces, tend to support this new arrangement and so have come to be called Charterists, while representatives of those provinces who have relatively lost influence

have rekindled the perennial political flame of Federalism in order to reclaim their prerogatives.

Taken together, these two conflicts of Irredentists versus Consolidationists and Federalists versus Charterists form the two axes of a political framework that can be invaluable to your lobbying efforts. If, for instance, you are proposing a bill that is identifiably in Consolidationist and Charterist in content (say, a measure calling for a fleet of merchant JumpShips to be built and the revenues thereof to be accrued by the Captain-General), your lobbying efforts towards Charterist-Consolidationist and Federalist-Irredentist MPs need not be extensive, as they are likely to support or oppose the measure respectively, based purely on merit. Instead, you can focus your persuasive efforts on Charterist-Irredentists and Federalist-Consolidationists, who may be swayed in your favor by the elements of the measure matching their ideological convictions. With this framing, you can maximize your limited time and financial resources, avoiding the need to canvass every MP for support over the obligatory expensive luncheon.

As a final consideration, you must be aware of the outsized influence wielded by the delegates from the Clan Protectorate. Though this province is only entitled to seven MPs, its vital military and economic contribution of the Protectorate to the ruling coalition, combined with the cultural friction of meshing Clan governance with League politics means they cannot be simply ignored. Clan Sea Fox's recent acquisition of liquidated ComStar property and ventures has made them very protective of their new interests, and while they have acknowledged the precedent of not challenging MPs to civilian-caste Trials of Grievance for their voting patterns, no such protections exist for lobbyists. If you feel particularly bold, you could attempt to use their honor system in your favor and challenge them to a Trial of Possession for their vote on a given bill or motion, though this gambit relies on your political skills and the forbearance of the MP in question in allowing a trial decided by some means other than combat. Aside from such drastic tactics, it is best to deal with the Clan Protectorate MPs indirectly to avoid unintentional offense. Garner their support for measures by convincing a significant number of non-Clan delegates to bring the matter up, and if you truly must advance legislation contrary to their interests, do so without directly mentioning them, and do not skimp on hiring top-rate bodyguards willing to defend Trials of Grievance on your behalf.





TALES FROM THE CRACKED CANOPY: THE DEVIL'S LUCK

ALEXANDER J. ROTH

At the Cracked Canopy, a MechWarrior bar on the gaming world of Solaris VII, a Memory Wall displays mementos of glorious victories and bitter defeats, of honorable loyalties and venomous betrayals, of lifelong friendships and lost loves. Each enshrined object ensures that the past will not be forgotten and the future is something worth fighting for.

INTERNATIONAL ZONE
SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII
LYRAN ALLIANCE
2 AUGUST 3081

The grizzled old MechWarrior walked in, shoved up to the bar in a seat with a view of the holoscreen. Leo, the head bartender, inattentively explained the Memory Wall to pair of techs as they paid their tab. His attention was on the holoscreen, where the next 'Mech battle was set to start, a vibrant new challenger rising through the ranks in a salvaged *Mad Cat* versus a heavily modified *Victor* piloted by a respected veteran of the arena.

Seeing the old man saddled up to the bar, Leo asked, "What'll ya have?"

The old warrior, eyes set on the screen, ordered "Rye whiskey, straight up."

Pouring the harsh whiskey into a glass, Leo, mostly from a desire to have an excuse to watch the upstart in the fight, started with small talk. "You come in for the match? This new 'Mech jock, some half noble

from Skye in a flaming red *Mad Cat* he calls the *Devil's Luck*, is makin' a run like I haven't seen in years."

"I heard. Though I doubt he truly has the devil's luck."

"Oh no, that's his 'Mech, all right. All loaded up with Clan tech and painted in flames. Hell, he even has a pair of dancing devils behind the cockpit. He's a bit of a braggart, claiming he's so good in a 'Mech that he won his *Mad Cat* from the devil himself, and that in taking it he took Mephisto's luck."

As the old man grumbled something in reply, Leo saw the match was starting and quickly turned up the feed's volume, with the holocaust taking center stage. The match was short, with the *Mad Cat* putting the modified *Victor* on its back in the second exchange of long-range weapons, then quickly closing firing like a madman, ignoring his heat, which prevented the *Victor* from regaining his feet. The opposing pilot yielded within ninety seconds of the start.

The crowd at the bar was lit with excitement, but within fifteen minutes the after-battle interviews with the MechWarriors were over and the bar's crowd had dwindled to a group of young technicians already too inebriated to understand the finer points of advanced arena tactics they were loudly debating. Alone at the bar was the old man, who raised his glass, signaling for another round.

As he provided a second glass of rye, Leo said, "So, do you still doubt he has the devil's luck?"

"Yes."

Now feeling the need to defend the shining star of the evening, Leo spat out, "Did you see that match? Dropped him on the second volley, then ended it in a mad dash. And I've seen that *Victor* duel before, he's no slouch. You really gonna argue he doesn't have the devil's own luck?"

"Well, first off, the jock *is* good. The first volley was light to make the *Victor* move for the cover. I'd venture the second volley was dialed in at that precise spot. Did you see the ground was loose there? So I'd say the MechWarrior is a skilled shot and tactician, but the devil's luck is something else altogether."

Taken aback by the old man's reply, Leo's frustration with another embittered old MechWarrior was replaced by confusion. "What d'you mean?"

"My experience with the devil's luck—the true devil's luck—goes back to the Tenth Donegal Guards, Second Battalion, Lima Company, Recon Lance. We were called 'Lucky Lima.' Now, I know you've never heard of them, but we were considered lucky because of our lack of combat losses. Lima hadn't lost a 'Mech or a MechWarrior to combat operations in over three generations. Now, before you ask, there was no cowardice or politics involved. The Lucky Lima would be called in to support or reinforce another unit, and within an hour or so after

DropShips landed, a ceasefire would be declared. There were a few minor skirmishes, and on at least two occasions in the Fourth Succession War, they were on the front lines of major assaults. In both of those cases, the opposing command had pulled out to try to flank another unit or support another part of the line.

"So, 3050 rolls around. By then I'd fought my way up into Lucky Lima's Recon Lance, piloting a centuries-old *Phoenix Hawk*. We were led by Kinchen in his *Wasp* Land-Air 'Mech. Nick and Grant, both minor nobles who piloted a pair of *Locusts*, filled out the rest of the lance. The two of them may have been placed in the company due to their families, but they trained just as hard as the rest of us. I'd say Grant was my equal in a 'Mech, and I sure as hell wasn't connected, maybe lucky, but not some prince's third cousin twice removed who could decide which of the family 'Mechs to pilot on a given day. Nick wasn't far behind us in skills, but Kinchen was beyond us.

"We would have six-day-long combined-arms drills in the field. That's six days on no sleep, a couple protein bars a day, and just enough water to not die. A few days in and you were chasing shadows, shooting at where targets used to be five seconds ago. Hell, on more than one occasion we had to pull double shifts in the 'Mech bays, assisting repairs after taking falls on Day Five or Six. But not Kinchen. No food, no water, no sleep—nothing ever shook him off form. A small point of pride is I could normally outshoot him with my lasers at range, but in anything else, none of us were anywhere near his skill."

"That was just Recon Lance. Hauptmann Jakes—who according to a company rumor, had singlehandedly fought off a full company of Capellan Death Commandos sometime prior to relocating to our little backwater—drilled us nonstop. Now in my time, I've seen elite units fight, and for being untested in combat, I would say we weren't far off. All the nonstop training had us move as one. We knew what each other was thinking before the thoughts fully formed. Though we were four MechWarriors, we were one."

Leo grinned. "He took out a whole company of Death Commandos? I'd love to see that holovid..."

"To tell you the truth, I doubt that was anything more than a rumor, a piece of bravado Jakes allowed to add some depth to his commands. But he had most definitely seen hard combat before, and bore the scars to prove it. If it came to a fight, I would rather have him on my side than a whole Star of *Daishis*. But I tell you this so you can understand what the devil's luck really is.

"There were twelve of us—a company, a family. For over three years, we took every meal together, bunked in the same barracks—sweating, bleeding, breathing, and crying together. I loved each of

them more than I have ever loved anything. They were my brothers and sisters.”

“So Lucky Lima had the devil’s lucks, and your unit was special, and have another drink, MechWarrior.”

“No,” the old man protested. “Lima had a lucky streak, a brilliant run than ended abruptly after running into Clan Wolf on a world called Chateau. Her luck almost held, though. Given the layout of the Clan deployments, we were tasked with protecting the left flank. Lima avoided the initial fray, where the Wolves cut through the rest of our battalion like they weren’t even there. We hadn’t been engaged yet when Marshal Sarah Steiner called for a retreat.”

“When this order came in, we had enough intel reports that the Wolves’ weapons overpowered and outranged us. In our youth, knowing we were outgunned did not matter, only that we would finally put our training to use. That we would join the ranks of combat-tested MechWarriors, and if we had to face superior monsters, then so be it.

“Jakes knew better. More than that, he understood tactics. He put forth a plan that gave us not only a chance to hold the enemy off, but to punch them hard enough for us to make it back to the DropShip as well. He paired our lance with our long-range missile carriers, which he had hunker down in the rough forest terrain a kilometer from the spaceport. Command Lance and Fire Lance would push forward engage and slowly, pulling back into an open plain. Recon would then flank, providing targeting data for the LRM carriers. The terrain would allow us to draw the Wolves into a place where we could hammer them with hundreds of missiles while they were facing off with our heavy ‘Mechs, while our light ‘Mechs could spot for the missile carriers without ever presenting an easy target.

“The plan was as tactically sound as could be arranged with the intel we had. As it turned out, in the end, it worked too well. Our Command and Fire Lances began the engagement against three *Mad Cats* and a *Masakari*. The *Masakari*’s lack of speed allowed the lance to duck behind terrain, preventing that monster from coming to bear. But with an *Atlas* heading up both lances, our company’s speed was limited, allowing the *Mad Cats* to close too fast. It was just a few hundred meters from the ambush point when Lucky Lima lost her luck. Over the comm we heard Helena call out as her *Cyclops*’ armor gave in and her ammunition detonated, a sudden supernova on the edge of the battlefield. Her death cry was the first for Lucky Lima in almost a century, but it wasn’t the last one that day.”

The old MechWarrior paused, his eyes glassy. “If I’m gonna keep talking, I’m gonna need that bottle.”

Leo obliged.

"Thank you. There are some memories I prefer to not face sober." Another drink downed quickly and the glass refilled, the MechWarrior continued.

"After Helena went down, Jimmy's *Crusader* took a headshot, then the engine in Diaz's *Warhammer* went critical. Those *Mad Cats* were like nothing we'd ever seen, faster than they had any right to be, with lasers and LRMs flying at a pace that should have cooked their pilots in their cockpits. In a span of fifteen seconds, Lucky Lima went from a century of being untouched to a quarter dead.

"But those fifteen seconds meant everything, because the *Mad Cats* had entered the trap. Nick and Grant launched from the woods in a full sprint, Kinchen powered up and set his *Wasp* into AirMech mode, and I took flight in my *Phoenix Hawk*. Kinchen and the *Locusts* began harassing the *Mad Cats*, and their speed and the element of surprise meant a few errant shots from the Clanners didn't connect. I was focused on the monstrosity that was the *Masakari*. By spacing and timing my jumps into the thickest parts of the woods edging the plain, and taking a few quick steps and launching again, I was able to close with the slower 'Mech without it landing a shot."

A grin appeared on the old MechWarrior's face, and his eyes seemed to glow for a second. "I even managed to tag that bastard with my large laser—center mass, a perfect shot.

"Hardly made a scratch.

"Two more quick jumps, and I got my first piece of good news: the *Locusts* had been able to transmit the targeting data for a firing equation on each of the three *Mad Cats*, and the forest was drenched in a cloud of smoke as a two hundred and forty long-range missiles arced up rained down like Zeus' thunderbolt from Olympus, directly on the *Mad Cats*. I found out later that the missiles took out two of those killer 'Mechs entirely, the third had lost a leg, and it only took a few short seconds for Hauptmann Jakes to close the distance to the last *Mad Cat* and deliver its coup de grâce via his *Atlas*' autocannon."

After another shot of rye, the MechWarrior stared ahead, his eyes not seeing the bar anymore. He filled the glass again and closed his eyes. "I was mid-jump, about forty-five meters in the air, trying to keep position on the *Masakari*, when it hit me. It must've been PPC and laser both, because my *Phoenix Hawk*'s left leg was blasted clean off, and the damage made lose control of my jump. I tried to land on my one remaining leg, to no avail.

"My *Phoenix Hawk* went down hard. I was unconscious and laid out, an easy target for the most terrifying 'Mech I had ever encountered. But I was lucky. Kinchen, in his LAM, used the speed and maneuverability of the AirMech mode to come to bear on the distracted *Masakari*, and he relayed the targeting data to the LRM carriers. As luck works

on the battlefield, the *Masakari* was focused on my *Phoenix Hawk*, probably trying to protect its rear armor. But as happens to so many MechWarriors, the *Masakari* pilot had gotten tunnel vision: their whole world became our duel, and as the 'Mech turned to deal me that fateful blow, the pilot exposed his back to the LRM carriers.

"The *Masakari* took the full fury of the incoming salvo, and when I awoke, it was torn apart. As I came to, I heard the comm chatter calling Lima back to the DropShip. Mission accomplished. You could call it the first victory against the Clans. But this escape had its cost. To pull out in time, Lima had to leave our fallen 'Mechs and pilots behind. This included me in my crippled *Phoenix Hawk*. Kinchen was yelling, arguing that he could reach me and get back before dust-off. Maybe he could have, but scans were showing more Clan assets coming in. Including a light Star that was moving faster than we'd thought possible. If you've ever seen a *Dasher* burning MASC on an open battlefield, you know that's one hell of a sight."

The MechWarrior just stared at the full glass, looking through it, almost a hatred in his eyes, when he began to speak again. "The next few moments are something that will remain in my thoughts for eternity. I was being left behind, to die or be taken prisoner by this unknown monster. I accepted it—Helena, Jimmy, Diaz, and me, a fair trade for the lives of the rest of my company, my family. The remainder of Lucky Lima was able to load onto our *Union DropShip*, and I had a commline open to them. We said our goodbyes and sent our love to each other, normally by implying some form of improper relations we were having with each other's mothers, in what, to an outside listener would sound like vulgar exchanges of hatred, but we knew.

"I was on the radio with them when the light Clan 'Mechs emerged, a good three hundred meters outside my large laser's range. I shot anyway. They ignored me and headed toward the spaceport. I guess there was no honor in finishing off a crippled 'Mech that posed no threat. I was on the comm with Jakes, and I could hear the relief in his voice when I told him the Clanners were ignoring me. Having lost a quarter of his command in a matter of minutes, you have to appreciate the small victories."

Confused, Leo said, "I don't remember Chateau as a victory. Hell, it was months later before we had any real pushback against the Clans."

"Right. It wasn't a real victory. But on the comm with Jakes, he told me I must've still had some of the Lucky Lima running for me. He ordered me to pop my hatch and yield. He then said words that echo through my mind every night when I close my eyes: 'Boy, you fought well today, and to survive a solo attack on that monster, you must have some of the luck of the dev—' He never got a chance to finish."

The MechWarrior grimaced, choking on tears as he struggled to continue. "Turns out Clan honor codes in combat frown on ambushes from hidden vehicles. Rather than let a minor victory live on and inspire the Inner Sphere, why not target a DropShip? No one would call a unit taking one hundred percent casualties a victory."

The man sat still for long moments of silence, then started again this time in a clear voice. "In a moment, my whole company—my family—was gone. Dead. Eternally silent. I thought I could never feel that alone again. I was wrong. Those light 'Mechs circled back when they were done with whatever their mission was. One of the pilots slipped a corded leather band around my wrist. After a year and a half of beatings, of fighting and struggling with those who killed my family, I was a MechWarrior again.

"You see, I've always been lucky. I was lucky on Tukayyid, where I saw Khan Garth Radick fall. I was lucky in the Refusal War, where I fought alongside Vlad Ward's Crusader Wolves. I was lucky to have slipped back to Arc-Royal with Phelan Kell's Warden Wolves. I was lucky to not be absorbed by the severed remnants that became Clan Wolf-in-Exile. I have dozens of other tales where I survived against the odds or walked through hell itself seemingly unscathed.

"But the luck I have, it's not good luck. It is the devil's luck, to walk away unscathed while your friends and family are dying next to you. To come back to an empty home because you cannot stand the company that will inevitably lead to another loss. Fighting the next fight, because maybe that's the one where your skill falls short and your luck fails you, because at some point, combat becomes your only friend. When you've had the devil's luck as long as I have, you count the days until it runs out. Until you can see your friends again, and you wonder, 'When I cross over, will they even recognize me?' Hell, I no longer recognize myself in the old pictures. I can barely believe I was ever that young. And seeing the images of Nick, Kinchen, Diaz, and Grant, they look like children. They *were* children. Hell, I'm now over a decade older than Hauptmann Jakes was when this happened."

Pushing the full glass away from him, the MechWarrior asked for his tab. As he counted out C-bills, he continued. "You see, Jakes' last words were meant to give me hope in what I was sure to face. The devil's luck will keep you alive against all odds. You will walk through the fires of hell itself without a burn, but you won't go through completely untouched. It comes with a price—a damned high price—and all the luck in the world is not worth it."

There was something else atop the bills he slid forward. Three cords woven together, old, worn, and frayed at the edge: a cut bondcord.

"It's been a long time since I told that story," he said. "Hell, maybe I've never told it before. Maybe these memories are better left pinned to the wall."

The old MechWarrior stood and started toward the exit, but he paused and turned back to Leo. There was a new look in his eyes, a fire and determination Leo hadn't seen in him until now.

"One more thing," the old MechWarrior said. "Do you know of any stables looking to hire a pilot, preferably one that would put me on a course to fight that particular *Mad Cat*?"





MASKIROVKA REPORTS: TIAMAT CRASHES INTO THE WALL

JOEL STEVERSON

From: Parvati Sukkasem, Senior Analyst, *Tuánduì cuì niǎo*

To: Ghazaar anak lelaki Lan Leong, Director, *Zang shu er*

Date: 28 April 3150

Subject: [Encrypted] Operation TIAMAT sabotage and Terran reconnaissance

Classification: Top Secret: Directors' Eyes Only

Report: OT033050-4/TR160450-2

As-salamu alaykum, Director. I present *Tuánduì dà bǎilù* analysis of equipment failures plaguing the lead echelon of Operation Tiamat, *Tuánduì cāng lù* analysis of Operation Dakini, and may it please the Chancellor, *Tuánduì cuì niǎo* recommendations in light of these analyses.

OPERATION TIAMAT

The Strategios began planning this joint operation with the DCMS in May 3149. Its goal was the liberation of systems ceded to the Republic under the Tikonov Treaty and—ultimately—the conquest of Terra. Wave One of the Capellan Confederation Armed Forces' thrust began in August and targeted four worlds. Of these, only Liberty was well defended. Suspiciously light resistance on Bryant, Epsilon Indi, and Sheratan suggested (with moderate confidence) that the RAF was baiting a trap. We elevated this to high confidence when Stone's Fury abandoned its defense of Liberty in mid-September, three weeks earlier than anticipated. Subsequently, the Chancellor mandated a conservative

approach for Wave Two, astutely splitting it into two phases rather than assaulting another four worlds simultaneously. Phase One hit Procyon and New Home in October. Phase Two would have struck Keid and Sirius, but after the RAF recaptured Liberty in early November, it was pared down to a single objective—Keid.

The Fifth Sian Dragoons made landfall on 4 December. We expected (with moderate confidence) the Republic Standing Guard would defend, but the Fifth encountered only militia tanks and conventional infantry, which they quickly bested. When major combat operations ended on 8 December, the Fifth was 94 percent combat-effective. Five weeks later, salvage and repair had replenished most of the Fifth's combat losses, but they reported only 82 percent combat effectiveness. This decline was unexpected, but not unheard of for A-rated regiments with the latest experimental equipment. Pareto analysis bore out this theory. The data show the top five BattleMech chassis reported as non-mission-capable (NMC) were *Raven II*, *Catapult II*, *Agrotera*, *Vandal*, and *Lu Wei Bing*.

When we examined mid-January combat-effectiveness reports for all CCAF Operation Tiamat forces, a startling trend emerged. On Epsilon Indi, the First Liao Guards reported 89 percent combat effective; Warrior House Dai Da Chi reported 84 percent. On Procyon, the Fourth Liao Guards reported 86 percent, and the Second Canopian Lancers reported 90 percent. Closer examination of the data revealed all five regiments were reporting higher-than-usual numbers of NMC 'Mechs, vehicles, and aerospace fighters. Since Gray Monday, the communications difficulties have reduced our regiments' average mission-capable rate (MCR) from 92 percent to 83 percent. In turn, our regiments reported a reduction in their combat-effectiveness rate (CER) of 8–13 percent. These numbers were all in line with the expected reduction, allowing the looming threat to progress unnoticed until 1 February, when CERs showed an additional 11 percent drop.

We conducted a deep dive on MCR reports, expecting to see predominant NMC classifications as Parts Shortage, Shortage of Trained Maintenance Personnel, and Maintenance Delays. Instead, the leading causes of NMC status for all combat units were Unscheduled Maintenance (38 percent), and Unexpected Parts Replacement (32 percent). These data led us to one inescapable conclusion: Operation Tiamat forces were the victims of rampant sabotage.

Unfortunately, in the time it took to complete this analysis, our Republic opponents had stepped up their asymmetric warfare efforts. By 16 February, the insurgents had moved beyond compromising our maintenance stores. On Epsilon Indi and Keid, ammunition stockpiles were destroyed with such abandon that the First Liao Guards and House Dai Da Chi reported they could only sustain two days of fighting. On



Procyon, the Fourth Guards and Second Lancers reported multiple lances of 'Mechs rendered inoperable. Plus, three of the strike force's DropShips required several weeks of repairs to return to spaceworthiness. By the time word of this treachery reached Epsilon Indi (3 March) and Keid (8 March), the regiments staging there had suffered similar losses.

Sabotage reduced the combat effectiveness of the five regiments staging to assault Terra to an effective strength of three regiments. Reports from *Zang shu er* assets in the Free Worlds League warned of activity within the Wolf Empire and Jade Falcon Occupation Zone. While our reduced invasion force is still capable of conquering Terra, they would be hard pressed to hold it against incursions from the Wolves or Falcons. Due to these developments, the Strategios requested more information on defenses in the Terran system. This was the catalyst for Operation Dakini.

OPERATION DAKINI

This was a failed covert reconnaissance of the Terran system. The *Merchant*-class JumpShip *Terracotta Expedition* and *Star Lord*-class JumpShip *Wulingyuan* were civilian vessels operated by *Zang shu jian* shell companies organized as independent cargo brokers. They serviced trade routes, established by the Capellan Transitional Council in 3081, that connected the Liao and Capella Commonalities to the regions that became Prefectures V and VI. Both JumpShips had been equipped with Clan transponders (sourced from Sea Fox merchants) and were crewed by civilians with embedded *Zang shu jian* agents. These brave citizens answered the Chancellor's call without hesitation.

On 16 April 3150, *Terracotta Expedition* jumped from Procyon's zenith jump point to Terra's nadir jump point. *Wulingyuan* jumped from Procyon's zenith jump point to Terra's zenith jump point an hour later. It was hoped that their ostensible status as merchants would prevent attack by any forces defending the Terran system (low confidence). Neither jump was successful.

Procyon Station—an *Olympus*-class recharging station located at Procyon's zenith jump point—detected an emergence wave two hours after *Terracotta Expedition* jumped. A flight of *Yun* aerospace fighters were dispatched to investigate. Each fighter carried a search-and-rescue (SAR) team equipped with Ailette exoskeletons. A second emergence wave followed an hour later, and another flight of aerospace fighters was launched.

The fighters quickly located the sources of the emergence waves. The Dakini JumpShips had returned, each horribly disfigured. Firsthand reports described it as if the ships were split in half, then one half was mirrored out of phase, and the two halves had recombined. The SAR

teams found no survivors. This type of damage is consistent with that sustained by JumpShips attempting to enter Prefecture X in late 3135.

On 1 October 3135, Exarch Jonah Levin activated Fortress Republic. This protocol was a last-ditch defense of a portion of the Republic slightly larger than Prefecture X. Its primary feature was dubbed “the Wall.” The functional mechanisms behind this defensive system are still unknown. Various theories have attempted to explain how the Republic could interfere with hyperspace transit. Dr. C. Lorem posited a hyperspace disruption field that directly interacts with an inbound JumpShip’s hyperspace field, causing it to veer off course. Another popular theory requires some sort of “Wall generator” that effectively expands the gravity well of a system, thus rendering known jump points unusable. Dr. Mary Garden proposed a more exotic theory, whereby an “interceptor vessel” remains in hyperspace, lying in wait near known jump points. The interceptor would engage an inbound JumpShip while it was still in hyperspace and somehow force it to return to its origin system. Her theory does not address how the interceptor causes the observed damage, however. The interdiction theory posits a device that detects the hyperspace emergence wave that precedes all jumps and then somehow reflects it back to the system of origin.

However the Wall functioned, its operation was clearly a significant drain on the Republic, as they could not sustain it long term. In early 3149, the Wall around Prefecture X came down. Over the next ten months, the RAF was slowly beaten back until only a handful of systems outside Terra remained under their control. No signs of the Wall’s infrastructure were found, and it was believed to have suffered a catastrophic failure (high confidence). The similarity in damage to Dakini’s JumpShips and those that attempted to breach the Wall fifteen years ago leaves only two possible conclusions: either the Republic constructed a new Wall to protect the Terran system, or they relocated the infrastructure to Terra sometime in the last decade. The Republic’s Operation Shofar may have ultimately been a diversion intended to keep our attention focused elsewhere while they relocated the Wall’s infrastructure to Terra (low confidence).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the depleted status of Operation Tiamat forces, coupled with the certainty that Terra is protected by whatever defensive system powers the Wall, and the uncertainty of Clan predations, we make the following recommendations:

1. Discontinue CCAF participation in Operation Tiamat.
2. Continue pacification efforts on Bryant, Epsilon Indi, Keid, and Sheratan.

3. Assign additional *Zang shu zhe* resources to Bryant, Epsilon Indi, Keid, and Sheratan to expunge the insurgency.
4. Wait for the situation around Terra to develop before taking further action.

Separate from the above recommendations, we respectfully submit that obtaining reliable FTL communications remains of paramount importance to the Chancellor. The negative effects of delayed communications cannot be overstated. Establishing new command circuits of JumpShips solely for communications purposes would be an acceptable alternative, provided sufficient JumpShips can be sourced.

As always, we remain confident the esteemed Celestial Wisdom will guide our forces to ultimate victory.





DIAMANDIS' DOGS

M. W. HAYDEN

**MILITARY DROPPORT, BANGOR HEIGHTS
BANGOR, POULSBO
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
15 OCTOBER 3028**

Watching a *Locust* BattleMech and a Vedette tank follow the last of the trucks into the cavernous hold of the *Mercury Phoenix*, Lieutenant Allen Frid shouted, "The convoy is in!"

Frid, ranking survivor of the Diamandis Guard, braced himself as his Manticore heavy tank hit the ramp of the chartered merchant DropShip. Close on his heels, a marauding company of BattleMechs of House Marik's vaunted Sixth Orloff Grenadiers.

Just inside the massive cargo bay door stood a battle-worn *Griffin*, its particle projection cannon firing into the rapidly approaching company of lime and drab-green foes. Dimitri Diamandis gritted his teeth, taking careful aim before felling an Orloff *Wasp* with a PPC shot to its left leg. The 20-ton war machine careened into the ground, debris flying as the machine disintegrated on impact.

"Where is everyone else?!" shouted Diamandis as his long-range missiles struck an approaching *Marauder* with no effect. "Where the hell are the Knights of St. Cameron!?"

Allen Frid's voice crackled over the radio from the Manticore tank. "Gone! They're all gone, sir. The St. Cameron mercs cut and ran with House Astra's forces. This was all we could save. Your sister is with me. Your parents..."

Gone? The thought was the last to occupy Dimitri Diamandis' mind as a high-caliber autocannon round demolished the Griffin's bubble canopy, obliterating any discernible trace of the MechWarrior within.

The headless 55-ton BattleMech swayed for a moment before it thundered to the deck below, almost in unison with the rapidly closing cargo-bay doors.

On the same deck, tears welled in the eyes of Raquel Diamandis. Her mother and father had fallen trying to do what the Knights of St. Cameron and Poulsbo's ruling Astra family would not: defend their world, and in the end cover the flight of their household. Now Raquel's brother—the son her parents sought to protect—was dead.

She fell to her knees as the DropShip's engines ignited, the vulnerable ship carrying away its precious cargo. All that was left to her clutched to her breast.

**MANOR READY ROOM, DIAMANDIS' DIAMOND
HERMAGOR, KIRCHBACH
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
3 APRIL 3034**

"A courier brought word from the ComStar station at New Stamos last night," Raquel Diamandis told her staff. "The Archon has ordered a peaceful transfer of power. We've been told to stand down with the other planetary governments within the month."

She silenced the murmur from her staff with a steely glance. "There will be no such transfer of power on this part of Kirchbach. It is Lyran. The Archon may lack the courage of her convictions, but I do not. Diamandis' Dogs do not." In recent weeks, she had developed a preference for the Diamandis Guard's nickname. The gravity of her pronouncement weighed heavily on every member of her audience.

Judy Ramon, a House Diamandis 'Mech technician hailing from Kirchbach, offered the only dissenting voice. "My lady, this talk is reckless. There is some wisdom in the Archon's words. Even under Rasalhague rule, Kirchbach would surely welcome the House of Diamandis to remain."

An involuntary groan came from somewhere in the room.

Stiffening, the statuesque Raquel turned on the shorter woman. "There's more wisdom in a drop of Diamandis blood than in any of the lying words and broken treaties that wretched woman can offer." Her eyes narrowed. "Two hundred and forty-nine years of service. *That* is what my family has given the House of Steiner. And in six years, Katrina Steiner has taken everything from me."

Her useless mercenaries couldn't protect Poulsbo, and the damned Mariks abandoned their conquest of the planet. My family died protecting a world the Archon couldn't properly defend against an invader who

couldn't be bothered to keep it. The piece de resistance was House Astra's accusations of dereliction, the basis to seize our lands. Only too late did the truth come to light on Tharkad...

It had only been a few moments, but to Raquel Diamandis, there was an eternity of ill will. She barely contained her fury. "And to make amends, she gives us a factory-fresh *Hatchetman* and this small holding, which she will not only now rip away, but serve on a platter to puppets of our enemies? That is all the Tyr Resistance Movement is. 'Little Snakes,' servants to whoever purports to offer them liberation. When the Kurita boot was on their necks, the Tyr movement was our ally. And now that the Combine has ceded them a few worlds, they have turned on us."

Judy Ramon blinked and remained silent.

DIAMANDIS' DIAMOND
HERMAGOR, KIRCHBACH
FREE RASALHAGUE REPUBLIC
10 JANUARY 3035

The once and future Vulture's Hill was a slate-gray butte that dominated the dry river valley it occupied. Known as Diamandis' Diamond by its current inhabitants, the now-fortified butte jutted sharply from the valley floor, its angular stone slopes contrasting sharply against the golden wheat fields below, verdant valley walls beyond, and pale sky above.

On the fringes of the imposing natural monument, the stench of death and decay lingered. A dozen week-old corpses lay by the dirt road below, clustered in grassy ditches and browning scrub. Beyond the dead, fields of golden grain blew carelessly in the wind.

From a vantage point high up on the Diamond, Allen Frid, now captain and commanding officer of Diamandis' Dogs, looked wearily down at the mess. *Those bodies...local boys. Freedom fighters. Little Snakes. Tyrists.* Frid pondered a half-dozen more things he might call them. His hands shook as he fumbled to light another cigarette. *And now Judy?*

"Hey, Captain!"

Cocking his brow at the cheerful tenor of Johnathan LeMons, Frid turned to see the lanky, aging MechWarrior walking alongside the commander of Diamandis' Dogs' infantry section, the gaunt and perpetually weary Lieutenant Friedrich Lang.

"I told you not to call me that out here." Frid started to throw the cigarette aside, though his hand would not cooperate. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Just a quick rundown before I hit the hay and Johnny's watch begins, Captain." Lieutenant Lang pulled a rugged noteputer from his satchel. "We just completed our sweep of the Diamond. Judy is nowhere to be seen, and her quarters were cleared out. We're certain she took *Shimmy*. I don't think she'll be back."

"I think she's done with us. I'm worried she's *more* than done. Local girl like that. Teddy's probably furious," Johnathan interjected, biting his lip as he ran a dark hand over the tight salt-and-pepper curls of his hair.

Frid took a contemplative drag from his cigarette. Ex-Kurita MechWarrior Theodore "Teddy" Suleiman, the *Vulcan's* mercenary pilot and owner, would indeed be livid. *He was lucky Raquel took him in to begin with. Looks like his luck ran out. Another drag. But Judy? The idea of her running and joining her countrymen? Forgivable. But to hand the Little Snakes a third of our BattleMech strength, even a Vulcan like Shimmy...damning.* Frid's gaze drifted to the dead at the foot of the butte. He wondered how she had managed to bypass the 'Mech's security, then dismissed the thought.

"Maybe we should have listened to her and buried those locals," Lang said, regarding the dead below. "I think that pushed her over the edge."

Frid felt the piercing glare of the lieutenant's earnest blue eyes. Lang had no sympathy for the men who had tried to assault the Diamond a week ago, but found the gruesome display in poor taste.

"You know there are shooters all over this valley," Frid said. "Go out there, and you're likely to join the dead. Even the Little Snakes would agree." He sighed. "You're both dismissed. Good night and good hunting."

Lieutenant Lang crisply turned and left, but LeMons lingered a moment longer, eyeing the captain. "Things are heavy for all of us, but you look like the weight of this world is on your shoulders."

Frid nodded. "More like the weight of this valley. Raquel is delusional if she expects us to hold this thing, let alone rule squat."

"It's no good to talk like that, Captain," countered LeMons. "Don't let other people hear you. Just remember, she isn't the only one. We've got a job to do, but not only for Raquel Diamandis. Think of *your* kid."

Frid's eyes followed LeMons as he departed, then they rose to the highest vantage point of the Diamond: a robust manor, built in the style common to a world hundreds of light years away. *A long way from Poulsbo, indeed.*



On the sweeping balcony that dominated the west facade of the manor, Lady Raquel Diamandis silently defied snipers to take their best shot while she enjoyed the sunset, a nightly tradition that was innocuous during peace and tinged with mortal danger in this season of simmering insurrection.

Unger City is the wellspring of our troubles, an open floodgate of misery pouring into our valley. The city never liked me, but the Archon's lack of conviction has only exacerbated the situation. I never expected their rumors of dissent to amount to much, but now...

"Captain Frid and Lieutenant Lang would never approve of you standing out here," a familiar voice gently chided.

"Theodore Suleiman," she responded curtly to the mercenary MechWarrior and owner of the recently pilfered *Vulcan*. "I suspect you're here to ask for reimbursement."

"No. I'm here to talk about your intentions. We are down to two BattleMechs, and arrayed against us is not only an entire planet, but three interstellar realms. What is next? Where do you stand?" The man silently keyed a handheld communicator.

The woman turned slightly toward him, enough that her face was now visible, though her gaze did not meet his; her focus was somewhere below. Absently she ran her fingers across the symbol of her nearly extinct house, a smooth, lozenge-shaped brooch over her breast, cast in gold and jeweled with sapphire and emerald. She let her mind wander. "This land is for the House of Diamandis. I've lost everything else. I'll not lose this sliver."

"No possibility of standing down?" Suleiman's voice betrayed no emotion.

"No. I will not waver," Raquel responded without a moment's hesitation, her gaze now firmly back on the city. "Diamandis' Dogs are the vehicle for my will. Even when Tharkad abandons me, they never will."

She did not hear the man slip away as she spoke, nor did she hear his whispered words. She never saw the skeletal form of a *Vulcan* appear distantly on the now-menacing horizon. Her sad gaze had drifted down to a waifish figure in the staging yard below. "With all of you, I am invincible."



At the unexpected boom of autocannon fire and the familiar percussion of exploding mortar rounds, Lori Frid—Allen's daughter, known to all as the Kid—instinctively took cover. Her wide, green eyes scanned the sky for any evidence of impending danger.

A staccato of hits shook the compound. *Was it near me? No...* Lori gave an involuntary gasp at seeing the west balcony of the manor

engulfed in a settling debris-filled cloud of acrid smoke, small fires here and there. *Dad...*

The girl broke into an awkward run, gangly limbs flying as she sprinted across the small citadel's staging yard, her vision blurring from the wind, smoke, and tears. As she ran, the lumbering vehicles of Diamandis' Dogs roared to life, echoed by the distinctive footfalls of a *Locust* BattleMech. Lori ignored all of these, racing forward. All around, soldiers and household staff hustled for cover. "Where is he?!" Lori shouted over the din. "Where's Captain Frid?!"

"He's in the house, Kid!" an unseen voice called to her.

Lori found her father in the personal quarters of Lady Diamandis, kneeling next to a figure lying on the Lady's bed, his coveralls stained in blood. *His blood?*

"Get the Kid out of here!" Teddy Suleiman bellowed. The grizzled, one-eyed mercenary glared fiercely at Lori, who was gently pulled from the room by a Diamandis' Dogs sergeant.

Lady Diamandis sputtered, sending flecks of blood onto Frid's face, her now-sightless eyes wide and red from burst blood vessels "C-Captain! Captain Frid!" she moaned, coughing.

"I'm here, my Lady," replied the captain.

"My Lady, please try not to talk," Cherie Rhee said. The former Rasalhague Regulars 'Mech technician was the closest thing Diamandis' Dogs had to a medic. The meager supplies were every bit as wanting as Rhee's poor medical skills; the months-long siege had seen to the supplies and the endless sniper attacks to the trained medics.

Rhee ripped open a pack of fresh bandages and firmly pressed the white clump against a spreading pool of blood at Lady Diamandis' abdomen. Locking eyes with the worried Frid. "Hold this here, Captain," Rhee entreated. "Pressure."

Lady Diamandis groaned as Frid put his weight on the wound. He looked to Rhee for guidance, but the woman was rummaging through the satchel next to her, ultimately dumping the contents to the floor. Frid sharply inhaled as the lady's hand flew up, grasping at his increasingly shaggy hair. He felt something warm and sticky as she spoke.

"Captain...the Diamond...the Valley... hold..."

Frid strained to hear more over the din of gunfire that had erupted outside, but the lady gave only a final gurgle. The small noteputer by the lady's head whined at her passing for a moment before Rhee silenced it.

"Teddy, the door," Rhee said, pulling the sheet over Raquel Diamandis.

Suleiman paused, shifting his gaze from Rhee to the still form under the sheet before walking to the door and locking it.

The full weight of the moment pressed on Captain Frid. He gazed at the dead woman's form before shutting his eyes tightly. "It's over."

This whole thing is over. She was the knot tying us here, now that knot has been cut. We need to leave, need a course of action—"

"Leaving? What, Kirchbach? That's an awful quick decision without Lang and LeMons." Rhee glared at Frid. "What of the Lady's wish to hold the valley?"

Frid softly shook his head. *Those men know the stakes better than either of you.* "Friedrich and Johnny would be of the same mind. Our loyalty is to the House of Diamandis, not a corpse."

"But *she* was the house of Diamandis, the end of the line," snapped Rhee.

The silence in the room was deafening as Suleiman considered the captain. "So, if we are to attempt a breakout, who shall pilot Lady Diamandis' *Hatchetman*?"

"We both know it has to be you," Frid whispered, lost in thought, his eyes downcast.

"Why don't we just walk away?" offered Rhee. "Leave the valley? Kirchbach is a big world. We can find someplace else, blend in, fade away, disappear..."

Frid shook his head. "Forget it," he said, suddenly resolute. "Tyr, these Little Snakes, won't soon forget an enemy. And make no mistake, Cherie, when you joined us, you became just that. It doesn't matter if you were born here."

"Not to mention your illustrious service to House Kurita *before* you signed on with Lady Diamandis. We're both running dogs for the occupiers," Suleiman interjected, feeling an involuntary twinge. *But this is her home. I, on the other hand, just want to go home...*

Rhee looked defeated. "So we really do have to leave..."

Frid nodded. "The Commonwealth is still running biweekly flights out of Idiline and New Stamos for the rest of the month."

"Either way, we'll need to go through Unger City," said Suleiman. "I propose the spaceport at Idiline. It's not as close as New Stamos, but the route is sparsely populated, and we're less likely to meet armed resistance."

Frid threw the mercenary a worried look. "I'm concerned, Teddy. Idiline is also the headquarters for the DCMS peacekeeping contingent on Kirchbach during the transfer of power. I'm leery of marching us straight into the jaws of the Dracs."

Suleiman's eye met Frid's, his tone somber: "Better than the maw of Rasalhague."

**DIAMANDIS' DIAMOND
HERMAGOR, KIRCHBACH
FREE RASALHAGUE REPUBLIC
11 JANUARY 3035**

As dawn broke, Lori Frid surveyed the troops in the staging yard from the roof of the manor. She had not slept that night, and she now sought to distract herself with the events in the yard. She considered the infantrymen, a company's worth, the uniforms predominantly old Lyran issue. On each shoulder, the sapphire-and-emerald insignia of House Diamandis was rendered in fabric.

The Kid's eyes traveled across the mishmash of armored vehicles, uniform only in their drab-green paint and Diamandis insignias. Lori had learned the call signs by heart: the daunting short-range missile carrier *Hullabaloo*, the Hunter support tank *Up-Beat*, the well-worn Vedette light tank *Shindig*, and finally her father's vehicle, the deadly Manticore heavy tank *Hi-Energy*.

Next, the younger Frid's eyes settled on the BattleMechs of Diamandis' Dogs: Johnathan LeMons' personal *Locust*, which he affectionately called *T-Rex*, and Lady Diamandis' *Hatchetman*, dubbed *Snake Charmer*. The *Hatchetman* had been a personal gift from the Archon herself, and was now piloted by the enigmatic Teddy Suleiman. Conspicuously absent was *Shimmy*, Suleiman's personal *Vulcan*, which had disappeared without a trace two nights earlier. *Stolen by Tyrists*? Farther back was the support convoy, a dozen trucks of no single type dwarfed by a large 'Mech transport carrying the burnt-out remains of the last of House Diamandis' original BattleMechs—a decapitated *Griffin* Cherie Rhee called *Old Moldy*, glimpses of the scarred 'Mech visible under billowing tarpaulins.

Lori's attention was drawn to a clamor below as her father climbed to the top of *Hi-Energy* and addressed the crowd. "For four years, we have made this land our home in service of the Archon. For many months, we have remained in defiance of the same Archon, who sold everything we worked for so cheaply. You, the staff and soldiers of House Diamandis, have done the impossible, our tiny valley weathering so many storms." For a moment Frid glanced up at his daughter, high above the crowd. "It is now time to reckon with the impossible. With the death of Lady Diamandis, this endeavor can no longer go on. Each of you has experienced loss and sacrificed much. Today, we make for the spaceport at Idiline to rendezvous with a DropShip bound for Tamar. It is our last and best chance to leave Kirchbach. We held out for months, where others folded without question. There's real honor in that."

There were a few murmurs, but not a single person gathered raised their voice against him. *And now...*

"According to the wishes of Lady Diamandis, we shall scorch the earth. Let this place be her pyre. Leave nothing of use for the Little Snakes."

OUTSKIRTS OF UNGER CITY
HERMAGOR, KIRCHBACH
FREE RASALHAGUE REPUBLIC
11 JANUARY 3035

Curtains of smoke rose from the Diamond and the fields beyond as the Diamandis' Dogs column headed down the rough dirt road to Unger City, which lay at the mouth of the dry valley. The manor behind them was consumed in flames, the body of Raquel Diamandis within. Frid and the Kid looked back on the grand pyre from the hatches of *Hi-Energy*. Frid blinked hard against the smoke in his eyes. *As you would have it, Raquel.*

The Vedette tank *Shindig* led the column, flanked closely by *T-Rex* and more distantly the imposing *Snake Charmer*. The medium 'Mech's hatchet swung with the cadence of its steps, the dull *whomp* of the blade through the air all but lost among the booming thunder of 'Mech footsteps and the roar of the vehicles all around. These machines were followed by *Hi-Energy*, *Hullabaloo*, the truck column, and finally *Up-Beat* bringing up the rear. The infantry rode on the combat vehicles wherever they could to free up space in the trucks for the household's civilians. Makeshift white flags fluttered on the aerials of each vehicle.

On the horizon, Unger City loomed, its gloomy mid-rise towers taking on an intimidating air. Frid had been through the small city hundreds, even thousands, of times. First as liberator, later as neighbor, and in the end, as an occupier. The city had been too dangerous to visit for months, as the inhabitants increasingly turned against their erstwhile Lyran rulers.

"Kid, get down and close the hatch," Frid ordered over his headset before ducking down and buttoning up his own hatch. The city came into view through the Manticore's periscopes as his eyes adjusted to the light of the crew compartment. He went over the plan in his head once more. There was one road into Unger city from the Diamond and only one road out of the valley. The vanguard of the column would break off and engage targets in a piecemeal fashion as needed, covering the entire route as best they could, while the vehicle column kept moving. *Hullabaloo* and *Up-Beat* would stick with the column the whole way, with the defending vehicles and infantry in the vanguard rejoining the main column as it passed. *It should be easy. Go straight two kilometers,*

turn south, go two more kilometers, cross the bridge over the River Swift, then drive on to the spaceport.

Frid snapped back from the conjecture as a devastating eruption sent *Shindig* and its attendant infantry flying into the air.

"Floor it, keep going!" Frid shouted into his mic. "Damn the mines! We're in the open! We're sitting ducks! Johnny and Teddy, covering fire on that line of buildings!"

Frid cursed. There had been no indication of the road being mined, but he lamented not having foreseen it. *Even with our attention divided in every direction during the siege, we should have anticipated this!*

T-Rex raced ahead of the formation, its machine guns sweeping whatever windows faced the column's approach, the medium laser's deadly flash setting one of the smaller buildings alight. *Snake Charmer's* Defiance Killer autocannon roared to life, the *Hatchetman's* own medium lasers raking the wall of buildings before the convoy. Bullets from the city pinged off the column's armor, and a chain of mortar rounds threatened their flank as they drove on.

Flipping through the Manticore's weapons, Frid felt his blood run cold as he saw his tank's PPC had been disabled in the blast that had claimed *Shindig*.

Dirt road and armed resistance gave way to pavement and tranquility as the motley formation entered the small city proper. "Hold fire," Frid keyed his mic as the frantic pace slowed somewhat. Down the road, a teenager not much older than Lori ran across the otherwise empty street. "Teddy, take *Snake Charmer* on point."

"On it," came the gravelly reply. The medium 'Mech moved to the front, dwarfing parked cars but still shorter than most of the buildings around.

An eerie silence for blocks, not a single person on the street or in the windows. *They know we mean business*, thought Frid. *Maybe they'll let us go...*

As the column approached the main intersection, the air filled with a fusillade of short-range missiles fired from the windows of one of the buildings. Explosions danced across the *Hatchetman*. The machine staggered but did not fall, its left forearm dropping to the ground and crushing a car.

Suleiman paused for a moment, then menacingly swung toward the offending building, autocannon blazing as the hatchet chopped into the building's facade. The 'Mech pulled forward, walking into the collapsing tower. Occupants in neighboring buildings opened fire as well, mostly with small arms, focusing on the enraged *Hatchetman* as it cleaved its way through the block.

Frid grunted. *There's no way through that mess. We need to work around it.* "Johnny! Break south! We need to get on the main drag and get the hell out! I need you to find us a way!"



Johnathan LeMons was a bottomless reservoir of calm as the world erupted around him. Instinctively ducking, he throttled his *Locust* to speed and barreled away from the fighting, down the previous block. At first confining, the buildings soon grew smaller and leveled out into open parkland, beyond which their bridge over the River Swift was visible. In the time it took him to reach the treed expanse, he had leveled a handful of hostile structures and crushed underfoot a marauding truck hauling a machine gun.

Mentally plotting the course, he radioed back. "Allen, this is Johnny. You need to go a block back and a half dozen south. The road will start to wind, just stick with it. I'm in the city park now with a visual on the bridge. We can cut through to the main road from here."



Frid shuddered as another truck erupted in a ball of fire. *Were those screams?* He forced the thought away. "Convoy, this his *Hi-Energy*. We need to turn around, reverse at best speed, and turn down the first road to the south! Just before the warehouse. Eyes out for Little Snakes! Teddy, if you're still there, continue on the main road and link up with us at the bridge!"

Hi-Energy followed the trucks, firing into the foray behind it. Covering missiles from *Hullabaloo* and *Up-Beat* soared just over the turret on either side and into the mess at the intersection.

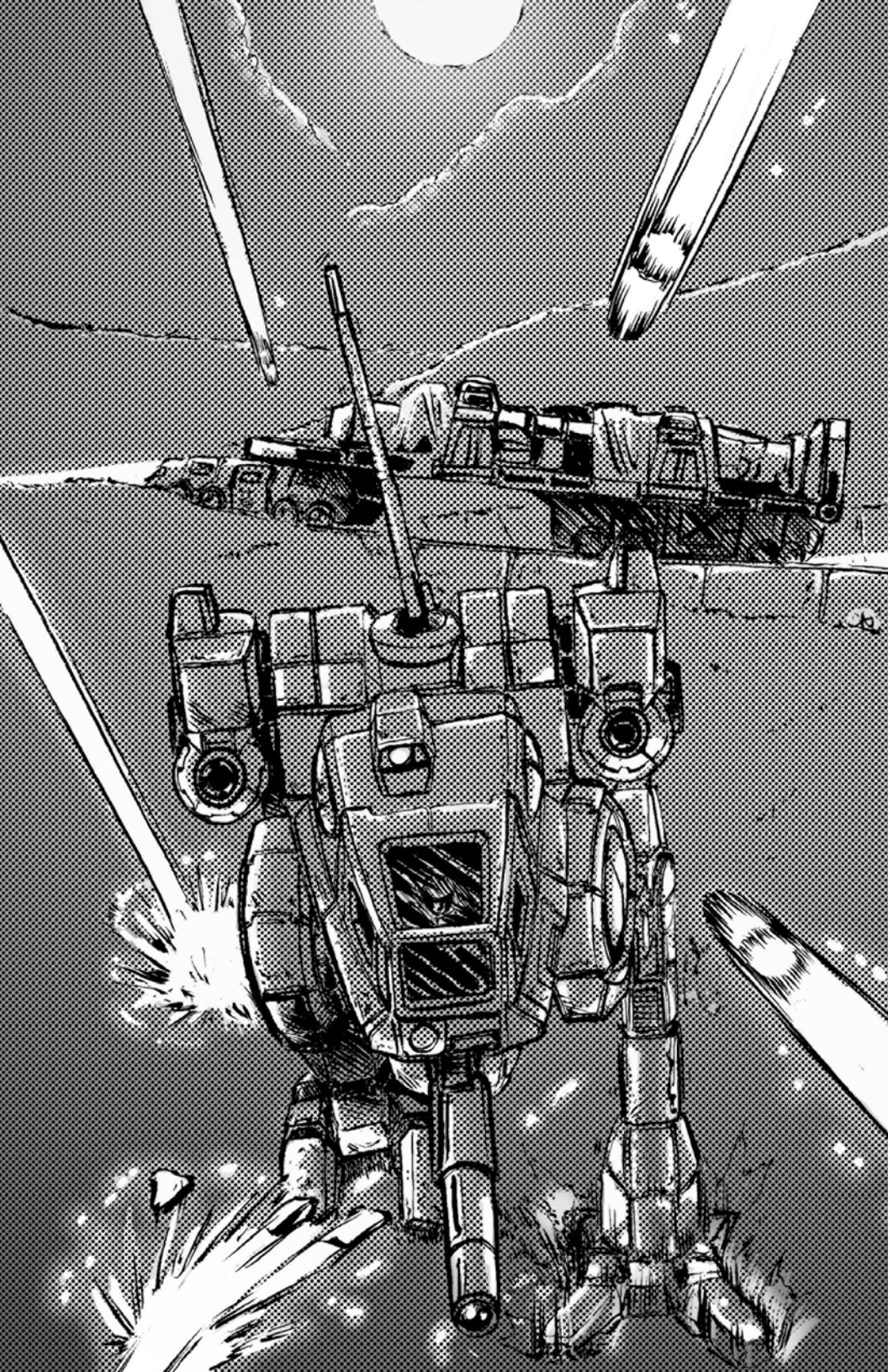


Blocks away, Johnathan LeMons raced toward the bridge, looking for any sign of armed resistance, hoping the park had not been mined. Off in the distance, a skeletal silhouette fired light autocannon shells at LeMons' nimble *Locust*. The veteran pilot maneuvered evasively, testing his enemy's marksmanship.

"Allen, something's got me ranged. Can't get a sensor lock, but it looks like it's breaking off. I can at least get a bridgehead set up. The park appears clear!"



The pace of the convoy had become glacial, trapped behind the massive 'Mech transport, which by dint of proximity had been closest to the escape route. It now led the convoy. Feeling relatively secure,



Frid popped his commander's hatch to take stock of his passengers. "Lieutenant Lang!"

The commander of the infantry section, who had aged twenty years since that morning, took his eyes off the windows above for a moment to squint down at Frid. "Yes, Captain?"

Frid glanced around, noticing that only about half the infantry remained on the tank, maybe less on the other vehicles. "Lieutenant, I need your men to prepare to dismount. I want eyes on that field. *T-Rex* is securing a bridgehead, and I'd like to avoid getting caught out in the open."

The lieutenant looked disdainfully at Frid, but after a moment's consideration uttered a gruff "Fine."

Frid nodded, looking to the buildings around them. "I'll stay out here with you until you go," he offered.

**CITY PARK, UNGER CITY
HERMAGOR, KIRCHBACH
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
11 JANUARY 3035**

Cherie Rhee downshifted as her massive 'Mech transport reached the park. Looking down, she caught sight of Lieutenant Lang and the infantry, who had dismounted and now advanced alongside the massive transport. The lieutenant looked around, then waved her on.

Hitting the accelerator and putting the ancient transport into gear, Rhee was startled by the sound of the infantry firing on an unseen foe through the trees. Seated too high to see through the foliage, she tried to spot the target or the lieutenant, but to no avail. "Do it, Rhee." She gritted her teeth, and the rest of the convoy followed.

As the transport passed the final cluster of trees, she saw the target of the infantry's fire: a large grain transport pulling in to block the bridge completely. She grabbed for the radio and reported sternly, "Column be advised, potential hostile blocking bridge!" She heard Frid swear as Diamandis' Dogs adjusted their fire away from the unarmed truck to answer renewed fire from the city. Then out of the corner of her eye, Rhee saw movement.

She had not heard the pounding footsteps of the 45-ton hatchet-swinging colossus over the din of combat as it erupted around her, but she saw it clearly now.

"*Hi-Energy*, this is *Snake Charmer*. I will remove the obstacle."

Rhee could not help but cheer as the charging machine smashed into the obstructing vehicle, sending it over the side of the bridge and

into the river below. Their route clear, the convoy pressed on to the bridge, the combat vehicles pausing only to allow the beleaguered infantry to remount.

Snake Charmer joined *T-Rex* on the opposite bank, followed closely by the remaining convoy trucks. As the 'Mech transport driven by Cherie Rhee crossed, a high volume of ineffective mortar fire fell like a deadly hail. Reaching the bridge next, *Hi-Energy* crossed without incident.

As *Up-Beat* and *Hullabaloo* were halfway across the bridge, a stray mortar struck the Hunter tank, igniting its ammunition. Watching from the riverbank, Frid groaned as the smaller tank erupted in a cascade of exploding munitions that blew the vehicle apart. Neither the crew nor the mounted infantrymen stood a chance.

Behind the sparking inferno, the SRM carrier *Hullabaloo* went in reverse and suddenly came to a stop. The few remaining mounted infantry dismounted and took up defensive positions.

"What happened? Why isn't it moving?" Lori pleaded.

Frid popped his hatch and stood, scoping the scene with his rangefinder binoculars. "They threw a tread..." he said, anguish creeping into his voice.

Mortars fired from unseen positions fell near *Hullabaloo*. Two of the crew frantically crawled out of the damaged tank as the turret swung around and unleashed a remorseless barrage on enemies real and imagined. The mortar rounds kept coming, growing closer. The two crew members who had escaped tried to run across the bridge, only to find their path blocked by *Up-Beat*'s flaming wreckage. The pair then ran to the railing, climbing to stand on it.

"Don't..." whispered Frid.

Holding hands, the two figures jumped into the river below and vanished from sight.

The SRM carrier erupted in the same hellfire that had consumed *Up-Beat*, taking the attendant infantry with it. Frid gritted his teeth. With his enemies beyond reach and only a sliver of his original force, it was impossible to try engaging at this point. A mortar round landing nearby snapped him from inaction.

"Dad, we've got to go. *Now*," Lori begged.

**SOUTHWEST OF UNGER CITY
HERMAGOR, KIRCHBACH
FREE RASALHAGUE REPUBLIC
11 JANUARY 3035**

In the twilight, the road was lonesome. What was left of the infantry moved to the 'Mech transport. *Better protection than trying to cram them onto this thing.* Frid had traded spaces with the exhausted driver. Lori had curled up in the jump seat next to him. "Hey, Kid."

Lori looked at her father with red eyes. "Yeah?"

Frid gulped. Reaching into his breast pocket, he pulled out a cloth-wrapped object. "Your mother wanted you to have this."

Lori carefully took the object from her father and unwrapped it. Within was a brooch of sapphire and cracked emerald, the damaged symbol of House Diamandis.

"You never talk about her," she said, absently running a finger along the crack in the precious stone. The Kid had seen it before, thousands of times. There was only one like it on Kirchbach. Maybe the only one left anywhere.

"Oh..." whispered Lori.

"We couldn't tell you." Frid started, tears welling up in his eyes. "After what happened to the family on Poulsbo—*your family*—she refused to let it happen to her again. She had to be invincible. You can't be that if you have a family." He wiped an arm across his face. "We had to protect you, to protect her."

The two rode on in silence for a moment. "I raised you after Poulsbo because Raquel couldn't." He broke off. *Wouldn't.* "I loved your mother, as much as anyone. She knew that..." Frid coughed. *No. I don't know if she was capable of knowing that, but I like to pretend she did.*

The Kid looked back up at him. "Dad, I—"

A violent eruption behind them lit up the twilight road. Frid turned his attention to his panoramic viewscreen in time to watch a second truck join the first in fiery death. "NO!" he shouted, his eyes wide.

On the horizon, against the fading pink and growing purple of the evening sky, stood the skeletal specter that had stalked Diamandis' Dogs for days: the stolen *Vulcan*.

"Dogs of Diamandis!" a woman's voice boomed across all frequencies. "In the death of your Lady, I see you have forgotten all conviction. I wonder if you have forgotten too, your sins against the living and the dead of Kirchbach and Rasalhague."

"Judy..." gasped Frid. "Cherie, I need you to be the stalking horse for our trucks. Your transport has more amor than they do. You get this?" Cherie had barely responded in the affirmative before Frid ordered the trucks to pull up alongside her. "Teddy, can you engage?"

There was a burst of static from the *Hatchetman*. "Hi-Energy, this is *Snake Charmer*. My ammo is depleted, and there's no way I can close with the *Vulcan* without getting torn to shreds."

Frid sighed. Without his PPC, and his LRM ammo spent, there was no way *Hi-Energy* was up to the task. "Johnny?" his voice came ragged.

"Say no more," came Johnathan LeMons' perceptive reply. "I know the job. You get the Kid out of here."

The *Locust*, still nearly fresh, broke off at a dead sprint, tearing up the ground as autocannon rounds sent dirt flying around it. LeMons skillfully feinted, causing the *Vulcan*'s pilot to waste precious ammo. Judy's guttural curse rose over the airwaves as the *Locust* and *Vulcan* closed range. A hail of machine guns and coherent light raked the *Vulcan*, which answered with its own barrage of bullets, laser beams, and a column of superheated plasma from its flamer.

The two foes began their deadly, looping dogfight, each determined to get the angle on the other. Concerned gnawed at the *Locust* pilot as he watched his diagnostic screen, warnings blaring inside his neurohelmet. For a moment he believed he had the edge, managing to get into the *Vulcan*'s blind spot.

Johnathan LeMons trained his weapons on a blown-out piece of rear armor, laser light slashing the area, but *T-Rex*'s machine guns were silent. LeMons cursed over the clicks of empty magazines as he realized his machine gun ammo was depleted. The veteran MechWarrior then felt nothing as his opponent's machine turned and kicked through his cockpit.

Moments later, the *Vulcan*'s pilot, Judy Ramon, felt a wave of panic as the pilfered BattleMech notified her of an overloaded gyro. Judy screamed indignantly as the *Vulcan* lurched toward the ground, her world going black upon impact.

Kilometers away, Frid watched the two war machines collapse, pillars of smoke and flame where they had fought moments earlier. "Damn it, Johnny," he muttered, turning his attention away from the distant fires.

The remaining trucks raced ahead of him, and a 45-ton hatchet-wielding metal monster lumbered past him. Somewhere behind him, piled onto a lumbering transport, was the legacy of an almost-extinct MechWarrior House.

**IDILINE REGIONAL SPACEPORT
HERMAGOR, KIRCHBACH
FREE RASALHAGUE REPUBLIC
12 JANUARY 3035**

As *Chu-sa* Robert Thomas gazed out at the plains beyond, the first rosy rays of dawn burst forth on the horizon. Stationed around the spaceport behind him, a BattleMech company of the Second An Ting Legion awaited his command. Thomas knew his 'Mech company's days on this planet were coming to an end. With the last Lyran transports departing, there would soon be no further need for the Draconis Combine Mustered Soldiery's peacekeepers; he and his people would move off-world within a month.

"*Chu-sa!*" a soldier on watch called to him. "BattleMech on the horizon!"

Thomas felt his bowels liquify at once. Reaching for his binoculars, he scanned the horizon, trying to ascertain the situation. "*Hatchetman*, damaged. It's the Diamandis machine. I track a Manticore, as well..." Reaching for his communicator, he keyed into the spaceport's general frequency. "Hold fire but stand by. *Panther* team, maintain position out of sight. The markings tell me these are the holdouts from Unger City."

Armed with submachine guns, the DCMS sentries signaled the vehicles to stop. Keying his communicator to the loudspeaker, Thomas boomed: "Exit your vehicles. Make no sudden movements. Keep your hands visible. We wish you no harm, but we need to ascertain your intentions."



In *Hi-Energy* Frid listened carefully to the communication and toggled the Manticore's fusion reactor to standby.

"Wait, what are you doing?" pleaded Lori. "Those are Dracs!"

Frid nodded. "I know, Kid. But the situation is different now. We can't offer much resistance, and you might not believe this, but they're here as the neutral party."

Lori flashed an incredulous look at her father.

Frid sighed. "This fight, the one we've been in the middle of for all these months, is with Rasalhague. And right now, the Little Snakes trust the Dracs as the moderating party more than they do us. It won't always be that way, but it sure as hell is now. Come on." *Hell, after all this I'll take Takashi Kurita himself over a Tyrist any day.*

Climbing out of the tank, Frid noticed Suleiman had already approached the DCMS officer at the gate. "Wait a beat, Kid. I need to check this out." As he neared the two men, he saw them exchange a crisp salute, and the *chu-sa* walked away.

"What the hell is this?" demanded Frid.

"I told you, Captain: better than the maw of Rasalhague." Suleiman turned back to Frid. "Delivering an operational *Hatchetman* is my ticket back to House Kurita. You're a Lyran, you should recognize a trade. One man and a few machines for one machine and many people." Making a grand gesture with this arm, he pointed to the demolished *Griffin* on the transport. "The Diamandis machine is yours. The trucks are now property of the Free Rasalhague Republic. The *Hatchetman* and your Manticore now belong to my lord, Takashi Kurita. I will return to the service of House Kurita, and what is left of the servants and soldiers of House Diamandis will return to their beloved Commonwealth."

Frid, the older and shorter of the two, let fly a furious punch, which sent his erstwhile companion to the ground. The DCMS sentries raised their guns. Wordlessly, Lieutenant Lang and the survivors of Diamandis' Dogs aimed their own weapons.

"No, no." Suleiman waved his hand, signaling for the soldiers to lower their arms. "Much as Captain Allen Frid refuses to believe it, we're departing as friends today."

Teddy rose to his feet, rubbing his jaw, eyeing Frid. "Show some gratitude. I saved your life. If I hadn't given Judy the tool she needed to avenge her countrymen, we both would have eventually met our ends on that damned hill with Raquel Diamandis. And once I was in the *Hatchetman*, I could have demolished what was left of the Dogs and simply turned in the machine, but I didn't. I gave you a mutually beneficial bargain: you saved your daughter, and I saved my reputation."

Frid's fumed, his muscles tense, but he knew the truth. There was no way out alive, other than to accept the deal that had been forced upon him.

Teddy rolled his shoulders, slouching slightly. "Let it go, Captain. The wave that carried you here has crested and is now rolling back." Frid's tormentor glanced at the Lyran Commonwealth DropShip in the distance. "Careful it doesn't strand you here."

**IDILINE REGIONAL SPACEPORT
HERMAGOR, KIRCHBACH
FREE RASALHAGUE REPUBLIC
14 JANUARY 3035**

From a window in the *Union*-class DropShip *Katzenberg*, the Kid gazed at the massive loading operation below, transferring the remains of *Old Moldy* into the ship's hold. Farther away, the *Hatchetman* had been hastily repainted in gray primer, and emblazoned with the Dragon of

House Kurita and, offset below that, the An Ting Legion's insignia: a young dragon on a field of red. In the shadow of that terrible war machine, she could make out a figure in a gray uniform waving at the DropShip. *Maybe Teddy Suleiman.*

Lori's gaze returned to the spartan passenger compartment shared with the rest of the household's survivors. Most slept. Some cried. Others looked blankly at a horizon that was still too close. Friedrich Lang slept peacefully. Cherie Rhee wept quietly. Allen Frid stared vengefully out at the tiny man below.

In time, the vast ship rumbled, and Kirchbach fell away, until the planet became a grain of sand in an endless void.

**BONCHER SALVAGE
TAMAR CITY, TAMAR
FEDERATED COMMONWEALTH
12 NOVEMBER 3047**

"Hell of a story." The broker nodded as he brushed his fingers along the ravaged armor of the headless, dilapidated *Griffin*. "You know, she is salvageable."

The elegant young woman selling the 'Mech nodded silently, her face unreadable. The brooch of sapphire and cracked emerald on her lapel was the only ornamentation to her otherwise somber clothing.

"So, why sell it? I mean, why not restore it to its former glory?" The agent's brow furrowed as he considered the weathered metal of the silent machine.

"I think it's better as a story."

"Excuse me?"

"I think this BattleMech, or really any BattleMech, makes for an excellent story. What almost no one will tell you is that it also makes for a terrible life."

"What about your mother's legacy?"

"It's still there. Somewhere up on Vulture's Hill."





ELECTIONEERING: A MECHWARRIOR: DESTINY MISSION BRIEFING

STEPHEN TOROPOV

**PLANETARY GOVERNOR'S OFFICE
LAKELAND, KENDALL
FREE WORLDS LEAGUE
1 NOVEMBER 3149**

When the Free Worlds League pulled itself back into existence, many far-flung worlds like Kendall gladly took the opportunity to return to the fold. However, a faction on Kendall maintains they would be better off on their own, and are looking for any way to break the world away from the League again.

COMMANDER'S CALL

"Well, folks, congratulations, we get to be the protectors of democracy. The election's in a few weeks, and with the Independence Party polling in the pits, the governor is afraid they're going to take drastic action. There's no chance of them really succeeding at the ballot box, but even minor unrest might be all the excuse Caesar O'Reilly and his goons would need to come knocking again. Our primary goal is to prevent this by rooting out their arms caches, but exposing the theorized Marian connection would go a fair way to keeping things stable around here long term. One last reminder: we can't be seen influencing the election itself, so we're purely doing security work. No matter how abrasive the Independence Party's candidate is."

Players will earn 5 XP for completing this mission.

OBJECTIVES

- Investigate the agitators
- Uncover the source of Marian support
- Ensure the election proceeds as scheduled

CUES

- Was that lobbyist speaking Latin?
- Catch them in an unguarded moment
- How deep does this go?
- Follow the money
- The arms shipments were in here all along

TAGS

- House Marik
- Marian Hegemony
- Civil Conflict
- Enemy Infiltrators
- Counterintelligence
- Political Statement

SETTING

Situated on the anti-spinward border with the Marian Hegemony, Kendall has become vital to the re-formed Free Worlds League as a source of both food and military equipment. Revenue from the Brooks, Inc. and Kali Yama/Alphard Trading Corporation factories allowed the world to fund its own defense for decades, and while many citizens are not fully trusting of the government on Atreus, most recognize the security and opportunity the League provides. The planet itself has a reputation as a low-gravity garden world, though it now bears some scars from repelling regular raids and invasions, most recently a Marian attack in 3148. The planet's Parliamentary seat is up for its biennial election, and this year the generally popular incumbent is being challenged by a pro-independence candidate. The planetary governor has heard rumors that the Marian Hegemony is materially supporting these malcontents to achieve politically what they could not through force of arms. Given the Marian conflict with the neighboring Duchy of Tamarind-Abbey, the dangerous possibility of infiltration and agitation cannot be ignored.

SCENES

Scene 1: *Suggested NPCs: Electoral Candidate (Noble), Reporter, Security Guard*

The Independence Party is holding a campaign event, and the team is using this as an opportunity to scope out the organization's headquarters while undercover. In the main event space, the party's candidate is glad-handing with some less-than-savory supporters, while the party's offices are under notably heavy guard. Sneaking into the offices will likely yield some leads, and someone at the meet-and-greet might let a detail slip under the questioning of a particularly persistent local journalist.

Scene 2: *Suggested NPCs: Marian Spy (Intelligence Agent), Smuggler*

The intelligence gathered at the campaign event leads the team to a warehouse (Medium building, 12 Integrity) on the edge of town that the Independence Party's militant wing has been using to process arms shipments from the Marians. The guns are gone by the time the team arrives, but the Marian spy running the warehouse as a front is still on site and will be alerted to possible action if the team was discovered snooping around in Scene 1. If the team can capture and interrogate the spy, they may learn where the guns have been taken. If not, they will have to find a way to track down the trucks that drove away with the most recent shipment.

Scene 3: *Suggested NPCs: Reporter, MechWarriors, Member of Parliament (Noble)*

Realizing their operations are being compromised, the militant faction has decided to give up on politics and just attack the sitting member of Parliament while they are en route to a campaign stop. Having discovered the location of their remote staging ground, the team must formulate and execute a plan to stop the militants before they can reach the MP's motorcade with their smuggled-in 'Mechs. The reporter from the earlier event is traveling with the motorcade now; are they a possible ally, a potential infiltrator, or simply a newshound looking to get the scoop of the decade? The answer depends on how the party interacted with the journalist in Scene 1.





VENGEANCE GAMES

CRAIG A. REED, JR.

This story is dedicated to the real Robert Madson—a good friend, fellow *BattleTech* player, and the designer of the original *Rattlesnake* BattleMech.

You are gone, my friend, but you are not forgotten.

PART 1 (OF 4)

I

**INTERNATIONAL ZONE
SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII
BOLAN PROVINCE
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
24 NOVEMBER 3084**

The first thing Gideon Wozniak noticed about Solaris was the dark clouds gathering overhead.

He was one of a hundred passengers debarking from the *Monarch*-class DropShip *Star Lark*. Most passengers were clustered together outside the terminal, chatting with each other. The rest were couples and a few loners like Gideon scattered among them. He stayed close to the center of the passenger herd, his gray eyes sweeping his surroundings.

The air was tainted with the common smells around a spaceport—exhaust fumes, burnt ozone, lubricants, and other vapors. The noise of machinery, vehicles, and the people around him droned low in the background. The air was warmer than expected, but dark clouds were on the horizon.

He felt rather than saw the man fall into step with him. "Looks like rain."

"The guide says it rains frequently." Gideon glanced at the man. The man, Alex Miller, was average all the way around—unremarkable in a crowd like this. His business suit and coat added to his anonymity. The six weeks they'd shared a cabin on the *Star Lark* had been the quietest Gideon had had in two decades. He suspected Miller was a soldier, but by unspoken consent, neither man had spoken about their pasts.

Unlike Miller, Gideon wore boots and military field trousers, both black, and a gray double-breasted shirt under a synthetic leather jacket devoid of all patches. His only luggage was a worn duffel bag. He hadn't bothered shaving in several days, leaving thick stubble across his lower face. His hair was long and shaggy, adding to the appearance of a down-on-his-luck MechWarrior or tech.

The large doors of the spaceport terminal entry parted, allowing the passengers to walk in unimpeded. The terminal, a structure of steel, ferrocrete, and glass, had been built on the remains of the old terminal razed by the retreating Word forces. Gideon thought the building fit the city—garish, promising hope, thrills, and action, but hiding the dark soul that swallowed too many of those who walked through those doors.

Betting booths stood just inside the doors. Most were occupied by people making their first bet on arrival, or one last bet before leaving Solaris. Overhead, large monitors showed highlights of recent arena fights, with announcers describing the action with forced eagerness.

"I suppose this is where we part ways," Miller said.

"Probably," Gideon said, his eyes taking in everything around him.

"Well, goodbye, Gideon," Miller said. "Enjoy your stay on Solaris. Hope you find what you're looking for."

"Thanks."

They quickly shook hands and drifted apart as they approached Customs. Surprisingly, Customs was easy to get through—just a bored, uniformed official in a booth who glanced at Gideon's passport, asked a series of yes-or-no questions, searched his bag, and welcomed him with a canned speech.

Beyond the Customs booths, Solaris exerted its power. The terminal was two stories tall, its glass and steel ceiling giving the area an open feeling. Stores lined both sides, with a few kiosks in the middle, selling everything from food to Solaris souvenirs, guided tours to arena tickets. Betting booths were everywhere, and more monitors displayed Solaris gladiator interviews or more match highlights.

Gideon ignored them. He had no time to waste on anything Solaris had to offer. There was no telling how long Reskov was going to be on Solaris. He had to find him fast.

And kill him.



On the terminal's second floor overlooking the customs line, a tall woman with long dark hair and wearing expensive clothes, sat at a table near the rail. She was attractive, with luminous green eyes, and stared at a noteputer on the table before her. A perscomm nested along the left side of her face, from ear to cheek. On the table, an empty plate and a half-filled coffee cup sat.

While she appeared to be looking at the noteputer and sipping her coffee, she was actually watching the incoming passengers below. "Wozniak just passed through Customs," she said softly.

"Our other friend?" her employer asked over the perscomm.

"Coming through Customs now."

"Excellent. I will dispatch Mr. Madaraz as soon as Mr. Wozniak settles in one place. Contact Miller as soon as he clears Customs, then don't let Mr. Wozniak out of your sight."

"Yes, my lord." The woman stood up and put the noteputer away into a shoulder purse. After leaving a tip, she followed Wozniak, tapping a button on her perscomm.



Alex Miller's perscomm buzzed. He took it out of his pocket and put it to his ear. "Yes?"

The female voice spoke with a clipped accent. "Long-term luggage storage, number three-seven-one. Combination is your birthdate. Everything you need is there." The channel went dead.

Miller scanned the terminal until he spotted the sign for the long-term luggage storage and headed for it. He hadn't expected to be contacted so quickly, but it also meant he could start his mission sooner.

II

INTERNATIONAL ZONE SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII BOLAN PROVINCE LYRAN COMMONWEALTH 24 NOVEMBER 3084

Gideon found a bar before it started raining. The Cracked Canopy occupied the bottom floor of a three-story building five blocks from the spaceport. It was an open, bright place, with light wood dominating the decor. The place was sparsely occupied, with three employees and twice as many customers dispersed around the barroom. Monitors

were mounted in several strategic locations, showing a soap opera, the soundtrack mixing with the low conversations.

The smell of food tickled his nose as he walked toward the bar. The bartender, shorter and thinner than Gideon, smiled. "What would you like?"

"Fulgar's?"

"Of course."

"Could I also get something to eat?"

The bartender smiled, reached under the counter, and handed Gideon a menu. "Let me know when you're ready to order."

Twenty minutes later, Gideon was in a corner booth, enjoying his beer and a sandwich. He sat facing the main door, his back to the wall. While he ate, three people came in and two left. A younger man replaced the bartender, and a waitress began delivering drinks to the occupied tables and booths.

He was nearly finished when the main doors opened and an older man in a business suit entered. Gideon stopped eating and stared at the man. *No, it can't be...*

The man was tall and lean, wearing the suit like a model. Gray at the temples, the rest of his hair was dark and short. He was handsome, with a smooth face and pencil mustache. His gaze drifted over the bar room until he saw Gideon. *Damn it! It is! Uncle Tony! What the hell is he doing here?*

Gideon quickly swept the room as he considered the sudden appearance of an old family friend so far from home. Interstellar distances made it impossible for Tony to have beaten him to Solaris from Antietam, so his presence here had nothing to do with Gideon's mission.

But Tony's sudden arrival wasn't a coincidence. Someone had tipped him off to Gideon's location, probably one of three customers who had come in after him. He scanned the room and eliminated the older man and younger girl involved in an animated discussion in the booth closest to the front door. The third was an attractive woman of Asian descent sitting at the bar. She wore a calf-high red skirt, red blazer over a white blouse, low-heel shoes, and a handbag sitting on the bar top. Her black hair reached past her shoulders, and she wore tinted glasses. She noticed his gaze, returned it, and Gideon felt his cheeks flush.

"Gideon!"

He looked up at Tony, who was now standing next to the table. "Uncle Tony."

"May I sit?"

"Go ahead. You can tell your friend at the bar to join us." His tone was flat, and he saw disappointment cross Tony's face, but it was gone quickly.

Tony turned to look in the woman's direction, but she was already moving toward them. Her strides were quick, businesslike, her figure a match for her face. Tony slid into the booth across from Gideon, and a few seconds later, the woman joined him.

Tony smiled, showing perfect teeth. "Good to see you again."

Gideon stared at the man. "Why is one of my father's oldest friends and lancemates here, three hundred light-years from Antietam?" He looked at the woman. "You followed me."

"You never saw me," she replied.

"Look, Gideon—" Tony began.

"Why are you here?" Gideon interrupted.

"My employer wishes to obtain your services," the woman replied.

"Who are you? And who's your employer?"

"Ami Yamaguchi. And I work for Baron Riordan Mallory."

Anger rose in Gideon. "No."

"You have not heard the baron's offer."

"I'm not doing it. I have no loyalty to the Mallory family." Gideon slid out of the booth.

"Viktor Reskov," Yamaguchi said.

He stopped and stared at her. "You know."

"Gideon," Tony said with a disarming smile. "Please, we can talk about it."

Gideon slid back into the booth. "You have three minutes."

"We know where Reskov is," Tony said. "He's here on Solaris."

Yamaguchi nodded. "But you will need the baron's help."

"Why do you care about Reskov?"

"You and the baron want Reskov dead."

Gideon stared at her again. For several seconds, there was silence.

"Gideon," Tony said softly, reaching out to put a hand on Gideon's arm. "The baron has a plan. He doesn't expect your unquestioning fidelity."

Gideon looked at him. "I don't trust him."

"You can trust he wants the same thing you do," Yamaguchi replied.

"He doesn't know what happened on Kittery, what Reskov did to those people."

"He does. Probably better than you do."

Tony leaned forward. "You know the Mallorys don't shy away from what has to be done. Honor above Glory—"

"Duty above All," Gideon finished. "Just words. Where were the Armed Forces of the Federated Suns when we were imprisoned on Kittery? Where was Yvonne when Sandoval and Hasek declared war on the Combine and Confederation?"

"You don't understand. The AFFS hauled us—me, your father, Mickey, and the rest of the battalion—out of retirement and threw us

into the fight as soon as New Avalon came under attack. By the time we could have attempted a rescue, Devlin Stone had already done it."

"The baron has already earned Duke Sandoval and Duke Hasek's animosity with his criticism of their actions during the Jihad," Yamaguchi said. "Both have paid the price of their folly."

"Come and listen to the baron's offer," Tony said. "You don't have to commit to anything. Just hear him out."

Gideon closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. *So tempting*, he thought. *But you can't trust nobles. Stone taught us that. But the Mallorys believe in that "Honor above Glory, Duty above All" motto of theirs. So does my father, Uncle Tony, Aunt Mickey—and damn it, so do I. Duty to the dead of Ash Ford, to Sarah, James, and the others. Reskov has to die for what he did. And if Mallory gives me a shot at killing him, so be it.*

He opened his eyes and looked at both of them. "All right, I'll listen."

III

**INTERNATIONAL ZONE
SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII
BOLAN PROVINCE
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
24 NOVEMBER 3084**

Alex Miller walked into the small, garishly furnished hotel room, tossed both his bags onto the bed, then took a small device from his pocket. The device, the size of a pack of casino cards, hummed when activated, and he walked around slowly, scanning the room. Convinced the room was free of electronic listening devices, he turned the detector off and pocketed it.

He opened one of his bags and took out the thick envelope that had been waiting, along with the bug scanner, in the spaceport terminal locker. The envelope was small, thick, and bulged with something. He unsealed it and poured the contents onto the dresser. Keys on a key ring, a card, and a data chip landed in a pile. The card said: **PLAY CHIP**.

Miller looked at the items for a few seconds, then retrieved his noteputer and a pair of earphones from his other bag. He picked up the chip, inserted it in the noteputer's data slot, then turned on the device. A message flashed up: **SUNRISE RADIANCE**. Miller typed in **MOONLIGHT SHINE**, plugged in the earphones, then slipped them on.

After a few seconds, the woman who had contacted him at the spaceport began speaking. "*Welcome to Solaris. Operation Osiris is*

currently on standby, but can be activated at any time. This data chip has the details about Operation Horus, including this target list, and can proceed as planned. The keys are for the safe house, several vehicles, and a First Solaris Bank safety-deposit box. All necessary details are on this chip. The first half of your payment is already in your account. The rest will be deposited on completion. Any changes to the assignment or emergency contact will be through the safe house's communications unit only. Any other contact will be by leaving a message for Mr. Crosshill at the hotel's front desk. This audio file will erase itself at the end of this playback. Good luck."

When Miller checked the chip, the audio file no longer existed. He read the other files on the chip, memorizing the important data. He pocketed the keys and the data chip, looked at himself in the mirror, and left the room. He wasn't worried about the security cameras: his line of work usually meant he never came close enough to be associated with the event. For now, he was Alex Miller, a Tharkad businessman who liked to gamble.

IV

BLACK HILLS SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII BOLAN PROVINCE LYRAN COMMONWEALTH 24 NOVEMBER 3084

Tyson DeGea followed the servant down the hall, with Lee Chou a step behind. Green Mansion still showed signs of the ruins it had been when the Word of Blake had destroyed it before fleeing the planet. A third of the mansion was still under reconstruction, and furnishings were somewhat sparse.

At the end of the hall, the door to Baron Hasek's study opened and Victor Skiles stepped out. Bald with a short, full beard, Skiles was one of Hasek's fighters, one of the best on the Class Two circuit. The buzz around the Black Hills had the baron promoting him to the Open Class before the next season started.

He walked toward DeGea and Chou, and DeGea's eyes narrowed. He hadn't survived the Word's occupation of New Avalon by ignoring his instincts, and they were telling him Skiles was wrong somehow.

"Mr. King, Mr. Lee," Skiles said smoothly as he approached them. "Another round of meetings?"

"A brief one today," DeGea replied. He and Lee were posing as Capellan March businessmen looking to invest in Blackstar Stables.

"I hope things go well."

They walked past each other and continued on their way. DeGea turned his head and watched Skiles. Once he disappeared up a staircase, DeGea put him out of his mind and focused on the task ahead.

The servant stopped at the study's door, knocked, waited for an answer from within. When it came, he opened the door and stepped inside. "Messrs. King and Lee to see you, my lord."

"Send them in," a voice said from inside.

The servant bowed, then stepped back to allow DeGea and Chou into the room, closing the door behind them.

The study was Blackstar Stables' heart and brains. A large desk dominated the middle of the room, where Baron Mather Hasek sat. Around him were bookcases, paintings, and a few sculptures. Despite the expensive trappings, the room gave off an air of business.

"My lord," DeGea said in a brisk tone.

"What is it?" Hasek demanded. He reminded DeGea of an accountant—medium height and weight, with narrow features behind narrow spectacles. He wore a dark suit with the insignias of the Federated Suns and Blackstar Stables on its lapels. "The next negotiation session isn't until tomorrow."

In the aftermath of the Jihad, the Hasek family had stepped in to reclaim both the remnants of the Blackstar Stables and Green Mansion. The Daelun family, who had taken over the Stables with the Haseks' permission some years before, had been hit hard by the Jihad. Unable to manage the stables at this time, they had turned control back to the Haseks with the promise that the Haseks would return control back to the Daeluns when things had been sorted out. Mather Hasek was now running Blackstar Stables, tasked with rebuilding and reclaiming its reputation as one of Solaris' elite stables. In the last three years, he had rebuilt Blackstar back to a B-rated stable, with a strong shot at regaining an A-rating when the next stable rankings came out.

But it wasn't the games that brought DeGea and his partner to Green Mansion. Three months ago, Hasek had been contacted by someone claiming to have a list of still-active Word collaborators and agents in the Inner Sphere. In return for the list, the person, calling themselves Mordred, wanted money. Hasek had contacted the local Suns government, and DeGea and Chou—agents from the Ministry of Information, Intelligence, and Operations—were assigned to verify the list and acquire it for the Federated Suns.

As proof of the list's veracity, Mordred had given Hasek the names and locations of six Word agents on the list. The names were forwarded

to New Avalon, and after an MIIO investigation led to a dozen arrests and two foiled terror campaigns, DeGea was ordered to obtain the full list.

But Mordred still insisted on using the baron as an intermediary, annoying both Hasek and DeGea. The negotiations were conducted by perscomm in Hasek's office, with Mordred's voice electronically altered.

"Something has come up, my lord," DeGea replied. "The list of people Mordred gave us to be on the lookout for? One of them arrived on Solaris this afternoon. Gideon Wozniak."

The baron's frowned in thought. "The name sounds familiar."

"His nickname during the Jihad was Stone's Hammer."

Hasek nodded. "I remember now. One of Stone's senior battalion commanders. Whenever Stone needed an objective that had to be taken or an enemy formation that needed to be shattered, Wozniak was the one he sent for."

"Yes, my lord," Chou replied. "He resigned from the Republic Armed Forces three months ago and left Terra."

"The question is, why did he show up here?"

"We think he's looking for Viktor Reskov."

Hasek's face hardened. "The Ash Ford Butcher."

DeGea nodded. "Yes, my lord. According to our sources, Wozniak was there and witnessed the massacre. He barely survived."

Hasek thought for a moment. "Why is he looking for Reskov on Solaris?"

"Evidence indicated Reskov fled in this direction, but nothing solid."

"Nothing else makes sense," Chou said. "Wozniak's been with Stone since the start. He was a senior RAF officer, and should have become a Knight of the Republic, or even a Paladin, but word is he turned Stone down when the position was offered. The only reason I can think of has to be Reskov."

"Maybe Wozniak has information MIIO doesn't. But I don't see how this will affect the negotiations."

"I don't see how either, my lord, but Wozniak's name is on the watch list. There has to be a reason Mordred included it."

Hasek leaned back in his chair, his expression dark. "Maybe Mordred is Reskov."

"That thought has crossed our minds," DeGea said. "But we can't risk our chance to get that list—"

"Chance?" Hasek's tone turned bitter. "Viktor Reskov is responsible for the execution of one hundred and seventy men, women, and children—Federated Suns citizens. If he is here, and Wozniak tracks him down and kills him, I'll consider it justice." He glanced at a clock on the wall. "Now, I have a business meeting in half an hour with some real investors. Anything else?"



From the window of an upstairs bedroom, Reskov watched the two MIO agents drive away. He turned away from the window and went over to a chair near the fireplace. The dancing fire illuminated the bottle of whiskey and the glass on a table next to the chair. The bug he had planted in Hasek's office had allowed him to listen to the entire conversation; he hadn't survived for this long by overlooking things.

He sat, poured himself a drink, and stared into the fire. Wozniak's appearance on Solaris wasn't surprising; he knew there was a chance Gideon would track him down before he could completely vanish.

He sipped the whiskey. His cover was secure. He had changed his face and his fingerprints, and erased every record of himself he could find. He was one of the millions on Solaris, hidden in plain sight. It should be impossible for Wozniak to find him.

But thirteen years ago, Reskov had learned the hard way that Wozniak had an ability to defy long odds. The man had survived not only Ash Ford, but a decade of the most intense fighting seen in the Inner Sphere in centuries. Now, he had come looking to finish what started on Kittery.

He closed his eyes and tried to find his center, but he couldn't. All he could see was Wozniak's face with his cold gray eyes, glaring at him. He reached up and touched the barely noticeable scar Wozniak had given him. Reskov had nearly died that day, and he knew Wozniak wouldn't make that mistake again.

Reskov had come to Solaris to hide while arranging his final escape. If the games were Solaris' number-one industry, espionage was a close second. All the intelligence agencies had assets here, while freelancers and major criminal and terrorist organizations moved through the streets, dealing, double-dealing, and triple-dealing with each other. Information was their currency, and good information was valuable.

Reskov had a gold mine.

Before fleeing Terra, Reskov had stolen a list of Word of Blake ROM's deep-cover agents and collaborators. Some of the names were already worthless, but enough live names remained to make it valuable. He already contacted MIO, the Capellan Confederation's Maskirovka, the Draconis Combine's Internal Security Force, and three SAFE factions from the former Free Worlds League. He'd also sent feelers out to the Lyran Intelligence Corps and the Republic's newly formed Sphere Intelligence Service. The *Kokuryu-kai* had expressed interest, as had the *Zhanzheng de Guang*.

The plan was simple. Using cutouts, he'd separately convince each agency that he was selling them the whole list. In reality, he was selling parts of it to each interested group, tailored to cause each state the

most problems. He'd supplied a free sample to each interested party to convince them the list was real. Once Reskov had his money, each payee would get their part of the list, with a few names from other states as a bonus. By the time anyone realized the deception, he would have his money and be gone.

Reskov glanced at his watch. It was nearly dinnertime, and there was something he had to do before then. He picked up what looked like a civilian perscomm and pressed one of the stored numbers.

On the second ring, a voice said, "Yes?"

"It's me." The perscomm, a product of the Word's ROM technology labs, had a built-in voice scrambler. The other person heard Reskov's electronically altered voice.

"What do you want?"

"I need someone dead."

"Who?"

"Gideon Wozniak. He arrived on Solaris today."

"So?"

Reskov smiled. The person on the other end was one of the names on the list, a deep-cover Word of Blake ROM agent inside the local Maskirovka network. "So, unless you and your partner want to answer awkward questions from your coworkers about your real loyalties, I suggest you find a way to do the job."

"I'll see what can be done. My own assets are not available."

"As soon as you can arrange it."

"I have no choice, do I?"

The connection went dead.

Reskov put the perscomm on the table next to the whiskey and poured himself another glass. *The hunter just became the hunted.*

V

BLACK HILLS

SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII

BOLAN PROVINCE

LYRAN COMMONWEALTH

24 NOVEMBER 3084

The Sword and Sun Hotel was the premier hotel in the Davion sector. Like most of the best-known structures in the city, it was destroyed during the Jihad, but had been rebuilt better and stronger than before. The thirty-story structure rose above the surrounding buildings as a beacon of Federated Suns' pride.

To Gideon, the building was overhyped, overbearing, and overdone. He immediately felt out of place in the lobby, a lump of coal in a sea of glittering gems. He saw a few looks of distaste, and if it wasn't for Tony and Yamaguchi, both recognized guests, he was sure hotel security would have ejected him.

But they passed through the lobby and up to the twenty-eighth floor with no problems. Once out of the elevator, Tony led the others down the luxuriously furnished hallway. The carpet was thick and gave under Gideon's boots. The walls were a rich yellow, the doors they passed a glossy red with large brass plates declaring the room number.

They reached the end of the hall, where another red door stood. Gideon read *simon davion suite* on the brass plate. Tony knocked on the door and waited. After a short wait, the door opened, and a man dressed in a severe dark suit stepped into the room. He was tall and thin, with a mane of white hair. "Mr. Madaraz, Miss Yamaguchi. His Lordship is waiting for you in the main room."

"Thank you, Smithers," Tony said as he walked past the butler. "Is it too early for a glass of Glenhedren?"

"I will see what I do find, sir." He looked at Gideon. "Mr. Wozniak? Would you like anything?"

Gideon shook his head. "I'm fine."

"He'll have a green tea, lemon and honey," Yamaguchi said, "as will I."

Smithers bowed his head. "Of course, Miss. The water is already heating."

Gideon turned and glared at her, but she walked past him and into the suite. "Come on."

The suite was even more opulent and over the top than the lobby. Gideon, who had spent most of the last two decades in tents, 'Mech cockpits, DropShips, and barracks, felt even more out of place.

The short hallway opened into a large room with large windows. There was a pair of large couches, twice as many overstuffed chairs, and several floor-to-ceiling bookcases. Side tables placed to hold drinks sat next to each couch and chair. A large four-sided stone fireplace sat in the middle of the room, with the chairs and couches arranged into two conversation areas, one on each side of the fireplace.

There were two occupants in the room. One was an Elemental in a jumpsuit, standing in a corner, as solid and unmovable as a granite block. The second inhabitant sat in a chair, reading a book in his lap. Around him, more books were stacked on the chair arms, the floor, and on the table next to him.

Smithers coughed. "My lord, your visitor has arrived."

The man looked up at Gideon and the others. "Welcome to Solaris VII, Major Wozniak," he said cheerfully, taking the open book from his lap and placing it on top of the book stack on the table. He motioned

to the Elemental. "Don't mind Sergei over there. I take it your trip was satisfactory?"

"It was fine."

"Excellent. I'm Riordan Mallory." He strode over, extending a hand in greeting. Gideon looked at the hand for several seconds before he took it.

As they shook hands, Gideon examined the baron. He'd met several of the Mallorys, Antietam's ruling family when he was growing up, but Riordan Mallory wasn't one of them. He was younger than Gideon, shorter, with a swimmer's build, and neatly cut dark hair. His face was slightly narrower than Gideon expected, with smooth, pale skin, a slender chin, and a sharp nose. From behind a pair of small, round spectacles, a pair of electric-blue orbs returned the stare without a flicker of emotion.

Mallory released the handshake and motioned toward the chairs. "Please sit. We have much to discuss."

Gideon claimed a chair and dropped his bag beside it, while both Yamaguchi and Tony sat on a couch.

Mallory went back to his chair and flopped down. "Ever been to Solaris before, Major?"

"No," Gideon replied. "And I resigned my commission with the RAF. I'm no longer a soldier."

"You'll always be a soldier, Mr. Wozniak, just as I will always be a scholar."

"Can we cut to the chase? Uncle Tony said you know where Viktor Reskov is."

Mallory's expression changed. "I do, but getting to him will not be easy. He's changed his name, altered his face, and has a position that will make it almost impossible to get him."

"Point me in the right direction and I'll do the rest."

Mallory raised an eyebrow. "Confident, aren't you?"

"Arrogant, aren't you?"

"Gideon!" Tony snapped. "Show some respect!"

The baron held up a hand. "Not necessary, Mr. Madaraz. Mr. Wozniak has a low opinion of nobles, and I don't blame him. We collectively failed our duties at the start of the Jihad, and some never did fulfill their responsibilities."

Smithers came in with a tray, and distributed drinks and small plates of cookies to each of the four. Gideon picked up his teacup and sipped. "You're right. I have no respect for nobles. Especially for the Haseks and Sandovals."

"On that we agree, and they hate being reminded of their recent failures," Mallory sipped his own tea. "I want to help you kill Reskov."

"Why?"

"I have my reasons."

"Do you know what happened on Kittery?"

"Of course. I specialize in military history, and am currently researching the Jihad. While I was investigating Stone's Kittery campaign, I came across the Ash Ford massacre."

"One of many."

"Yes, one of many." Mallory sipped his tea. "Compared to the Taurians and Regulans' indiscriminate use of nuclear weapons, Ash Ford doesn't even rate a footnote in history. But what happened at Ash Ford stirred my sense of justice. During my research, I came across your name and Viktor Reskov's."

"Why kill him? Why not have him arrested, tried, and executed, all according to law?"

Gideon glared at him. "I don't want him to have another chance to slip away. He's managed to do that for thirteen years, but no more. Killing him is the only way to make sure."

Mallory nodded. "You are committed to this course of action?"

"Yes."

The baron sipped his tea again. "All right."

"Are you sure, Gideon?" Tony asked. "You were never the type to nurse a grudge."

"It isn't a grudge," Gideon replied. "It's a promise I made before the graves of two dozen fellow soldiers and one hundred and fifty-nine civilians who were slaughtered on Viktor Reskov's orders."

"Ash Ford isn't the only massacre I can tie to Reskov," Mallory said. "I can connect him to three other civilian bloodbaths after Kittery. Viktor Reskov has the blood of more than a thousand people on his hands."

"Where is he?"

Mallory exhaled slowly. "The problem is he's a public figure here on Solaris, and there's too much security around him at the moment to just go up and kill him."

"I don't care. Tell me his name and where he is."

The baron stared at him for a few seconds, blue eyes locking with gray ones. "Not yet."

Gideon put the teacup down and stood. "Then the hell with you."

Mallory's tone was cold and level, and his expression darkened. "You'll never get to him. You'll be dead or arrested before you can make the attempt. But suppose you *do* manage to kill Reskov, then what? What do you do afterward? Escaping off-planet will be impossible, and people will hunt you down like a rabid animal. Is that you want?"

"I don't care."

"Of course not. You're Stone's Hammer, the hard man Stone turned to for the hard missions. Your reputation precedes you—already, word of your presence is reaching the intelligence agencies and stables. How long before it reaches the news hacks?"

"I don't care."

Mallory sighed. "What if I was to tell you that your reputation is the one thing that will get you a shot at Reskov?"

"I'm listening."

"What I'm offering you is a chance—a *chance*—to confront Reskov, and to do it in a way to keep the law from pursuing you."

"How?"

Mallory smiled. "When was the last time you attended a party?"



"I don't need an escort to my room," Gideon said.

"The baron wants to extend every courtesy to you, Wozniak-*sama*," Yamaguchi replied. "Besides, I was coming this way anyway. The other door leads to my bedroom."

They were in a short hallway that led to a couple of doors, one on each side of the hall. Like the rest of the suite, the hall was richly furnished, with paintings depicting 'Mech battles hanging on both walls.

"Why do you work for Mallory?"

She gave him an appraising look. "All nobles need retainers, Wozniak-*sama*. My family has served the Mallory family for two centuries. It is an honor to serve."

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Calling me Wozniak-*sama*. I'm Gideon."

"I know." She tilted her head slightly. "You sound very much like your father."

Gideon looked at her. "You know my father?"

"I have met him several times. He is proud of you, though he wishes you had fought under the Suns banner."

"My choice was made by circumstances beyond my control." He shrugged. "Stone earned my loyalty the hard way. I couldn't walk away."

"But you've walked away now. Left everything behind to hunt down a mass murderer."

Gideon glared at her. She returned his glare unflinchingly. "I have ghosts demanding justice."

"Justice or vengeance?"

"Is there a difference?"

"Depends. Are you doing this out of honor or guilt?"

Gideon waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "Enough. I'm going to take a nap."

"Very well. Dinner will be at five, no formal wear required. If you need anything from Smithers, there is an intercom in your room."

"And the baron?"

"Most afternoons, he does research. I expect he will try to discuss the Jihad from your point of view at dinner tonight."

"I'm not much of a conversationalist."

"That will not be a problem. The baron will carry the conversation. All you have to do is answer when he takes a breath."

Gideon raised an eyebrow. "You have a sense of humor."

She smiled, lighting up her face. "I am happy you noticed, Mr. Wozniak."

"Call me Gideon when we're alone, please?"

She nodded. "Very well, Gideon. Please call me by my first name when we are alone."

"All right, Ami. But I do need a nap. I didn't sleep much on the trip in from the jump point."

"Of course. You will find some toiletries in your room's attached bathroom, and your bag should be on the bed. Until dinner, then."

"Until dinner."



It was close to midnight when Yamaguchi slipped into the suite's study. The only light was on the large antique desk. Mallory sat at the desk, using a stylus and notebook to write another chapter in his latest book.

She watched him write. Her employer insisted on writing the first drafts of his book in longhand. He rarely drank alcohol, slept only a few hours at a time, and had no friends, merely associates. She had worked for him for the last five years, yet rarely saw the private man behind the public persona.

"What is it?" Mallory asked, not looking up from his writing. "Any problems with Wozniak?"

"He's settling in, but he is deeply wounded man."

"I gathered that during dinner." Mallory looked up. "What is your assessment of him? Can he do the job?"

"He is a man driven by both guilt and justice. Stone's fight against the Word gave him a focus for all that energy. But now, with the Word destroyed, the emotions remain. These have driven him to find and kill Reskov. I have no doubt he will do his best to kill Reskov, no matter the cost to himself."

Mallory removed his glasses and leaned back, rubbing his eyes. "We all have scars, Ami. Some physical, some mental. Some heal over, but others remain open and bleeding. Gideon's still bleed."

"You could turn the evidence over to the authorities, and let them try Reskov."

Mallory shook his head and closed his eyes. "The case is shaky at best. Reskov burned a lot of data and several bodies covering his tracks. Any half-competent lawyer could poke holes in the evidence I

have. I'm still investigating, but Reskov could slip through the dragnet and vanish without a trace before I'm ready."

"My lord, forgive my unease, but—"

"Is it right to use Wozniak to kill Reskov?" Mallory finished.

Yamaguchi bowed her head slightly. "My lord, I did not—"

"You know me, Ami. This confrontation could backfire in several different ways. That's why Osiris and Mr. Miller are still in play."

Ami looked up. "My offer still stands."

"No," Mallory replied. "Hasek's perimeter security at Green Mansion is very good. Besides, Gideon has earned the right through his own blood and the blood of the soldiers Reskov killed. I will not cheat him of his chance beforehand."

"Yes, my lord." The silence lingered for several seconds before Yamaguchi asked, "Are you sure you can trust Wozniak? He doesn't like you."

Mallory sighed. "I hoped I could appeal to his loyalty. I didn't consider there was no loyalty left to appeal to."

"He *did* come with us."

"Only because I'm giving him a shot at killing Reskov." He looked at her. "And one other thing: Wozniak isn't a stray cat."

"My lord?"

"Remember Yin and Yang, the two kittens from New Avalon you insisted on bringing back with us? Or that Bower's Deer you spent a half-hour freeing from that briar thicket? Your love for animals is a part of you, but please don't treat Mr. Wozniak as one."

Yamaguchi bowed. "I promise I will not treat him as a stray animal. Is there anything else, my lord?"

"No, I'm fine," he replied. He took out his pocket watch, opened it, and looked at it. "Go to bed. After I'm done, I'll be heading to bed. *Oyasumi nasai*, Ami."

"*Oyasumi nasai, goshujin-sama.*"

VI

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

The flashback came again, as it had nearly every night for thirteen years. Vivid and as horrifying as the original.

"You can't die on my yet, you bastard!" Reskov screamed in his face. "You're going to watch the rest of your people get executed, then I'll kill you myself!"

The scene shifted, and Gideon found himself leaning against a wall. His mind was hazy from both pain and the drugs he'd been given. He tried to move his arms and legs, but they were bound. He could see blobs of color moving around him, but after several seconds of hard blinking with his good eye, the blobs became Word of Blake soldiers dragging members of his command into the open. The prisoners were lined up in front of him, a guard standing between each pair. Their hands were bound behind them, and all looked dirty and battered, but each had a defiant look in their eyes.

Suddenly Reskov was there, grabbing Gideon by the hair and yanking it back so he could stare into his face. The left side of Reskov's face was swathed in bandages, and there was an ugly gleam in his eyes.

"Last chance," he growled. "Tell me where Stone is, or I start executing them."

Gideon remained silent, passing on his refusal with a glare.

"Fine," Reskov snapped. He released Gideon and walked toward the rows of prisoners. He stood in front of a blond woman who had been Gideon's communications tech and unholstered his pistol. He pointed it at the woman. "Last chance. Where is Devlin Stone?"

Gideon looked at the woman. Cassandra Fielding was a recent New Avalon Institute of Science graduate, assigned to Kittery to reestablish the military communications network before the Word had invaded. She was engaged to be married, and always upbeat, even when they were in the camp. She returned his look, her expression telling him she trusted him.

"Fine." Reskov shot Cassandra in the head.

As she fell over, he walked to the next prisoner in line, a young, thin man with wild brown hair. Gideon remembered his name: "Rabbit" Gilmore, a Kittery native who had been arrested for protesting the Word's occupation through graffiti. A talented artist, but not a soldier.

Reskov turned to look at Gideon. "Where is Stone?"

Again, Gideon stayed silent. Reskov shot the man in the head and moved on to the next prisoner.

"Where is Stone?"

"Where is Stone?"

"Where is Stone?"



Gideon snapped awake. For an instant, the afterimages of those dead bodies floated in front of his eyes before they faded into the dark ceiling.

He sat up, head hurting and heart pounding, breathing ragged, as if he'd run a marathon. He turned on the light and wiped grit from his eyes. Getting his breathing under control, he flung the covers off and got out of the king-size bed. The noise from outside was muffled by the suite's height and the thick curtains. He stretched to loosen up his muscles but still felt tense.

"Are you all right?"

Gideon spun toward the bedroom door. Ami stood there, dressed in silk robes, watching him. From her uncombed hair, she had also been asleep. In the back of his mind, he felt long-dormant feelings stir.

He ran a hand through his hair. "Yes, I'm fine. Sorry if I woke you."

"I am a light sleeper. Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

She leaned against the wall and looked at him. "It's about Ash Ford, isn't it? I heard you cry 'Reskov' and 'no' a number of times."

He shook his head. "Just a nightmare, a flashback to what happened."

"Or the ghosts reminding you of your reasons for being here."

"It's nothing."

"You have many scars."

Gideon realized he was only dressed in shorts, and suddenly felt exposed in front of her. He grabbed a robe at the end of the bed and slipped it on, turning away from her. "They're reminders of past mistakes."

"A warrior without scars is either peerless or green."

"I'm neither. Thank you for your concern."

"In times when I cannot sleep, I use a tea blend that helps me relax. I could make you a cup."

"No, that's fine—"

He felt her hand on his shoulder and realized she had moved across the room without making a sound. "It will be no trouble. Even ghosts should allow the living to rest."

"I—"

"Please, Gideon."

The hand was warm through the robe's material, and he felt his heartbeat quicken. He tried to remember the last time a woman had touched him in an intimate way, and couldn't. He felt his objection disintegrating as he turned toward her. "If it isn't too much trouble."

She smiled and took her hand away. "I'll return shortly."

Then Gideon was alone again, the half-open door and a light fragrance the only evidence she had been there. He sank into a chair, trying to get his heartbeat under control.

He didn't know how long he sat there before Ami appeared with a cup. "Here," she said softly, placing her free hand on his shoulder.

"Thank you," he said, taking the cup. The strong aroma of fruit and mint tickled his nose as he sipped it. The tea was warm, sweet, and strongly-flavored. He took another sip.

"How is it?" she asked.

"Very good."

"It's a family blend."

"Where is your family from?"

"Ozawa, originally. But the Mallorys offered my ancestors a new home on Antietam. We have never regretted that decision."

Gideon nodded. There was a large minority of people of Japanese, Korean, and Chinese descent on Antietam, so another Japanese family wouldn't stand out.

"My family has an estate in the Cobalt Mountains, not far from New Dublin."

"I know the area. Beautiful countryside."

She smiled. "Especially when the fall comes and the leaves turn color. Purple and orange, reds and yellows. It's my favorite time of the year."

Gideon frowned. "I haven't been on Antietam in sixteen years."

"That long?"

He nodded. "Part of me wants to go home, see my family, and walk the streets of Sharpsburg again." He sipped more of the tea. "It's probably changed so much I wouldn't recognize it."

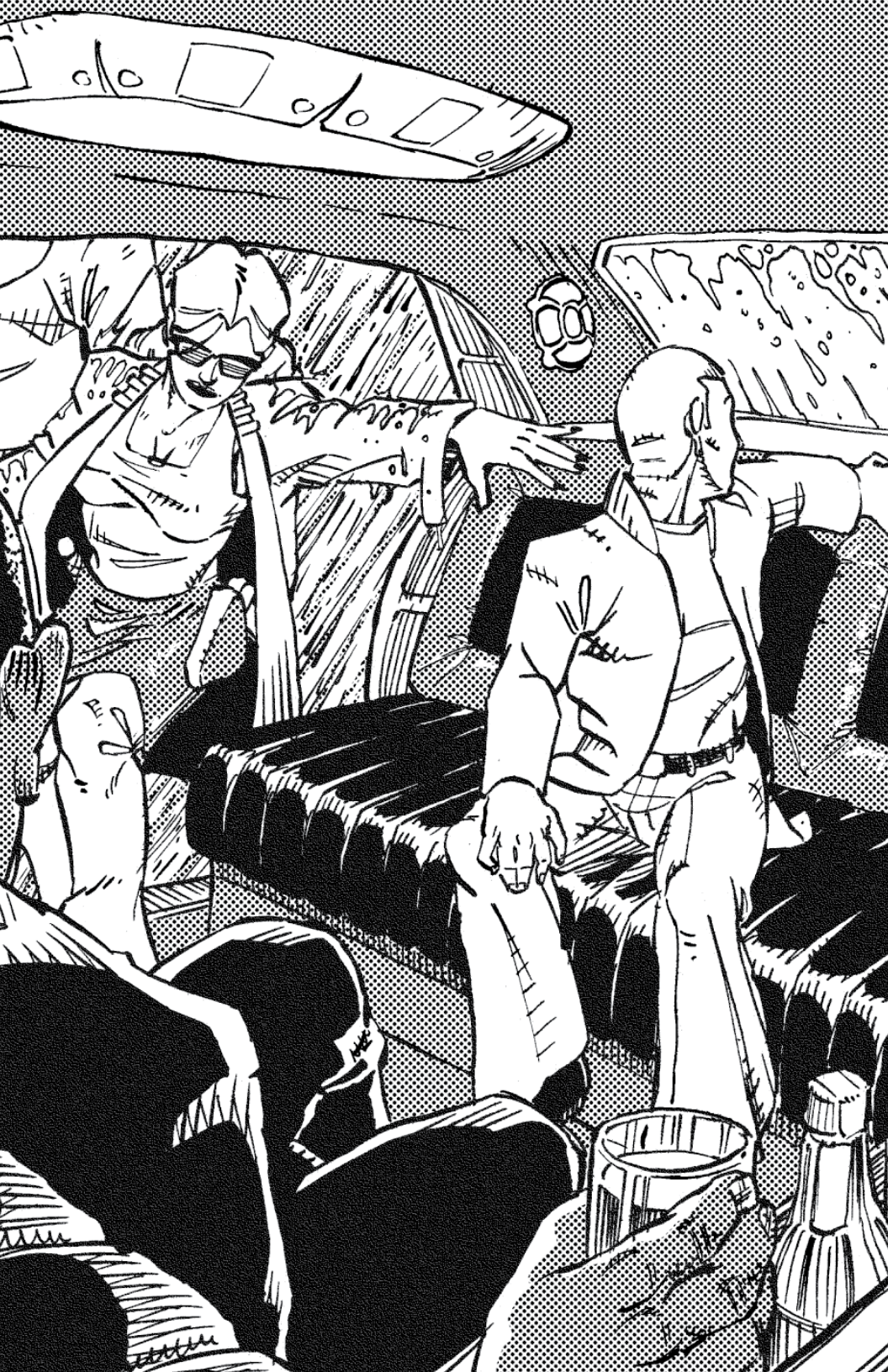
"I was there only two years ago."

They talked for a few more minutes, about Antietam and what had changed about it since Gideon had left. As they talked, he felt himself become drowsy. He finished the tea, but when he tried to stand, his knees buckled.

Ami helped him over to the bed. Once he was in the bed, she pulled the covers over him. "Good night, Gideon."

Gideon was already too far down the tunnel of sleep to manage anything more than a mumbled "Good night" before he was asleep. He didn't see the brief expression of sorrow on Ami's face before she leaned in and kissed him on the forehead, then turned out the light before she left.

For the first night in a long time, he slept peacefully.



VII

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

The party was already underway when Mallory, accompanied by Gideon and Yamaguchi, stepped out of the car. Night had fallen, and lights illuminated the Green Mansion's exterior. A steady stream of guests ascended the stairs to the main door, and several large men in suits stood at strategic locations.

The trio, along with Sergei, climbed out of the limo and found themselves on the lower of two driveways that passed in front of the mansion. Two flights of stairs, separated by the upper driveway, went to the front door.

The day had been a busy one for Gideon. Escorted by Ami and Tony, he'd been taken by limo to a hair salon. There, his unruly hair was cleaned, cut, and styled while his chin stubble was expertly removed. A tailor then took Gideon's measurements and fitted him for a suit. Shoes and other items were bought at a store next to the tailor's shop. After lunch, they had returned to the tailor's for a final fitting for the suit, then went back to the Sun and Sword for dinner.

Mallory turned to Sergei. "Stay here. We're already going to cause an uproar, so let's not overdo it." The Elemental nodded, and Mallory turned to the others. He was dressed in a dark suit and cape, and carried a walking stick. "Ready?"

Gideon looked down at the well-tailored suit in the dark brown and hunter green of the Mallory family. He had to admit the uniform-like suit was the best set of clothes he'd ever worn. His eyes settled on the pin on his lapel. The Antietam Guards, the Mallory family's personal troops, used red crosshairs imposed over a white skull as their insignia. Gideon's father had worn the insignia when he was in uniform. Now it was the insignia for the new Solaris stable the Mallory family was sponsoring.

Gideon inhaled deeply. "Let's do this."

"Good." Mallory looked around, then looked at Ami and said softly, "*Ima itte, hayaku. Ore to Gideon wa annaiyaku to kyaku-sama o sasaeru.*"

"*Hai, goshujin-sama,*" she replied, stepping back into Sergei's shadow. She wore a form-fitting dark blue dress, cut to allow ease of movement. She returned Gideon's look, and a smile flickered across her lips before she lifted a hidden hood over her head and disappeared into the shadows.

"Come on," the baron said, pulling on Gideon's arm. "Let's say our hellos."

"Where's she going?" Gideon asked, looking back only to see she had vanished.

"None of your business," Mallory replied. "Worry about Reskov."

"But she could get caught!"

"Ami can look after herself. I wouldn't have sent her if I thought otherwise."

"Who are we keeping busy while she—"

"You understand Japanese?"

"Some. Enough to know you're up to something."

"I'm usually up to several somethings at the same time. Right now, I'm up to getting you that shot at Reskov."

They climbed the stairs. At the imposing front doors, a servant in a green suit with the Hasek emblem on his collar frowned as Mallory and Gideon approached. A couple of meters away, two large men in suits watched them.

"Lord Mallory," the servant said uncertainly.

"It's McEwen, isn't it?" Mallory said brightly.

"Yes, my lord, but—"

"Let me stop you there." Mallory took out a pair of stiff cards from inside his suit jacket and handed them to McEwen. "Baron Hasek sent us invitations."

The servant ran a hand scanner across them and raised both eyebrows in surprise as the scanner light glowed green. "I'm sorry, my lord," he said quickly. "It's just that—"

"Understandable. But Mather likes having someone at his parties who can snarl back at him. Keeps them from being too dull."

"Would you like to be announced?"

"Nope. I like keeping Mather on his toes."

They went inside. "Those real invitations?" Gideon said in a low voice as they crossed the large entry hall. There were a few people around, and the pair got a few stares, a few of them angry ones.

"Very real—and mine. Mather likes verbal jousts, and unlike most of his clan, he spent a few years on the front lines fighting for prince and state." He motioned to a pair of open doors to the right. "This way."

The party was in the mansion's main ballroom. Food and drink tables were to the right of the doors, while tables for sitting and eating were to the left. In one corner, a small orchestra played some classical piece Gideon didn't recognize, providing an elegant backdrop to the murmur of conversation.

More than a hundred people, women in designer dresses, men in formal suits, stood and talked around the large, high-ceilinged room. Gideon saw a couple of AFFS officers, but everyone else was civilian.

Among them, white-coated servers circulated with trays of drinks and food for those too lazy or engrossed to get the items themselves.

"Be alert," Mallory said softly, the doorway far enough away to mute the conversations. "Most of these people hate me, and by proximity, they'll hate you too."

Gideon scanned the room. "Do you see Reskov?"

"To your left, near the back wall, next to Mather Hasek."

Gideon saw the party around the table in the back of the room: Mather Hasek, his stables' warriors and senior staff holding court. A spike of anger shot through him, and he started forward. A hand wrapped around his upper arm and restrained him.

"Not yet," Mallory said in a steely but low tone. "I'll choose the time. Be ready."

Gideon turned his head and gave Mallory a hard stare. The baron returned the stare and Gideon finally looked away. "Fine," he said softly. "We'll do it your way."

"First, we need to talk to...him." He motioned to someone standing against the wall to their right.

"Why?"

Mallory smiled. "Time to cross the Rubicon."



Tyson DeGea hated parties.

Unlike the holovid spies, who were invited to lavish parties, made quips, met stunning women and took them to bed, the MIIO agent wasn't suave, sophisticated, and genteel. Spycraft, especially in the Counterintelligence Branch, meant meeting in back alleys, combing through files and papers for small clues, dealing with people who lied as easily as they breathed, and executing occasional flashes of extreme violence.

He didn't know why Hasek had invited him and Chou, especially after Mordred had broken off negotiations that afternoon. What was worse, MIIO hadn't been able to track Wozniak after his arrival.

He sipped a glass of wine and was watching the party when he sensed movement from his left. He turned and saw Riordan Mallory bearing down on him like a locked-on missile, followed by... *Gideon Wozniak?*

DeGea looked for Chou, but couldn't see his partner. By that time, Mallory was standing there, smiling at him. "Good evening, Tyson."

DeGea gave Mallory a withering stare. "What are you doing here?"

"You *do* remember me from Markesan. Good. We can skip the small talk." Mallory motioned to Wozniak. "You know who this is."

"Yes."

"And why he's here."

"I don't see Reskov here."

Mallory's smile thinned. "Oh, he's here, Captain—sorry, *Major* DeGea. Right under your nose."

DeGea stepped into the baron's personal space. He was a half-head taller than Mallory, allowing him to glare down at the baron. "If you're trying some stunt—"

Mallory returned the glare with one of his own. "This isn't a stunt, Tyson. Reskov is here, and you've been dealing with him for that list. Viktor Reskov is Mordred."

A chill shot through DeGea. He sipped his wine, using the time to order his thoughts. "The situation is classified and—"

"Tyson, remember what I am—an intelligence *analyst*. And this is Solaris, when you can't throw a shoe without hitting a spy, an information broker, or a disgruntled employee with secrets to share. I've compiled data from a hundred unrelated sources, and I have a better picture of what's going on that you do. Come on, Mr. Wozniak."

"Wait a goddamn—"

"No, you're dealing with the devil, and I cannot allow it. Stay close by. I'll explain in a few minutes." Mallory walked away, followed by Wozniak.

DeGea scanned the crowd again, finally spotting Chou moving toward him, and met him halfway. "We have a problem."

"What?"

"Wozniak is here, and he's with Riordan Mallory."

Chou stared at him. "*What?*"

"Follow me."



Mallory and Gideon slipped through the crowd toward Mallory and his entourage. On the way, Mallory took a glass from a passing waiter's tray and sipped the contents. Gideon took a glass from the same tray, but just held it.

When he and Mallory emerged from the crowd, a pair of men in dark suits confronted them. "Private table," one said.

Mallory rapped his walking stick on the marble floor loud enough to make the nearest guests stop their conversation and look at him. "Really, Mather?" he said, his voice loud, the tone chiding. "You deny me the chance to speak to you?"

"That can only be Riordan Mallory," a voice filled with disdain called out from the table. "I didn't think you'd come."

"I stand by my conclusions. The Haseks and the Sandovals forgot their duty and pursued their own agendas. Both families' actions cost the Federated Suns millions of lives."

A low angry muttering came from the crowd. Gideon glanced around and saw everyone in the room staring at them, and the pleasant energy in the room became hostile.

"Let Mallory and his guest through."

The bodyguards stepped back, and Baron Mather Hasek rose from the table. He wore a black suit with copper trim. On one lapel was a pin of the Hasek family crest—a white pearl in a black diamond—and on the other, the copper compass of Blackstar Stables.

His fierce green eyes bore in on Mallory. "You walk in here and insult my family," he said, his tone clipped and harsh. "My family has served the Federated Suns for eight hundred years!"

"As has mine, Mather," Mallory replied, his tone not wavering. "But while Duke George did much good during his reign, he allowed his obsession with destroying the Confederation to blind him to the dangers from the Taurians and the Word."

"Don't you dare lecture me about responsibilities!" Hasek snarled.

"Someone should. Tell me, did you travel to New Avalon after the Word left? I did. Do you know what I saw? Ruins. Ruins of the capital of the greatest state in the Inner Sphere. I watched starving people line up for food, people who had once had jobs, families, a normal life. But I also saw horror and sorrow in their eyes, the pain of dying family members, the fear of an enemy that saw them as nothing more than targets!"

Mallory spun to face the crowd. "The Combine tried to take New Avalon in the First Succession War and failed. The Capellans have never even come close!"

Mallory scanned the crowd's faces, then turned back to Hasek. His tone dropped to a normal speaking level. "But when New Avalon needed troops to push the Word invaders off-planet, where were the Haseks and the Sandovals? Where were the Robinson Rangers and the Syrtis Fusiliers?"

The room was dead silent now, everyone watching the confrontation.

"Duke George was a defender of his people!" Hasek snarled.

Mallory's tone hardened, but his words were controlled. "Duke George launched an unsanctioned invasion, only to have Sun-Tzu Liao hand him his ass, then he let the Taurians nuke Federated Suns worlds."

Hasek leaned on the table and glared at Mallory. "Anything else to say before I throw you out?"

"About the dukes' incompetence? Not right now. But I do have someone to introduce to you." Mallory placed his hand on Gideon's shoulder. "This is Gideon Wozniak. He was with Stone on Kittery from the start, and by the end of the Jihad, he was one of the battalion commanders in Stone's Lament."

Around them, the crowd began murmuring.

Hasek scowled. "Why is he here? Shouldn't he be off being a Paladin in the Sphere?"

Mallory shrugged, unconcerned by the question. "He has a commitment to uphold. Old business still unfinished." He looked at Mather, his gaze cold and serious. "Old ghosts he has to lay to rest."

Gideon's eyes finally settled on the man he had avoided looking at since they reached the table. Mallory had shown Gideon photos of Reskov's new face and told him the name he was using—Victor Skiles—so he knew what to look for. The nose was wider, the face somewhat broader, and the cheeks a little higher. It was subtle work, but combined with a short blond beard and shaved head, Skiles looked nothing like Viktor Reskov.

At least, not until Gideon looked into the man's eyes. The same dark, cold eyes that, thirteen years ago, had ordered the destruction of Ash Ford, and the massacre of nearly two hundred people.

With a shout of rage, Gideon stepped around Hasek and threw the contents of his glass into Skiles' face. Skiles shot to his feet as Gideon stepped forward and fired a punch at his face. Skiles twisted right, blocked the punch, and countered with a hard hook to the ribs. Gideon felt the hit, but adrenaline minimized the pain. He kicked low, the instep of his right foot connecting with Skiles' left thigh just above the knee, disrupting the fugitive's balance.

Gideon gave him no chance to recover, and followed up with a combination of punches. Skiles blocked the first two, but the third, a left hook, slammed into his jaw hard enough to send him reeling.

Before Gideon could continue, someone seized him and pulled him away. He twisted and squirmed, but the security guards holding him back knew what they were doing. Skiles was also being restrained—in his case, by his fellow fighters.

Both Mallory and Hasek moved between the combatants.

"Enough!" Hasek snarled. "What is the meaning of this, Riordan?"

Gideon pointed at Skiles. "You sonofabitch!"

Skiles, face still dripping with wine, glared at him.

Mallory looked at Hasek. "This should be discussed in private." He looked at the man Gideon attacked. "You too, Mr. Skiles."

Hasek stared at Mallory for a few seconds, then nodded. "The library."

Mallory pointed his walking stick at DeGea and Chou. "Bring them along as referees."

TO BE CONTINUED IN SHRAPNEL #7!



CHAOS CAMPAIGN SCENARIO: THE BALLAD OF SIR LOBOS PLUMADOS

ERIC SALZMAN

When Captain-General Thomas Halas—then known as Thomas Marik—masterminded the creation of the Knights of the Inner Sphere in 3055, he sought to generate popular support for the consolidation of the Free Worlds League’s political and military power into the hands of the Captain-General by dispatching elite warriors to travel across the League’s worlds, righting wrongs in Thomas’ name.

Among the most famous of the Knights was Sir Miguel Lobos Plumados, a Chihene tribesman from Galisteo who earned his name from having driven off native “feathered wolves” that threatened his homestead in his youth. His exaggerated Galistean machismo and aggression provided excellent fodder for a series of recreational hologram environment (RHE) documentaries produced by Kensai Holographiks—a key element of Thomas’ propaganda campaign.

Impatient with Kensai’s initial efforts to restage his battles for their RHE productions, Sir Miguel obtained authorization for holovid crews to accompany him on missions to obtain actual battlefield footage. His entourage also included a technical team from Earthwerks of Keystone to keep his THG-11E *Thug* in top fighting form.

TOUCHPOINT: BRINGING DOWN THE HOUSE

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.

On Fletcher's night side, the omnipresent cloud cover cloaked the world below in inky blackness, broken only with intermittent flashes of lightning. Descending in a drop pod emblazoned with the insignia of the Second Knights of the Inner Sphere and his own personal sigil, Sir Miguel Lobos Plumados carefully tracked his altimeter and external video feeds.

"Ey, control! Scanners are black—you got me on target?"

"Confirmed, Sir Miguel. Your trajectory'll drop you right on their doorstep. The rest is up to you."

"Don't worry none about me. These pendejos tried to kill Lady Isis. That earned 'em the right to die with everyone in the League watchin'. Aircrews in place?"

"Kensai's team grounded safely beyond the perimeter and are in position. Showtime in ten—prepare to separate."

Opening a channel to the holovid crews waiting below, Miguel thumbed the signal for them to advance on the House of the Setting Sun compound. The opening chords of the RHE's theme song filled the channel as explosive bolts sent the drop-pod hull cascading away in a cloud of radar-jamming chaff, setting the Thug free to plunge groundward, braking jets roaring.

"Banditos and Cappies and Elsie's beware, for Sir Lobos Plumados now stirs from his lair..."

SITUATION

CITY STATE OF NEW LINZ

FLETCHER

CHAOS MARCH

8 OCTOBER 3063

When Chancellor Sun-Tzu Liao ended his engagement to Isis Marik and exiled her from the Capellan Confederation, her ship came under attack from Kali Liao's fanatical cultists, and only the intervention of Sun-Tzu's loyalists allowed Isis to escape. SAFE intelligence determined that the cultists were supported by the House of the Setting Sun's chapter on Fletcher, where the assassin guild had been aiding pro-Capellan irregulars in the battle to control the planet. As supreme commander of the Knights, Thomas Marik authorized Sir Miguel to carry out a high-profile punitive strike to eliminate those who had conspired to assassinate his daughter.

GAME SETUP

Recommended Terrain: Forward Base (Map Pack: Grasslands); Woodland (Map Pack: Grasslands)

The Defender arranges two maps with the long edges touching and designates one edge as north. The Defender's home edge is the eastern edge of the battlefield; the Attacker's home edge is opposite.

The Defender deploys half of their force anywhere on the western half of the battlefield. The Attacker's *Thug* may choose any spot the battlefield to execute a combat drop, rolling for scatter as appropriate. The Attacker's VTOLs enter the eastern half of the battlefield during the Movement Phase of Turn 1. The remaining Defenders may emerge from the House of the Setting Sun compound buildings during the Movement Phase of Turn 3.

Attacker

Recommended Forces: Sir Miguel Lobos Plumados (Gunnery 2, Piloting 3; AS: Skill Rating 2) in a THG-11E *Thug*.

Sir Lobos Plumados has the Weapon Specialist (PPC) Special Pilot Ability (see p. 82 *Campaign Operations*; or p. 95 and 101 AS:CE). Kensai Holographiks crews deploy aboard two Sprint Scout Helicopters that replace the Beagle Active Probe and TAG suite with nose-mounted searchlights (see p. 62, *BattleMech Manual*) and sophisticated holovid recording equipment.

Defender

Recommended Forces: House of the Setting Sun, pro-Capellan irregulars.

The Defender's force is 200 percent of the Attacker's force. No more than 50 percent of the Defender's force can consist of BattleMechs.

WARCHEST

Track Cost: 250

OPTIONAL BONUSES

+100 Master of Assassins (Attacker Only): The Defender's force includes Chapter Master Lee Ho Wen (Gunnery 2, Piloting 1; AS: Skill Rating 2) in an ASN-23 *Assassin*. Lee has the Jumping Jack Special Pilot Ability (see p. 76 *Campaign Operations*; or p. 94 and 97 AS:CE)

+100 Tears of Kali (Defender Only): Fletcher's stormy weather sweeps over the battlefield. Moderate Rainfall (see p. 62 *BattleMech Manual*) conditions apply.

+100 Shroud of Kali (Defender Only): Fletcher's heavy cloud cover creates Moonless Night conditions (see p. 62, *BattleMech Manual*).

OBJECTIVES

A Father's Justice (Attacker Only): Destroy or cripple more than 75 percent of the opposing force. [200]

Smile for the Cameras (Attacker Only): Maintain line of sight from at least one VTOL to each enemy unit on the turn it is destroyed or crippled. At least one VTOL must survive to the end of the scenario. [200]

Ballad's End (Defender Only): Destroy Sir Lobos Plumados' *Thug*. [200]

The Revolution Will Not Be Televised (Defender Only): Shoot down both Kensai VTOLs. [200]

AFTERMATH

Sir Lobos Plumados took the assassin enclave by surprise, shattering their operation on Fletcher and sending a message to Kali Liao's cultists that the Captain-General's justice extended even into Capellan-claimed territory. The resulting RHE was one of the most popular in the series, winning acclaim in the 3065 Vidtape Finals.





THE POISONER'S PEN: ADVICE FROM THE EBON MAGISTRATE

KEN' HORNER

Thank you, Agent Able Isotope 180W, for your query. While you've received some basic training at Pontus, I will be able to offer you some improved options for eliminating your target. Once you have narrowed down the scope of your need, feel free to reply, and I can give you even more options that will be suited to your end purpose.

In the use of poison, one of three goals should be established: Is the most important aspect of the poison (1) ease of administration, (2) lethality, or (3) non-detection?

In the category of ease of administration, I focus on introduction to the target when they are readily prepared for attack or are in a locale that makes administration difficult. Poisons that focus on lethality eschew subtlety for the assurance that the target doesn't survive. Finally, non-detection is less about not noticing that you've poisoned your assignment (I classify that as ease of administration) and more focused on no one being the wiser that the target met an early demise due to a toxin.

On Campoleone, the Count of Porula, Ichiro Sanchez, was throwing a lavish banquet for his favorite tabiranth and had invited hundreds of guests. I wasn't one of them, but I managed to convince a date to take me as their plus-one. Sanchez was having the banquet great hall-style, like a medieval lord. There was no point at which less than a dozen eyes were on him, not including his security detail (dressed as knights, but armed with lasers). Getting him alone wasn't a likely proposition, but he was all too happy to let people wander up to his table and offer him platitudes and toasts. We went up at one point, and with a bit of

sleight of hand dropped a tablet of locustax into his goblet of rosé. After a toast, we returned to our seats, and I promptly got in a fight with my date, then stomped out as if I were a self-absorbed princess, getting a cab just before Count Sanchez finished his drink.

If you don't have access to locustax, some tried-and-true alternatives are arsenic or ethylene glycol, often found in archaic coolants, both of which are easy to dig up on almost any planet. Arsenic is tasteless and odorless, while ethylene glycol is often sweet, making it a great sugar replacement that is also lethal.

Locustax

Vector: Ingested

Drug Strength: 10

Poison AP: 1

Duration: 8 turns

Base Price: 140

Equipment Ratings: D/C-E-D/D

Notes: Lethal; continuous

Ethylene Glycol

Vector: Ingested

Drug Strength: 3

Poison AP: 0

Duration: 4 turns

Base Price: 2

Equipment Ratings: B/B-B-B/B

Notes: Lethal; continuous

Sometimes subtlety is less important than getting the job done. This is often an avenue for the use of explosives or firearms, but there are occasions when a poison is the best choice. Modern security often actively looks for weapons or explosives, but the wide variety and forms of poisons make them harder to safeguard against. Additionally, most security personnel aren't expecting poison, as it just isn't that common in a universe often hyper focused on twelve-meter-tall killing machines.

A colleague of mine once needed to remove some particularly important Blakist scientists. While impersonating an off-world technician that my colleague had assassinated en route, he was able to slip a vial of dimethylmercury past security as an industrial solvent (few guards have ever taken a chemistry course), and replaced the hand sanitizer with the deadly compound. The scientists at the facility all used the tampered dispenser when viewing their latest lethal biological creation, only to fall into comas around six months later, along with a few dozen other collateral-damage victims. A reminder when using

many of these types of agents: make sure you handle them with care, as their lethality can be just as hazardous to you before you can deliver it to your target. There's a reason these materials work so well at taking out targets: this stuff kills very well.

Maitotoxin

Vector: Ingested

Drug Strength: 40

Poison AP: 1

Duration: 30 minutes

Base Price: 30

Equipment Ratings: B/D-D-D/E

Notes: Lethal; Delayed

Dimethyl Mercury

Vector: Contact

Drug Strength: 20

Poison AP: 4

Duration: 6 months

Base Price: 20

Equipment Ratings: C/D-D-D/C

Notes: Lethal; Delayed

When circumstances would make an unnatural death problematic, look for something that would give a medical examiner a hard time. The two desirable features of this method are something that duplicates the symptoms of a natural death and is hard to detect. Ensure that symptoms of the poison match the target's medical history. For example, a heart attack for an obese person is expected, but liver failure for a teetotaler will come across as rather suspicious and invite more scrutiny than necessary.

For avoiding detection afterward, try to ensure that any injury to administer the poison (such as a needle mark) can be covered up (the target was receiving medical care or had regular injections), and don't use something common. I prefer naturally occurring toxins, such as Bharat Cyprus Sap (unless you happen to be on Bharat). The clotting that occurs can be attributed to deep vein thrombosis unless someone is specifically looking for Bharat Cyprus Sap. I used this on a Capellan general who was stonewalling Canopian interests at every turn. At gunpoint I had him swallow about double the typical dose; he thought it was bitter molasses and I was just some woman he had scorned who wasn't really a threat once he talked me into lowering my gun. He learned a lesson at the end, but no one else was the wiser.

Other options are azh venom or oleander, which will escape all but the hardest scrutiny. Do not use necrotizing toxins such as snake or spider venom, as the tissue damage will be apparent to all but the most minimal examinations. Elemental poisons, such as thallium, arsenic, etc., are also poor choices because these are much easier for medical examiners to identify, compared to complex compounds like venoms.

Bharat Cyprus Sap

Vector: Ingested

Drug Strength: 6

Poison AP: 0

Duration: 1 hour

Base Price: 250

Equipment Ratings: A/X-D-C/E

Notes: Lethal; Continuous; Delayed

Oleander

Vector: Ingested

Drug Strength: 4

Poison AP: 0

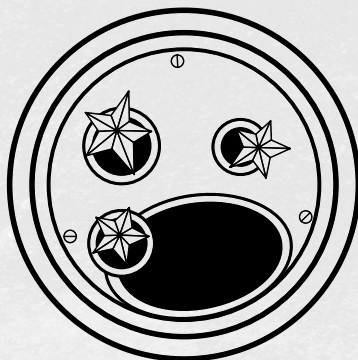
Duration: 12 turns

Base Price: 5

Equipment Ratings: A/A-B-B/C

Notes: Lethal; Continuous; Delayed

Note: All stats are for *A Time of War (AToW)*. For rules on how to use these poisons, see *Continuous Damage* and *Drugs and Poisons*, on pp. 180–181 and pp. 317–321, *AToW*, respectively.





ACE DARWIN AND THE SIDEWINDER CANYON

JAMES BIXBY

**VELVET GLOVE BAR AND GRILL
BRAGA, TIMBIQUI
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
24 FEBRUARY 3044**

I always managed to find a good bar post mission. Sometimes I like to brag that the bar closest to the spaceport is the only reason I take the contracts I do. The truth is, finding a backwater in need of a couple of pirates spanked by a lone hero in a light 'Mech, even one as powerful as my *Panther*, was becoming harder and harder to pull off. The so-called Era of the Mercenary seemed to be over with the rise of the Federated Commonwealth, and that went double for independent MechWarriors.

But Timbiqui and its spaceport tavern certainly fit my taste. It was called the Velvet Glove, yet another cute allusion to House Steiner's crest. The air was smoky without being overwhelming. Three of the walls were paneled in wood carved and charred to give the illusion of being made from liquor barrels. The menu was amenable as well, with many local breweries who knew what they were doing and well-rounded waitstaff who didn't.

And most importantly, the bar was loaded with starry-eyed locals who'd cover a hero's bar tab in exchange for a good story.

"So, Ace, how'd you get your hands on such a BattleMech out here?" my astech asked, setting us up for the con.

For the last five years, we've been running this story over and over. I suppose I should feel bad for swindling these rednecks out of a fifty-kroner bar tab. After all, their planet was ponying up nearly half a million

for the garrison job I'd just finished. But old habits die hard. And I do so love being the center of attention, when it doesn't involve trouble.

"Well, my friend, if you want to hear that story—" I downed the rest of the cold ale in one gulp. "—go get me another mug."

KOOKEN'S PLEASURE PIT LYRAN COMMONWEALTH SOMETIME IN 3035

The future of this particular MechWarrior was looking pretty bleak, if I do say so myself. I managed to swindle my way into the Nagelring by the skin of my teeth. While my grades were certainly adequate, my extracurricular activities set the commandant's teeth on edge, and I got to be on a first-name basis with her yeoman as a result. It was the incident with the Terran elephant-foot umbrella holder and the marked playing cards that got me expelled just as I was finishing my second year. I suppose some people just don't know a good joke when it hits them in the face. Only my time in the training simulators allowed me to hitch onto the planetary militia of Kooken's Pleasure Pit, so I was able to keep my dream of being a MechWarrior alive.

Still, after a three-year stint—and a sordid affair with the colonel's daughter—it looked like reenlistment was not an option for me, no matter how good I was in the cockpit. I had used all of my day passes for the month on a life well spent, seeking warm company, sultry entertainment, and trying my best to relieve nobles of their money through games of chance. All of those decadent evenings saw me twenty-four hours from discharge, I was stuck on long-range reconnaissance patrol while my lancemates and techs went off to celebrate my imminent departure.

"It's a pity you can't join us," one of my lancemates said. "We're going to have a round or two at Missie B's. We'll keep the dancers entertained for you!" I could have killed him, but the three MechWarriors and the technical staff were all smiling—the kind of smile that sowed mischief, I knew all too well. After three years, my penchant for mischief had certainly rubbed off on the lot, and good-natured but harmless practical jokes were common in the unit.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing. You be careful out there!" Lieutenant Esterhaus gave his traditional closing statement as though he were giving me a briefing. My other two lancemates were clearly choking back giggles. They turned away toward the bus that was to take them into town, chanting more well wishes at me for my last patrol.

When I opened my locker, I was blasted with confetti, string foam, and toilet paper. And then I had to exchange the tequila I found in my canteen with water. Normally I would not object to such a prank, but risking dehydration in a BattleMech is a recipe for disaster. Almost as bad as intoxication. But what the lance did to my *Commando* took the proverbial cake.

Standing stark in the yellow lights of the 'Mech hangar, the COM-3A *Commando* that had been my only real friend for the last three years was painted a bizarre camouflage of bright carnation pink and baby blue. The pattern was Militia standard, so the armored panels covering the twin SRM 6 ports were still in standard black-and-yellow checkers. Those standard colors mixed with the neon defacement in a manner so brazen and hideous a blind man could've spotted it from ten kilometers away. Across the chest was graffitied in bright yellow: HAPPY FRAG-OFF DAY, DARWIN!

It got worse when I raised the scissor lift to the *Commando's* cockpit hatch. The four-centimeter armored door was sealed, the cockpit already pressurized. This is not normal for a 'Mech in-gantry on a planet with a standard atmosphere. After entering my command chain in the nearby panel, the pressure equalized, and I was assaulted by the odor of the perfume department of every department store in the Inner Sphere. A dozen empty bottles of pirated brand women's perfume lay opened, the contents liberally poured all over the command couch.

I seriously contemplated chasing after those bastards and blowing their van sky high. I was just grateful the astechs hadn't done anything to the startup sequence. They must have thought the gauche paint job was enough suffering, in addition to being in a cramped cockpit smelling of yak piss and alcohol. It was times like this I wish neurohelmets had their own independent air supply, like in aerospace fighters.

So for the next four hours I found myself lazily marching 25 tons of sensory assault across steppes littered with occasional homesteads and highways. Civilian ground cars honked horns at my BattleMech while driving into town to seeking vice or work, or both. It was while I was waiting for a beefalo ranch to finish driving its stock along that things finally, for the first time in my career, got interesting.

Pulling itself up from the Sidewinder River Canyon was a BattleMech, painted in the yellows, greens, and browns of plains camouflage.

"Unidentified *Panther*, respond." I called out, priming the *Commando's* twin short-range-missile racks.

Static came over the communications channel. The *Panther's* MechWarrior made no attempt to signal damaged radio equipment. All MechWarriors across the inner sphere are taught an old form of BattleMech sign language, based on similar maneuvers that foot infantry

used when silence was called for. This *Panther* instead seemed to be shaking off rock and dirt.

The Kooken's Reserve Militia contained no *Panthers*. The BattleMech itself had no livery or markings visible, just the dusty neutral camouflage. Could have been a Kurita raider, could have been a pirate. It could have been someone local with a private 'Mech. Whatever the excuse, I was outclassed by the particle projection cannon on its right arm, and I needed to find a way out.

"Unidentified *Panther*, stand down and respond!" I called out again. Almost immediately, I switched to the Militia command frequency. "Kooken Base! Mayday! Mayday! Single Bravo-Mike, PNT series, unresponsive to hails. Requesting backup. Coordinates to follow." I slapped the red panel that dumped a live coordinate feed to the base's combat control center. Some computers back at base now had live updates on my position in near real time, and if I was lucky, alarms would be ringing out across the compound.

I still don't know if I was heard or not, because I immediately ran across the cattle drive and under the *Panther's* PPC. Whoever was piloting that 'Mech was green as grass, as my *Commando* was practically standing still when the bright-blue hand of God seared the air between its legs. It would take about five seconds to cycle, and I was going to take advantage of it.

A dozen short-range missiles streaked from my *Commando's* arm and chest. Half the warheads scattered into the *Panther's* legs and hips, but not enough to make the 'Mech stumble. I juke the *Commando* the opposite direction and snapped off my medium laser to melt a scar across the *Panther's* chest.

As I watched the *Panther* aim its PPC, my heart stopped. I was cursing too loudly and liberally that I couldn't claim time slowed down as that cannon fired. I watched my master display go from green to black as the arm that housed the *Commando's* laser flew back and to the left of the rest of the 'Mech. *Panthers* were built to provide fire support for scout 'Mechs, or to be low-weight gun lines. My *Commando* just couldn't survive another hit like that, which meant I couldn't survive another hit.

It's moments like this where you tend to do strange calculus. In my case, it was deciding between certain death and probable death. I knew the Sidewinder River Canyon was about fifteen meters deep. Its wall was more a steep slope that a determined individual could climb without equipment, but a BattleMech had to use hand actuators to dig in hard to hoist itself up. and the *Panther* hadn't moved since it crested the decline.

So I reoriented the *Commando* and rammed the throttle forward. For good measure I fired both missile racks again and even discharged the flamer underneath the right-arm SRM rack. The *Panther* jerked



a little to the right, and then the left, clearly undecided which way it needed to go.

"Got you!" I screamed as I pulled the eject lever. The sound of the two 'Mechs crashing into each other was not heard so much as felt over the rocket motor of my ejection seat. The bottom of the seat clipped the *Panther's* antenna and sent the world spinning hard and fast. For about ten seconds the only thing I was thinking about was not throwing up.

By the time I came to a hard landing on soft dirt, I felt like I'd been thrown around in a lead-lined refrigerator. But I was alive. I took my survival knife from its sheath and cut myself free of the command couch. For the longest time I just sat up against the seat, alternating between laughing, crying, and letting out a stream of curses. A glance at my chronograph showed me I was in combat for just under a minute.

By time I got to my feet, only about ten minutes had passed from my initial mayday. Realizing I might have an enemy MechWarrior out there, I stumbled to the edge of the canyon. Gazing downhill, I saw both BattleMechs on the ground, splayed out like slapstick cartoon characters. The whine of their fusion engines and mechanical parts was still audible. Neither 'Mech was moving, nor was the *Panther's* cockpit hatch opening.

I ended up sitting there staring at the 'Mechs for nearly an hour before Militia armored personnel carriers and a 'Mech lance arrived. An *Assassin* and a *Vulcan* immediately swung out in opposite directions to establish a perimeter, while the pair of *Locusts* stayed put, their SRM packs and lasers scanning the area. Command had decided speed rather than firepower was needed to help me, for all the good it did.

The Packrat transport rolled up, and a squad of medics and their force protection ran in my direction. I was so completely desiccated from the heat and the lack of an intact canteen that I saluted the infantry officer sent to assess me, and passed out.



When I woke up, I was in a hospital bed, with an IV in one arm and a splint on the other. Apparently, I got a sprain when I'd landed on my side. As it turns out, a 500-kilo ejection seat landing on top of you is not the most gentle thing in the world. I learned from my lancemates that the *Panther's* pilot had been killed on impact with the canyon floor, poor bastard's spine broken by the very restraint harness that was supposed to keep them alive. They had no identifying tags, though if the elaborate tattoos and the sword in the cockpit were anything to go by, it was likely a lost or AWOL Kurita MechWarrior from the Fourth Succession War. What on Terra had brought it so deep into Lyran Space, I did not know, nor did I really care. Apparently the 'Mech lance sent to assist was held up by a smattering of other ne'er-do-wells, but they

were driven off instead of fighting. So the *Panther* must have been their heavy fire support.

My *Commando* was recovered, the command couch reset. A new arm was on its way from the Requisitions Depot office, and could be installed in four to six weeks. That left the disposition of the *Panther* itself. Certainly a reasonable military would want to claim a 'Mech as valuable as that. But since I was the one who killed its pilot, the *Panther* was mine under rules of salvage that had existed for the best part of 300 years. Finally, after five years of work and a childhood of dreaming, I had my own BattleMech. At least, once three weeks' worth of paperwork were handled and the Department of the Quartermaster ratified it. But I could live on the Lyran Commonwealth's kroner for a bit longer.

By time it was all handled, I got my formal discharge party at Missie B's, and a few other places. Cheers all around as I told the story and got pointed out all the times I should have died. When we returned to the barracks, Lieutenant Esterhaus drove me to the 'Mech bay so I could take formal possession of my prize.

"We fixed up for you real good. Even got it repainted." The officer smiled. "The boys chipped in and bought you a fresh coolant vest and neurohelmet to boot. Your career as an independent contractor is all set!"

When he pulled the ground car to the gantry the *Panther* was using, my jaw hit the floor. "You have *got* to be kidding me!" I yelled.

The *Panther* was painted the same bright pink as my "going away" present. I noted the baby blue that was standard on Lyran Militias was absent, making my departure official.

"How much does it cost to paint a BattleMech?" I asked.

"About twenty grand," the lieutenant replied.

After that night, twenty grand was about 20,000 C-bills more than I had.

THE PRESENT

"And that's how I got my BattleMech," I said, downing my fourth draft of the night.

"Bollocks," one of my audience members said. "You ejected mid-charge? You should have wound up splattered on that canyon wall!"

"And how come you weren't made to pay for the destroyed *Commando*? Or had the *Panther* taken as its replacement?" another objected. "Life is cheap, BattleMechs aren't," he quoted the old saw.

"How did you even get into a Militia after being kicked out of the Nagelring?" yelled a third.

More questions kept coming, and my personal charm and dissembling was starting to wane. It was past time to make my exit.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I understand your skepticism. But the life of a MechWarrior, any MechWarrior, is one of improbability. Still, I thank you all for being such gracious hosts, and for the opportunity to serve you and to be served. Now if you don't mind, I must be on my way. Adieu!" I bowed and stepped out the tavern's door, and my astech followed a few minutes later, lit cigarette in his mouth.

He snorted. "You didn't pay, *again*."

I knew he paid my tab. My astech always pays for me. Too honest for his own good, if you ask me. One time he didn't pay for me and discovered the con worked. I imagine it scared the daylights out of him.

"How long till you think they figure that out?" I asked. It was part of the easy game we played with each other. You develop a relationship with your astechs that is more intimate than friendship. Sure, I was his employer, but an astech was responsible for my life and livelihood too. It was a quirky symbiosis.

"Probably tomorrow, when the owner reads the receipts. We'll be off to Galatea by then." The tech took another drag of his cigarette. "The Sidewinder Canyon. That story is always my favorite."

"One of my better origin stories, I think," I replied.

"Which tale is the real one, Ace?"

I wrapped my arm around my companion and laughed.

"Does it matter? Why let the truth get in the way of a good story?"





AFTER-ACTION REPORT: BARLOW'S END

JAMES KIRTLEY

Precentor,

I thought you'd get a kick out of this. It's a copy of an Internal Security Force document about the Draconis Combine's raid on Barlow's End last year. Not sure who this Furukawa fellow is, but David Tezuka is one of ours. As a little background, we've known about the "jump stabilizer" project at the proving grounds for several years, ever since Banzai squirreled away Professor McGuffin just before he was about to spill the beans at a conference at NAIS. Anyway, it looks like the Feds thought they were well on their way to building some sort of hyperspace interdictor before Wolf's Dragoons smashed it. Good thing our boy Tezuka can think well on his feet. What he did was a brilliant bit of misdirection, and it looks like the Snakes bought it. They'll be pursuing the wrong angle for years now.

As to hyperspace interdictors—well, we know it's theoretically possible to interrupt a JumpShip on arrival, but even our best hyperspace physicists think they're at least a century away from making one work, and they doubt the Feds are anywhere near that close. Current thinking is that they were attempting to generate some kind of "resonance field" using the high germanium content in the Barlow's End caverns—an approach our scientists ruled out decades ago. But it does explain why they dared working on such a project on the Combine's front doorstep.

PEACE OF BLAKE AND ALL THAT,

—J

From: Sho-sa Furukawa Akihiroa
To: ISF Director Subhash Indrahara
Subject: Operation Yakiimo post-mortem
Date: 12 December 3026

Director,

Per your request, I have put together a summary of Operation Yakiimo. This operation was a joint ISF/DCMS technology raid on the world of Barlow's End to retrieve or destroy a prototype Federated Suns device described as a "jump stabilizer." While we were ultimately unable to retrieve the device, our mercenaries were able to destroy it to keep it out of the hands of our enemies. Additionally, our science team has been able to analyze data assembled from a combination of battleROM footage and information from field agents on several Federated Suns worlds. It is our belief that this operation has set our enemies back decades in their research.

We were initially alerted to the project by a deep-cover agent, code name Fukurō, who was monitoring the Achernar Proving Grounds. Fukurō had come across internal memos detailing the development of a prototype referred to as a "jump stabilizer." Initially, due to the similarities in the English words for "jump jets" and "JumpShips," our science directorate suspected that the jump stabilizer may have been part of the so-called Super Griffin project, due to that prototype's greatly improved jump range. However, Fukurō was able to acquire additional data that suggested something radically different, including detailed requisitions of components and materials inconsistent with 'Mech jump-jet technology, and a reference to an upcoming inspection visit by Professor McGuffin.

At this point, our science directorate connected the name Professor McGuffin and "jump stabilizer" to the 3023 "Annual Conference on Hyperspace Physics" hosted by the New Avalon Institute of Science. Of particular interest at this conference was a talk by Professor McGuffin on "Overcoming Instabilities in Hyperspace Jump Envelopes." Despite being heavily subscribed, the talk was cancelled at the last moment, purportedly due to scheduling conflicts, and our agents were unable to locate the professor afterward. There had been no further traffic on "jump-envelope stability" (or related keywords) for nearly three years.

At first, confidence was low that the so-called jump stabilizer could be related to hyperspace mechanics for several reasons. First and foremost, JumpShips perform notoriously poorly in gravity wells, making it unlikely that the Federated Suns would be doing such research planetside. Second, Barlow's End is a border world subject to regular raids, and the existence of the Achernar Proving Grounds is at best an open secret. Finally, the Federated Suns is a backward nation, barely

capable of constructing a handful of JumpShips every year. Analysis considered it extremely unlikely that the Suns would be indulging in highly hypothetical research into a barely understood technology.

Nonetheless, Fukurō was able to gather sufficient information to suggest that not only was the stabilizer a legitimate scientific asset, but that the Federated Suns' engineers developing it were close to a major breakthrough. A decision was made in March of this year to launch a raid on the system before the engineers could complete their work.

Planning the operation took place between March and June. It was decided relatively early on that the Ryuken and Wolf's Dragoons would make an excellent raiding force. They were given a high chance of success, but the large number of targets the Dragoons were assigned would disguise the true nature of the operation.

As I am certain the director is aware, the raid was not an unqualified success. There are far lengthier and insightful analyses of the breakdowns in communications between the Ryuken and Dragoons commanders that led to the destruction of the prototype. It is not my place to comment on either the competence or potential malfeasance of the mercenaries. Nonetheless, the prototype was destroyed before it could be secured and taken off-planet.

Since the accounts of the mercenaries and Ryuken commanders did not agree, per our contract with Wolf's Dragoons, battleROM footage was made available to the DCMS High Command, and therefore to the ISF. Our team of scientists, led by Dr. David Tezuki, has analyzed that footage, as well as photos and requisitioned records acquired by Fukurō. They have assembled several theories as to the purpose of the device.

In the original abstract for his talk, Dr. McGuffin asserted that jump-field stabilization was the key to breaking through the thirty-light-year barrier that limits nonzero-mass jumps. However, according to Dr. Tezuki, a well-established fact of hyperspace mechanics is that the limit to jump range is a function of mass and energy consumption, not of any instabilities in the jump envelope. A full mathematical explanation of Dr. Tezuki's analysis is attached to this report.

Nevertheless, Dr. Tezuki and his team were able to draw some conclusions. From what they could determine, the prototype is roughly analogous to a Kearny-Fuchida jump-drive core, with a cylindrical titanium-germanium core, with storage and refrigeration capacity for what would likely be an insulating barrier of liquid helium. However, the actual prototype was much too small to be a standard K-F jump core. That, coupled with the unusual geometry of the attached components that appear to mimic jump-field initializers, suggest to Dr. Tezuki that the device could not be used for any sort of hyperspace jump.

Despite that, Dr. Tezuki believes the device is related to hyperspatial physics. One possibility is that the device is intended to create a K-F field,

but not a stable one. They surmised that the Suns may be attempting to build a weapon to take advantage of the effects of a poorly controlled K-F field. However, such a weapon would not be particularly effective for two reasons. First, the effective range of a device this small would be significantly smaller than a similar mass of conventional explosives. Second, and far more importantly, the manufacture of such a unit would be cost-prohibitive. Dr. Tezuki's team claimed that, had the Dragoons stopped to pick up the remains of the titanium-germanium core from the destroyed prototype, they could have more than doubled their revenue for the mission from selling the raw materials alone.

Another possibility is that the Suns are experimenting with hyperspatial physics for some end other than transport. Exactly what that might be is unclear, and Dr. Tezuki was unwilling to speculate. Numerous papers published on the subject over the past few centuries suggest that jump fields might be used to extract exotic matter or energy from hyperspace; however, no reputable scientist of the last century has been willing to even entertain such notions, let alone spend billions of C-bills to test them.

Dr. Tezuki is currently developing a theory that Barlow's End was chosen specifically for this project. Under normal circumstances, hyperspace research needs to be done outside of a gravity well, but he believes this project may have been specifically designed to test the effects of the spacetime curvature caused by nearby masses. If so, it is also possible that the high germanium content of the caverns under Landova may play a role, although he hesitated to suggest why.

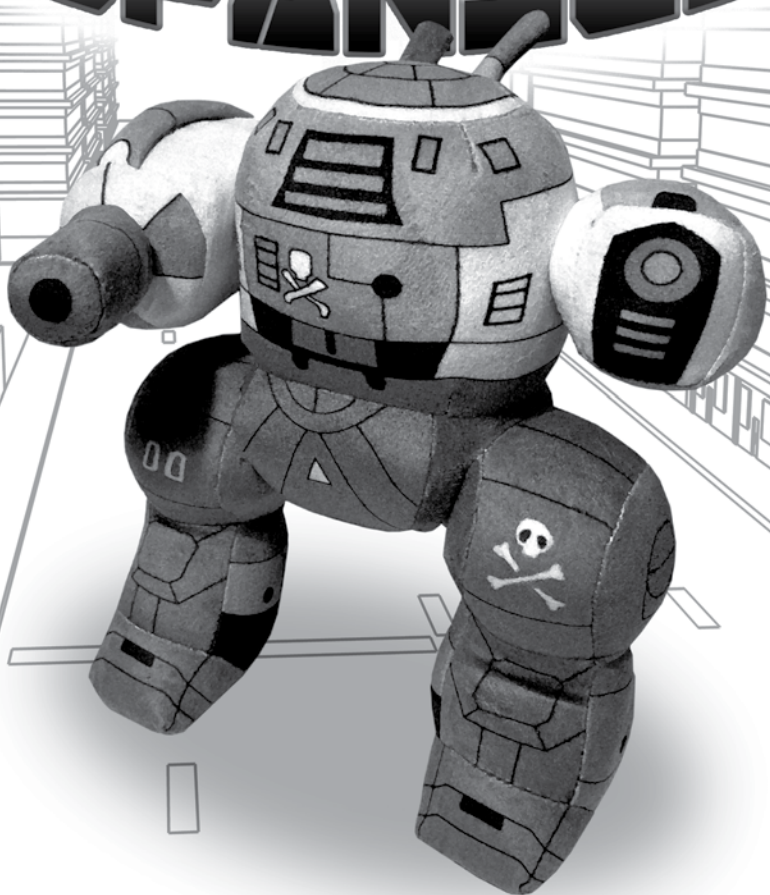
If Dr. Tezuki's theory is correct, it might be possible that the Suns have found a way to reduce or eliminate the chances of a misjump when using a nonstandard, or "pirate," jump point. If so, this prototype may be a scaled-down attempt to test their theory. If they could make such a device work, the strategic implications would be staggering. However, Dr. Tezuki thinks that even the Star League at its height would have been incapable of building such a device, let alone the primitive Federated Suns. If they were indeed pursuing such an objective, Dr. Tezuki believes that there was little risk of them succeeding.

One final scenario, of course, is that the prototype is itself a counterintelligence operation. Dr. Tezuki suggested that it may have been nothing but expensive junk designed to confuse our scientists, should they get a hold of it. To quote the doctor, "It's possible the Dragoons did us a favor by destroying it. Otherwise we might be chasing dead ends in hyperspatial physics for decades by attempting to replicate the Inner Sphere's most expensive paperweight." Our analysts don't find this terribly likely, as the prototype was, by all indications, incredibly expensive, and according to the Dragoons, the Suns fought tenaciously to keep it out of their hands.

In conclusion, it is unlikely we will ever have a satisfactory understanding of the Suns' device. Fortunately, our scientific team believes the destruction of this prototype will most likely set back any of their experiments for some time. Additionally, Dr. Tezuki stated that the cost of such an operation would be prohibitive to repeat, at least for the cash-strapped Federated Suns—unless they could find a significant influx of cash. While the Federated Suns has recently signed an accord with the Lyran Commonwealth, this agency believes that the extent of that alliance is far too limited to include the types of cashflow necessary for further operations of this kind.



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MOVING FORWARD

DANIEL ISBERNER

**HORON MOUNTAINS
GATEWAY
SCORPION EMPIRE
12 FEBRUARY 3151**

Galaxy Commander Emmy Line sidestepped her *Rhino*, causing the incoming Gauss round to hit the ground behind her. She hated pirate raids. She knew other Galaxy Commanders would not have bothered to personally engage the raiders, but what she hated more than pirates were commanders who thought they were better than the warriors under their command, and thus saw front-line combat as beneath them.

Without even thinking about it, she fired her medium lasers at the attacker. Two missed, but the other three scored hits across the *Griffin's* left arm, vaporizing the armor and burning holes in the structure beneath it.

This BattleMech was the last of the pirate company still standing. The other 'Mechs of her command Star had chased the raiders back to their DropShip and were currently engaging it, trying to keep it grounded long enough for air support to arrive and prevent it from launching.

She was pretty sure why the *Griffin* had not fled yet. It had maneuvered close to a rock wall, and she had not allowed it to get past her, which could only mean the 'Mech had no jump jets—a good bet, considering the *Griffin* bore the general look of something cobbled together from different parts. Its jump jets had probably been removed to make room for the big Gauss rifle.

Speaking of which...

Emmy sidestepped another shot, and the Gauss round exploded a tree behind her.

Her opponent had a tell. Whenever they fired their Gauss rifle, they raised the *Griffin's* right arm just a little bit. That made it easy to avoid getting shot.

Instead of returning fire, she decided she had had enough. Emmy pushed her throttle forward and fired up her Myomer Accelerator Signal Circuitry. The MASC pushed her *Rhino* to 129 kph, and when the pilot of the *Griffin* finally realized what she was doing, it was too late.

Her 50-ton 'Mech rammed straight into the enemy's left side. The *Rhino's* ram plates protected her, but also made the attack much worse. Combined with the spikes at the front of her 'Mech, what followed was brutal.

She impaled the *Griffin's* left leg with one spike, and half its torso disintegrated when her ram plates impacted it at such high speed. Emmy brought her 'Mech to a quick stop and turned it around. The sudden change in acceleration pressed her into her restraints. She was sure she would have bruises on her shoulders later.

Then she fired all her weapons into what was left of the enemy, aiming carefully to avoid hitting its head. The enemy's reactor signature went offline. Either she had damaged it enough to make it shut down or the pilot had decided that they preferred to live and shut it down in surrender. Either way, the fight was over.

"Ranger One to Ranger Star. Report!"

Andai's voice was firm when he replied. "We have disabled two drives on the enemy's DropShip. They have not powered down yet, but if they try to launch, it will most likely end in a crash. Air support is thirty seconds out."

"Very good, Ranger Star. Make sure they are not getting any stupid ideas into their heads and wait for the boarding crews to arrive. I have an enemy down and will signal medics to get the MechWarrior out of the cockpit."

"I really hope these pirates did not wipe their files."

"Me too. But they do seem new, so they probably have not figured out what we are after. Now, though, I have to figure out a way to get this thing off me..."

She heard everyone from her Star suppress a wild laugh over the comms. It was not the first time she had parts of an enemy 'Mech stuck on her *Rhino's* spikes, and she knew they made bets on whether it would happen during a fight.

"Who won this time?" she asked. There was nothing she could do about it, so she had decided to play along.

"Depends," Andai replied.

"On what?"

"Is anything dangling in front of your cockpit?" Even over the comms she could hear how difficult it was for him not to laugh.

"Aff."

"Then I have won."

"Congratulations. Now shut down your comm and laugh. I fear you are going to explode if you keep it in any longer."



It didn't take long for the medics to arrive. They cut a hole into the enemy 'Mech's cockpit and dragged out an unmoving figure. One of them gave her a thumbs-up, meaning the MechWarrior was alive but unconscious.

Very good. We need them alive.

Over the last couple years, information had become the most important resource the Scorpion Empire had. They knew the Inner Sphere was suffering from a hyperpulse-generator blackout, had been for quite some time now. They also knew Clan Wolf had moved closer to Terra and formed the Wolf Empire.

Clan Wolf was waiting to pounce on Terra, and Clan Jade Falcon was also on the move toward the same prize. Whatever happened next, the Scorpions had to know. That had led to Khan Magon Scott deciding it was important to capture enemy DropShips and MechWarriors. Even pirates. Because they could have information.

Oh, he will love these pirates. They are special. Or at least their hardware is.

While most of the pirates' 'Mechs had been more or less what they had come to expect from these bandits, there had been one 'Mech that had looked out of place. Close to a *Shadow Cat*, but not identical. It was also not some kind of FrankenMech, because it looked like it had been built in a factory, not in someone's garage, as FrankenMechs usually did.

No, these pirates must have come from the Inner Sphere. Which means they have information.

**TRADER BASE
GATEWAY
SCORPION EMPIRE
15 FEBRUARY 3151**

Emmy looked out of the window of her small office. On the horizon, she could see the IndustrialMech factory that had replaced a huge civilian car factory five years ago. Instead of producing useless, fusion-powered sports cars, the factory had been retooled to produce *Daedalus* BattleMechs and other IndustrialMech chassis that were, in turn, used to build other factories on other planets to accelerate the growth of

the Scorpions' military and industrial production capabilities for three years now. Once finished, they had added another production line, which manufactured Epona Pursuit Tanks for the newly formed Eta Galaxy on Göttingen, right between the two parts of the Scorpion Empire.

The colony of Gateway had been reestablished in 3141, serving as a base of operations between the newly established recharge stations before being abandoned. It did not take the Empire long to learn why the planet had been abandoned long ago. Massive creatures, living under the surface unless they were disturbed, had almost destroyed the half-finished settlement. Khan Magon Scott had moved half of Alpha Galaxy to the planet and sent them underground to destroy the creatures. Afterward, he had created Eta Galaxy, which was formed half from freeborn troops all around the Empire and half from seasoned Trueborn warriors, veterans other Clans would have declared *solahma*.

The factory was getting yet another production line that would build an upgraded version of the *Nexus*. The new model was designated the *Star Python*, named after a social, pack-hunting snake that constricted its prey before tearing it to shreds with its powerful jaws.

The first full production models of the *Star Python* were due to be put into production next week. The first two of those new 'Mechs would stay on Gateway, given to the training facility that would turn former Hanseatic League warriors and people too old to join the freeborn *sibkos* into warriors of the Scorpion Empire. The rest of the run would go to Eta Galaxy.

Emmy had championed putting the old *Nexus* chassis back into production. It had been an Inner Sphere 'Mech, but the basic model was easy to build and maintain. Alongside an improved version of the original model, the factory would also produce a version upgraded with Clan-tech weapons.

She had found blueprints for the *Nexus* in the old Word of Blake archives the Hanseatic League had on Braunschweig, but the files had been damaged. Without telling anyone, she had given the damaged files to a civilian company on Gateway that specialized in data recovery.

When she presented the restored files to Galaxy Commander Barin Myers almost two years ago, he had challenged her to a Trial of Refusal over the files, wanting her to destroy them, because she should not have given them to Hansa civilians. She had killed him in the Circle of Equals, and Khan Magon Scott had in turn praised her initiative. To reward her, he had raised her from Star Captain to Galaxy Commander, replacing the now dead Barin Myers and giving her control over Omega Galaxy—making her the first freeborn from the former Hanseatic League to be named a Galaxy Commander of the Scorpion Empire.

When Enrique Noyes was promoted to the rank of reKhan of Gateway—a position created more than half a century ago for

administering worlds in the growing Escorpión Imperio—Barin Myers had replaced him, and he had made no effort to hide his hatred for freeborns, even though they comprised most of Omega Galaxy. However, the freeborn warriors of Omega had openly cheered when Emmy took command. This outdated look of despising freeborns had been back on the rise in the Scorpion Empire after the defeat of the Hanseatic League. Fueled by terrorist attacks that had kept occurring even though the Hansas had been defeated, the self-proclaimed “Preservers” wanted to keep the Scorpion Empire stuck in the old ways.

Khan Scott had to defend his progressive stance more and more often of late, and he had defeated quite a few challengers to his rule of the Scorpion Empire in the last couple years. So far, he kept winning, and the Imperial faction, fighting to bring peace and unity to the Scorpion Empire, was far bigger than the Preserver faction, but the cry for them to move back into the old ways was growing louder, and Khan Scott was less and less able to calm things down.

He needs to be more aggressive toward these Preservers, bring them to their knees, strip them of their commands.

As far as Emmy was concerned, the terrorists and Preservers formed an endless circle. Terrorists attacked, and Preservers enforced punishments on civilians to teach them fear. In turn, more civilians joined the terrorists’ ranks, because they saw them as the only way out of oppression, which then nudged one or two more Trueborn warriors toward the Preserver camp.

A knock on her door made her turn around and pulled her out of her thoughts.

“Come in,” she said, and Star Colonel Nele Line entered.

“We have cracked the encryption on the files from the pirate DropShip. I thought you would like to take a look.” Nele handed Emmy a noteputer.

She looked through the files, and with everything she read, her mood grew darker.

“Prepare my DropShip and signal the JumpShips at the nadir point to form a command circuit toward Braunschweig while my ship is in transit. Whatever else they had planned, this takes absolute priority, and they are to transmit these orders to all JumpShips able to jump on their path. You are also to send these orders along the already established HPGs. I need to speak with the Khan as soon as possible. Until I return, you are in command of Omega Galaxy.”

I will miss the Star Python production line going online. She had planned to make a big fanfare about it, strengthening the bonds between the warrior caste and the civilians by celebrating what could be done when they worked together as a team. Nele would make a good show of it during Emmy’s absence, but a Galaxy Commander showing what

unity within the Scorpion Empire could achieve would have made a stronger point.

Rekhan Noyes will not be happy with that change on such short notice.

**KIROV SPACEPORT
BRAUNSCHWEIG
SCORPION EMPIRE
13 MARCH 3151**

The moment Emmy stepped off the DropShip, Star Colonel Peter Noye welcomed her. The towering Elemental was a good friend and Khan Scott's right hand. He had coordinated the move of the capital in 3148.

He was probably the one who urged the Khan to grant me my rank.

"How was your flight?" he greeted her.

"Uneventful. The first time in two years I have not had to fight terrorists or pirates for longer than a week in a row."

"Is it that bad on Gateway?"

"It is worse on other border planets in the former Hanseatic League. The systems with Preservers in command have seen more terrorist activity. It is mostly pirates plaguing my neck of the woods."

This was useless small talk. Peter already knew all of this, but they couldn't discuss what Emmy was here for without the risk of anyone overhearing, so they projected pointless chatter to any accidental or intentional observers. All she had told him about her recovered intelligence was that it was important enough to make her come in person.

They entered a vehicle parked at the edge of the tarmac and drove off toward the Clan Council Chamber.

"So, what is going on?" Peter asked.

Emmy glanced at the driver up front. Peter nodded.

"The Wolves are moving," she said.

"They are fighting a war, that is not a surprise. There is more, I guess?"

"Aff. They are not merely moving a few Galaxies around. They are moving their entire *touman*."

"How accurate is the information?"

"It seems legitimate."

"How old?"

"Roughly six months. The pirates had no information beyond September 3150. The HPG blackout in the Inner Sphere slows information down, so we were lucky this little piece reached us this

quickly. It was spread out between hundreds of data dumps different ships had shared with those pirates. Those ships had no idea what little nugget they had there, but our Watch has grown very good at dissecting and analyzing this kind of data. They pieced it together from dozens of completely unrelated reports buried in the pirate databases."

"Have the Wolves invaded Terra?"

"The data dumps did not say. It is possible. The information is six months out of date, and I do not think they have been sitting idly by for that long. By now they will at least have jumped into the Terran system. We have also found out that Clan Nova Cat is no more. The Draconis Combine annihilated them. While I understand the Sea Foxes are only sharing news with us, not intelligence, I wonder why they kept the Nova Cats' fate from us."

Peter did not say anything for the remainder of the trip to the Clan Council Chamber. She knew the look on his face meant he was deep in thought. Their vehicle came to a stop in front of the replica of a statue in honor of their last ProtoMech pilot, who had died protecting Graystone when the colony was established. The original statue was on Graystone, but Khan Scott had wanted a replica in front of the Grand Council Chamber on Braunschweig, alongside statues of other honored warriors.

Peter had already unlatched his seat belt when an explosion ripped the Clan Council Chamber apart.

Despite her seat belts, Emmy was thrown against the roof when the shockwave picked up their car and threw it against the building on the other side of the street. The structure crumbled around them and came crashing down on their car. She saw Peter's head hanging from his body at a strange angle, then she passed out.

**ST. ELFE MILITARY HOSPITAL
BRAUNSCHWEIG
SCORPION EMPIRE
22 MAY 3151**

Emmy opened her eyes. To her surprise, the light did not blind her. The room was not completely dark, but all lights were dimmed.

"Good, you are awake."

She turned her head, and needles started to dig into her neck and head, but she kept turning it.

Peter sat next to her bed, his neck in a brace, but otherwise he seemed fine.

"You are alive," she managed to say, but barely more than a whisper.

"Yes. My neck was hurt, but I fell in a lucky way. You hit your head a lot worse, and we had to put you into a coma for a week until the swelling in your brain had gone down."

"What happened?"

"The Council Chamber is almost completely destroyed," a new voice added to the conversation. Before she could move her head, Khan Scott stepped into her field of vision. "Terrorists smuggled explosives inside."

"How did they manage to sneak in enough to achieve such an explosion?"

"It seems one of the Hanseatic League merchants, who capitulated and fell perfectly in line from all outside appearances, had hidden a large part of his assets. He has been funding terrorist activity for years. Ever since we moved the capital to Braunschweig, he has been helping terrorists to get through our screening processes and insert them in the Council Chamber's facility management staff."

"How long have I been out?"

"Nine days." It was Peter who answered. "We caught one of the terrorists as she was trying to flee from the planet, and she gave up all intel on her own people almost immediately."

Emmy shook her head and was rewarded with what felt like nails being driven into her temples. Nevertheless, she turned her head back toward Khan Magon Scott. "Peter would have been fully capable of telling me all of this, my Khan. Why are you here?"

He turned his gaze toward Peter and smiled. "You were right, she is smart."

To Emmy, he said, "I have failed to calm the Empire down. This attack should not have happened. To try turning things around, I have decided to hasten my reform plans."

He paused, and Emmy sat up as straight as she could. *Whatever he wants to do, he wants me to be a part of it.*

"I plan to create a new position within the Scorpion Empire: a zarKhan. The zarKhan will rule the Scorpion Empire itself, while the Khan will be in control of our military. This will allow everyone to focus on the matters at hand and not be stretched too thin. The Scorpion Empire is too big to be controlled by one person. My original plan was to elect the zarKhan from the ranks of reKhans, but my ideal candidate has not yet achieved that rank."

Emmy's mouth was standing open. *He cannot be serious.* "Me?"

Once again Khan Scott looked at Peter, clearly pleased.

"You are correct. Matters have forced me to move the reform along faster than I wanted, so my plans have to be adapted."

"Has this news already left this room?" She could not believe the Preserver faction would be happy with it.

It was Peter who answered. "Nothing beyond an announcement that we are to hold a Clan Council so the Bloodnamed warriors can gather. We wanted to be sure you would accept the position before we announced anything. We also had to be certain you would be combat ready, because we do not want this position to be solely decided by a vote. We want this to be fought out in combat, too."

"Why in combat?"

"Because a vote will not be enough. Even when we win it with groundbreaking numbers—which we will, since the Preservers are a minority—the Council will never accept it without the crucible of combat."

"So, I have to be strong enough to fight and win."

"Aff. We need to thin the Preservers' ranks during the trials, and make it clear that you are stronger than all of them."

"Why...?" She wanted to ask 'Why me?' but the long talk and the revelation about their plan had both stunned her and left her weak. She was tired.

"Because you have been saying to come down on the Preservers for a while. Because how you handled the *Star Python* shows that you respect the civilian castes and the citizens of the former Hanseatic League. Because terrorist activity in the Gateway Province has fallen significantly since you took over as Galaxy Commander. Because you were born in the Hanseatic League and rose through the ranks from nothing. Because *you* are the best choice if we want to bring peace to the Empire!"

She put her head on her pillow, closed her eyes for a while to think, and soon fell asleep.



When Emmy finally awoke and opened her eyes, Peter was still sitting there. It seemed like he had not moved a centimeter since she had closed her eyes. *Patience has always been one of his biggest strengths.* Khan Scott was gone, though.

"When are the doctors expecting me to have fully recovered?" Emmy asked.

"Seven days."

She knew time was of the essence. In theory, the Imperials could stall a Clan Council meeting and an election for eternity, but the Scorpion Empire needed this new zarKhan. It needed her to *be* the zarKhan.

"What about saKhan Baba? Why not make him zarKhan instead?"

"He acknowledges his failings and will go along."

"His *failings*?"

"Khan Scott had ordered him to handle the Preserver problem, and he was also in charge of security for the Clan Council Chamber. He fully

accepts that he failed the Khan and the Scorpion Empire, and will take responsibility for that. Once you are installed as zarKhan, he will offer to step down from his post as saKhan."

"Who will replace him?"

"I will take his position."

"Congratulations are in order, then."

"Thank you."

"The Preservers will come for me before the Council, and before any trial can be fought there." She was certain they would try to weaken her with repeated challenges to a Circle of Equals; she had seen them do it before, to install their followers into important positions. That was how Barin Myers had replaced Galaxy Commander Enrique Noye as commander of Omega Galaxy. The Preservers were few, but they acted intelligently. They had not expected Khan Scott would offer Enrique the position of reKhan on Gateway, though.

"We can no longer waste time with internal struggles while the Wolves might already be on Terra, declaring themselves iClan. We need to stand united as soon as possible and figure out how we are going to handle that situation."

"I agree. You have a plan?"

"Aff!" Emmy was not yet sure her plan was any good, because she was still on medication, but she felt a strength burning inside her that was more powerful than any pain medication she might be on.

ST. ELFE MILITARY HOSPITAL BRAUNSCHWEIG SCORPION EMPIRE 27 MAY 3151

Galaxy Commander Emmy Line was in the hospital's gym, testing her strength while two doctors monitored her. She had been running, throwing balls through hoops, and powering through multiple obstacle courses until she was completely out of breath.

She was now flexing her muscles while taking deep breaths to slow down her racing heart.

"Your vitals are strong, Galaxy Commander." The doctor was matter of fact, not smiling or showing any sign he was pleased with her recovery. She would have been insulted, but he had shown the exact same behavior when he had told her only three days ago that her vitals were terrible. "You show rapid improvement, faster than we had expected."

"If you want, we could release you today," the second doctor said. "But I'd prefer to stick to our original plan and monitor you for two more days. Making sure you aren't overexerting yourself."

Her contractions made Emmy smile. As a freeborn accepted into the Empire's warrior ranks, Emmy had made a point of no longer using contractions, but this doctor did not care, even though the Trueborn doctor next to her, who had failed his warrior-caste testing, winced at every single one.

"I agree," Emmy said. "But I want the two of you to pack your things anyway."

"What?" She finally got an emotion out of the first doctor.

"I want you to come with me when I leave the hospital. Become my personal medical staff."

"Are you expecting any regression?" the female doctor asked.

I should really ask for their names, since they are not wearing name tags...

"Neg. I am expecting a lot of *aggression*. I also want you two to make certain everyone thinks my condition is worse than it actually is."

Both of them looked confused.

Emmy smiled. "You will figure this out soon enough."

When I am back in my room, I will prepare to announce my candidacy for the rank of zarkhan. It is time to shake things up some more.

Khan Scott had already announced the creation of the position. Newscasts in the hospital had been filled with almost nothing else. It was also achieving the desired positive effect. She could see it on the upbeat faces of the freeborn hospital staff and the newscasters.

Peter had also told her the Preserver faction was in an uproar. One of them had already died in a failed trial against the Khan. More had challenged him, but his rank allowed him to choose which challenges he would accept. Because of this, Tau Galaxy was in need of a new Galaxy Commander.

There had also been no candidacies from their own Imperial faction; Khan Scott and Peter had made sure of that. In return, the Preserver faction was too confused and angry to decide on a candidate, instead calling to quash the whole idea entirely.

Things are proceeding as planned...

29 MAY 3151

Emmy blocked a blow to her head and responded with an uppercut to her opponent's chin, which made the other warrior stumble backward. Before he could regain his footing, she kicked his feet out from under him.

He was too surprised to get his hands behind him in time to break his fall. Instead, the back of his head hit the ground, and she heard a crack. Blood flooded out of his nose, and all life went out of his eyes.

That was unexpected.

She had already been moving in, planning to pin him down and force him to yield or break his neck, should he refuse to acknowledge defeat.

Emmy had known she would have to fight off Preservers armed with made-up demands for Trials of Grievance. But she had not expected the very first one to wait for her outside of the hospital to challenge her to a combat trial over him being passed over for promotion in Omega Galaxy.

I did not even know he had fallen in with the Preservers. His being passed over was based solely on merits.

It had also not been her decision, as Nele Lines was acting commander. Emmy had been away from Gateway for too long, but there was nothing she could do about that. *Right now, my place is here. Nele can also use the time to figure out how to lead a Galaxy. She will be permanently taking over for me shortly anyway.*

Emmy's two doctors were already all over her, making sure to project concern over her condition where there was none.

The next week would be exhausting.



Three hours later she was sitting in the makeshift Council Chamber, having fought off two more Preservers on her way here. The Preserver movement had moved every Bloodnamed warrior from their ranks toward Braunschweig. Dozens of them were sitting on one side on the grounds of the football arena they had taken over. The stands were filled with spectators from every caste who had come to watch the proceedings.

Galaxy Commander Miros Baba stood at the podium in the middle of the grounds and complained about that very fact. "The Council is not a public spectacle, especially not after our Clan Council Chamber was destroyed by terrorists. Terrorists that might be sitting in the stands and watching us this very moment, planting even more bombs!"

"Do you want another vote on the matter?" Khan Magon Scott did not even try to hide his vicious smile.

The Imperials had not moved everyone to Braunschweig. They outnumbered the Preservers by enough to be able to leave Bloodnamed warriors, especially commanders, at their posts. With increasing pirate attacks, it would have been a grave mistake to strip so many warriors from all of the Empire's holdings. It also meant Imperials were in command of forces usually commanded by Preservers—something the Preservers had either not realized or ignored, because they were determined to stop the creation of this new position at all costs.

Baba looked around at the amused looks in the ranks of the Imperials, shook his head, and went back to his place on the Preserver side of the stadium.

"Now," Khan Scott continued the Council meeting, "my proposal for the creation of the rank of zarKhan has been made. It is time we vote on the matter."

The proposal was simple. The zarKhan would lead the Empire itself and be elected from the ranks of the reKhans, or the zarKhan could be reelected. The candidate would be selected by the Khan and rule for five years, and the Clan Council had to vote on the person the Khan put forward. In theory, the zarKhan would outrank the Khan, except in military matters, which fell under the sole purview of the Khan.

This first election would be different. The zarKhan would neither be selected from the ranks of the reKhans, nor would the Khan select the first candidate to hold the rank.

When the vote was over, the Imperials had won it, two to one. In theory, the next step would be to elect a zarKhan, but Emmy knew the Preservers would not let this stand. She was right.

Once again Galaxy Commander Miros Baba stood up, his face red with anger. "I cannot allow this travesty to happen. I declare a Trial of Refusal against you, Khan Scott."

"Very well, Galaxy Commander. What forces do you bid?"

"My command Trinary."

While Emmy was sure Khan Scott knew the Galaxy Commander was playing for time by bidding such a large force, he accepted, and the trial was set to take place the next morning in the ruins of a destroyed city.

30 MAY 3151

From a VTOL high above the declared combat area, Emmy was watching the warriors getting into position. Galaxy Commander Baba had brought fifteen 'Mechs to the trial. With him fighting a two-to-one vote, Khan Scott could have brought thirty 'Mechs to defend the Council's vote.

No one had dared to bid against the Khan, except saKhan Baba, but he had only made a token bid of twenty 'Mechs and three Points of Corona battle armor.

The Coronas moved into the ruined buildings, vanishing from Emmy's sight. Khan Scott's 'Mechs stayed behind the troopers, waiting. Galaxy Commander Baba's MechWarriors showed less patience. His light 'Mechs swarmed out, running through the ruined city. Khan Scott was still holding back.

Suddenly, twenty-five missiles crashed into the *Hellion* leading Baba's charge. Its torso crumpled under the onslaught, and the 'Mech went down, its torso and cockpit area a broken and smoking ruin. A *Kit Fox* suffered a similar fate as multiple medium pulse lasers stabbed out of another building and hit the 'Mech, ripping one of its legs clean off. A second salvo from the well-hidden Coronas finished what they had started.

Now the Khan's 'Mechs started moving, and tore into their opponents.

While the rest of the battle was less of a slaughter, there was no denying the victory. In the end, only Galaxy Commander Baba's *Dire Wolf* was left standing. He was clearly looking for Khan Scott on the battlefield, trying to engage him in a duel when his 'Mech's rear armor was obliterated by the third Point of Corona battle armor that had stayed hidden throughout the battle. The *Dire Wolf* turned around and fired all its weapons into the building the Coronas had been hiding in during the trial. The building collapsed on them, but not before they released a second salvo, carefully aimed at the assault 'Mech's cockpit.



Khan Scott had lost six 'Mechs and seven of his Coronas, four of whom had died in the building Galaxy Commander Baba had brought down on them. None of the Khan's MechWarriors was dead. While half his opponents had perished, more would be hospitalized for at least a few days. The Galaxy Commander numbered among the dead.

The Preservers have just lost whatever slim chance they had in the Council, Emmy rejoiced. They were already short on votes, but now... Should they try to initiate another trial, their chances will be even slimmer.

She didn't even try to hide the smile on her face when the VTOL landed after the battle and she exited it.



The Clan Council meeting continued in the afternoon, and the Khan stood behind the podium.

"While I know the news has already spread, I will now take official nominations and candidacies for the rank of zarKhan."

Emmy stood up and went to the podium.

"I will be the zarKhan of the Scorpion Empire." She had decided to say nothing more, not even phrasing it as a candidacy but as an undeniable fact.

Peter stood up, and she stepped away from the podium. The towering Elemental dwarfed even the other Elementals in attendance, and he had to press a button for the podium to rise before he could start.

"I am endorsing Galaxy Commander Emmy Line in her new position of zarkhan."

The Preservers didn't even flinch, but Emmy had not expected them to. She had also made sure Peter would follow her example and state her new rank as a fact that was already reality.

With most of the Preservers in an uproar about their choice of words, Star Colonel Mara Dinour stood up and advanced toward the podium.

"This is an outrage. I cannot accept this. A freebirth in a position that outranks even the Khan? Unless you withdraw that abominable nomination, I challenge both of you to a Circle of Equals."

They had expected this. With so many of their ranks dead or hospitalized, the Preservers had no chance to win this vote except by attacking it before it could be held, by killing everyone willing to take the position. It was their last line of defense.

Both Emmy and Peter accepted the challenge, but demanded that Mara select a second warrior from the Preserver ranks to even the odds, so they wouldn't cry foul afterward. Then the terms of the Circle of Equals were decided on. To allow for an immediate fight, they would battle right there in the football arena, using melee weapons and nothing else.

That came as a bit of a surprise to Emmy. She and Peter had expected the Preservers to push for an augmented battle, sending a MechWarrior in an assault 'Mech to take out Peter in his battle armor and kill her in her medium 'Mech while also stalling some more, in the hopes that at least a few of the Preservers' warriors would be released from the hospital. Instead, they had sent two Elementals to settle things right this instant.

It will not change the outcome.

There was no doubt in Emmy's mind.

The Preservers had prepared another surprise. A set of swords was handed to Star Colonel Dinour, a massive club given to the other Elemental.

They came prepared.

Because Peter and Emmy had not expected this, Peter went to the podium, picked it up, and smashed it to pieces. Everyone was looking at him in shock, but he simply took the metal rods that had held the podium together, tested their weight in his hands, and went back to the Circle of Equals that had quickly been drawn on the ground with chalk spray. He then gave Emmy one of the rods and kept two for himself.

When everything was set, Star Colonel Dinour advanced on Peter immediately, while the other Elemental rushed toward Emmy. She took a few steps backward and rested her heel against the chalk circle, hoping the fake shock and fear on her face looked real.

When her opponent reached her and turned to either smash her with his club or push her out of the Circle with a charge, she simply dropped to the ground and stuck her metal rod between his legs.

Certain he would either smash her with his weapon or catapult her out of the Circle by a combination of his mass and speed, he had no chance to stop, and the rod between his legs made it impossible. He was out of the fight.

Emmy sat up, making sure she remained within the chalk circle, and turned toward the fight between Peter and Star Colonel Dinour. As long as he did not signal Emmy to do so, she would not intrude on his honor by assuming he required help.

Dinour slashed at Peter with one of her swords, but he blocked with his rod. He stabbed at her with his other rod, but she deflected with her second sword.

The crash of metal on metal was loud enough to be heard even on the highest rows of the arena. Emmy could see the spectators watching intently, some of them in horror.

Peter kicked at his opponent, sending her stumbling back right as she had been rebalancing herself to attack again. Her swing missed, and he found an opening, crashing one of his metal rods against her side. But the Star Colonel recovered quickly and penetrated Peter's defenses to stab him in the chest.

Emmy watched in horror as her friend fell to his knees, blood flowing out his chest in big waves as his heart pumped it through the hole. Dinour advanced on him and spared a short, murderous glance at Emmy, who was still sitting inside the Circle of Equals. Dinour slashed down with both her swords—then suddenly her movement halted mid-swing.

It took a second for Emmy to realize something was sticking out of the female Elemental's back. Peter had forced both of his rods upward in one mighty act of strength, impaling Dinour from her belly, up through her chest, and out her back.

He let go of the rods and let his dead opponent fall to the side. SaKhan Baba quickly declared him and Emmy victorious, then medics rushed toward the Circle of Equals to try to save Peter.

Her friend fixated her with his gaze and nodded, smiling. Then he fell forward, his blood pooling on the grass under him. She knew the help would come too late.



When the vote was over and Emmy had been elected, she stepped in front of the crowds in the stands, not facing the warriors, but the people of the Scorpion Empire. There was no podium left to stand behind anyway.

"People of the Scorpion Empire." She spoke into a headset that transmitted her voice to the loudspeakers all over the stadium and to the various newscasts all over the planet. Her recorded speech would then be transmitted via HPGs and courier JumpShips all over the Scorpion Empire. "While I was elected by the warriors, I was born a citizen of the Hanseatic League. Not bred in an iron womb, but birthed by my mother. I have risen through the ranks, and I am here to show you that anyone can rise to power within the Scorpion Empire if they apply themselves and strive to be the best."

She turned around and faced what was left of the Preservers' ranks. "These warriors are the antithesis of what I am, what I want the Scorpion Empire to be. They are stuck in an outdated mindset that has brought nothing but loss to the people who followed it. The Smoke Jaguars, the strongest Crusaders of them all, were annihilated because they were stuck in the same way of thinking. And these warriors?" She pointed at each Preserver before she continued. "They have fared no better."

She turned back around. "I will not allow this to continue. No longer will Preservers be allowed to hurt civilians, to hurt the Scorpion Empire. Everyone who is not a warrior is under my protection. And the warriors *will* follow this, or face the same kind of justice they have faced here."

This part of her speech had been written by the Khan. He wanted to make sure everyone, including her, understood what he wanted to achieve.

"We need to stand united for what is to come..." She made another dramatic pause. "Clan Wolf is attacking Terra. They are probably fighting Republic forces as I speak. When they are done fighting, they will declare themselves ilClan. Either that, or Clan Jade Falcon will jump to the planet once the Wolves are defeated and the Republic of the Sphere is weakened."

She could feel the shock of the civilians. But not just the civilians. When she turned around, quite a few of the warriors were ashen. Especially among the Preservers' ranks.

We kept this information within a close circle for a reason.

Now it had maximum impact. Thinning the Preservers' ranks had been crucial to achieve this. Everyone had to know how the winds were turning before this information was brought to light. It had to be absolutely certain which side would set the path for the Scorpion Empire before they could determine how to respond to an ilClan.

"How will we handle an ilClan? Will we bow to it? Possibly sacrificing what we turned into? I say *no!* We are no longer bound by the redes

of the Clans. The Wars of Reaving made clear that the way the Clans followed for centuries is folly. To achieve Aleksandr Kerensky's dream of a peaceful people, we need to move forward with what we have become. We must set our own path."

She waited for this to sink in before she continued. To her surprise, none of the Preservers was using this chance to contradict her and declare a trial over this decision.

Perhaps they are waiting for a vote on it. Hoping, some of the Imperials will vote with them.

"But all this does not mean we will ignore an ilClan. We will negotiate with them. We will see where we can stand with it. Where our goals overlap. But we are not subservient to anyone. We are one people, warriors and civilians together. We are the Scorpion Empire, and *we stand united!*"

She shouted her last words, hearing her own voice boom across the stadium.

Roaring applause followed, from the onlookers and most of the warriors—even some of the Preservers.



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BATTLETECH ERAS

The *BattleTech* universe is a living, vibrant entity that grows each year as more sourcebooks and fiction are published. A dynamic universe, its setting and characters evolve over time within a highly detailed continuity framework, bringing everything to life in a way a static game universe cannot match.

To help quickly and easily convey the timeline of the universe—and to allow a player to easily “plug in” a given novel or sourcebook—we’ve divided *BattleTech* into seven major eras.



STAR LEAGUE (Present–2780)

Ian Cameron, ruler of the Terran Hegemony, concludes decades of tireless effort with the creation of the Star League, a political and military alliance between all Great Houses and the Hegemony. Star League armed forces immediately launch the Reunification War, forcing the Periphery realms to join. For the next two centuries, humanity experiences a golden age across the thousand light-years of human-occupied space known as the Inner Sphere. It also sees the creation of the most powerful military in human history. (This era also covers the centuries before the founding of the Star League in 2571, most notably the Age of War.)



SUCCESSION WARS (2781–3049)

Every last member of First Lord Richard Cameron’s family is killed during a coup launched by Stefan Amaris. Following the thirteen-year war to unseat him, the rulers of each of the five Great Houses disband the Star League. General Aleksandr Kerensky departs with eighty percent of the Star League Defense Force beyond known space and the Inner Sphere collapses into centuries of warfare known as the Succession Wars that will eventually result in a massive loss of technology across most worlds.



CLAN INVASION (3050–3061)

A mysterious invading force strikes the coreward region of the Inner Sphere. The invaders, called the Clans, are descendants of Kerensky’s SLDF troops, forged into a society dedicated to becoming the greatest fighting force in history. With vastly superior technology and warriors, the Clans conquer world after world. Eventually this outside threat will forge a new Star League, something hundreds of years of warfare failed to accomplish. In addition, the Clans will act as a catalyst for a technological renaissance.

**CIVIL WAR
(3062–3067)**

The Clan threat is eventually lessened with the complete destruction of a Clan. With that massive external threat apparently neutralized, internal conflicts explode around the Inner Sphere. House Liao conquers its former Commonality, the St. Ives Compact; a rebellion of military units belonging to House Kurita sparks a war with their powerful border enemy, Clan Ghost Bear; the fabulously powerful Federated Commonwealth of House Steiner and House Davion collapses into five long years of bitter civil war.

**JIHAD
(3067–3080)**

Following the Federated Commonwealth Civil War, the leaders of the Great Houses meet and disband the new Star League, declaring it a sham. The pseudo-religious Word of Blake—a splinter group of ComStar, the protectors and controllers of interstellar communication—launch the Jihad: an interstellar war that pits every faction against each other and even against themselves, as weapons of mass destruction are used for the first time in centuries while new and frightening technologies are also unleashed.

**DARK AGE
(3081–3150)**

Under the guidance of Devlin Stone, the Republic of the Sphere is born at the heart of the Inner Sphere following the Jihad. One of the more extensive periods of peace begins to break out as the 32nd century dawns. The factions, to one degree or another, embrace disarmament, and the massive armies of the Succession Wars begin to fade. However, in 3132 eighty percent of interstellar communications collapses, throwing the universe into chaos. Wars erupt almost immediately, and the factions begin rebuilding their armies.

**ILCLAN
(3151–present)**

The once-invulnerable Republic of the Sphere lies in ruins, torn apart by the Great Houses and the Clans as they wage war against each other on a scale not seen in nearly a century. Mercenaries flourish once more, selling their might to the highest bidder. As Fortress Republic collapses, the Clans race toward Terra to claim their long-denied birthright and create a supreme authority that will fulfill the dream of Aleksandr Kerensky and rule the Inner Sphere by any means necessary: The ilClan.