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Art of the Deal

Loren L. Coleman



In the mid-to-late 3060s, Giovanni Estrella De la Sangre, planetary governor of Demeter and CEO of Vicore Industries, embarked on an ambitious program to produce redesigns of classic BattleMechs. With the Steiner-Davion civil war taxing local military and civilian resources to their limits, he was often forced to seek out unconventional means.

Only after General Motors contacted Ceres Metals on [Vicore Industries'] behalf was the Capellan company willing to listen to Giovanni's proposal.

Excerpted from Vicore Industries' "Phoenix Report,"
1 August 3067

*Warlock, Capellan Confederation
7 April 3065*

Overseer pro-tem Nikolai Kwiatkowski shivered as he charged between buildings, slipping along the icy, unprotected walk. Frigid gusts whistled through frost-rimed metal framing, the support structure meant for enclosing ferroglass which was still waiting on delivery three years later. A strong blast of wind blew back his parka's fur-lined hood and ran cold hands down the back of his neck. Dry snow, as gritty as sand, stung at his eyes.

Ducking forward, the large man weathered Warlock's arctic grip until he finally bulldozed into the rotunda door. The revolving entryway created a thermal lock for the proving grounds' Operations Center. Shrill alarms rang inside this building as well. Nikolai's thick glasses fogged over and he swiped at them with one hand. Ignoring the elevator, which only seemed to work on alternate weeks anyway, he took the stairs three at a time and arrived gasping for breath with his throat on fire at the second-floor observatory only two minutes after the first perimeter alarm had sounded.

"What in the Chancellor's great-and-worthy name is going on here?"

Not that anyone paid attention.

Sirens continued to blare in three discordant tones as technicians pulled out procedural manuals and argued over their instrumentation. One man switched his tracking station from direct feed video over to broadband satellite. His female counterpart switched it back. On their shared monitor, the image jumped from the blocky silhouette for a *Blackjack* OmniMech, rust-red and looking lost against drifted snowbanks and frosted conifers, to a tactical overview of the local taiga. A large, flashing red icon eclipsed one entire corner of the display. Then back to the *Blackjack*.

Hùn dàn niu-kòu tóu-bù! Bastard button heads! Nikolai reached over to the alarm panel and cleared the annoying sirens. Everyone stopped dead as if he had thrown the master disconnect breaker for their brains. The overseer pro-tem switched the nearby station back to satellite and pointed at the red icon.

"What is that?" he asked through clenched teeth.

Jing-li Fen Xou, the operations manager, bowed perfunctorily. "DropShip," he said in his usual abrupt manner.

"One of ours?" Meaning one belonging to Ceres Metals or the planet's military garrison.

Xou shook his head. "Ours would not set off alarms."

They could, actually. The southern continent proving grounds were off limits on a live-fire day, such as this day with the BJ2-O undergoing its yearly retrials. But if the approaching vessel was a Capellan flight, it was not even trying to broadcast proper IFF clearances. With Warlock sitting so close to the Capellan-Federated Suns border, that likely meant a Davion DropShip.

Didn't the FedScum have their hands full enough with their civil war? They had to make Nikolai's life on this ball of ice more difficult?

Nikolai swallowed dryly. Help, he knew, was at least three hours away at the garrison post of Yumen. Where soldiers of the Confederation were treated to such luxuries as cafeterias, nightclubs, and the Canopian pleasure circus currently on-world. Ceres Metals' usual overseer, Nikolai's boss, was there as well. No doubt enjoying himself. Which meant that



responsibility for this breach would land squarely on Nikolai's shoulders.

"We have a visual," one of the techs called out.

Out of reflex, Nikolai looked out the large ferroglass window fronting the room. Snow flurries occasionally pelted the glass, driven horizontally by the sharp, arctic winds. Some of the larger flakes stuck, melting into long runnels that trickled toward the bottom edge. Visibility was intermittent, up to five hundred meters. Any DropShip visible by the naked eye would be landing right on top of them!

He moved to an auxiliary station where the technician had selected for penetrating radar. The computer painted an amber silhouette over the green-black scope.

Spheroid vessel. Military design.

Nikolai scrubbed his palms against the side of his trousers, drying away nervous sweat. Running the *Blackjack's* retrials by himself should have been another small stepping stone toward advancement. This was shaping into an administrator's nightmare.

Then the computer tagged the vessel as an *Intruder*—at 3000 metric tons one of the smallest spheroid-class assault DropShips one could find.

"They assault Warlock with *that*?" he asked aloud. A determined band of Capellan space-scouts could hold off any military force arriving in an *Intruder*. It could not even transport a single BattleMech.

Correction: it might hold *one* 'Mech if the cargo bay was refitted and you didn't load too much tonnage in the way of spare parts. Which was apparently the case, Nikolai saw, as a large shadow detached itself from the hovering DropShip and landed under its own jump jet power. The computer was having trouble placing it. Identification jumped back and forth between an old PXH *Phoenix Hawk* and one of the Confederation's newer 3L *Vindicators*.

"Where did that monster set down?" Nikolai asked sharply. "Is the DropShip landing anything more with it? Where is our garrison support?"



These people were not military-trained, and had not responded with good Capellan discipline to the emergency. But they knew how to get data when an oversight manager asked for it.

"Two hours for Yumen garrison," Fen Xou reported, answering Nikolai's last question first.

"DropShip is standing by. No other forces deployed," a technician at another workstation reported. "Enemy 'Mech is within two kilometers of our live fire range."

Within two kilometers of *Sao-wei Cho Tah Men's Blackjack*, then! "Have Cho move to intercept," he ordered. Perhaps all was not as dark as he'd feared.

"We are receiving a transmission from the *Intruder*." A communications tech held up her hand for attention. "Vessel identifies itself as General Motors Flight One-one-three-eight-special. With...with the compliments of Governor Giovanni Estrella De la Sangre." She frowned. Then, "Message repeats."

General Motors? Nikolai sneered. Worse than the enemy, then. It was their competition.

"Whatever game this Estrella De la...whoever...is playing, I want that BattleMech destroyed. "

The BJ2-O was on the grounds for its live fire retrieval after all. And bringing the venerable *Blackjack* design back to the attention of the Confederation Armed Forces, with the military's recent infatuation with new technology, could not hurt the reputation of Ceres Metals.

Or his own reputation, for that matter. Nikolai suddenly envisioned this as his ticket off Warlock, the frostbitten *zhì-chu ng* of the St. Ives Commonality. Away from the snow and the icy winds and the long hours spent proving (or finding flaws in) someone else's designs. A post on beautiful, warm Capella would not be too much to expect. Even the world of St. Ives itself would be acceptable. With a nice promotion. Surely he could bargain that in as well.

Dreams which lasted until the *Blackjack* OmniMech finally made contact with the foreign machine.



"A *Phoenix Hawk*," *Sao-wei* Cho reported. "The computer cannot fix on the variant, but I recognize its profile. Something different... *Ta ma dè!* It has reach!"

Reach? Over the Omni? "What variant is Cho running?" Nikolai asked, moving to the corner of the room where technicians monitored tactical screens, tapping directly into the *Blackjack's* systems.

"Alternate configuration 'C', with double long-barreled autocannon."

That shouldn't be, then. "Give me guncam feeds on monitors two and three."

New screens winked to life, showing fields of white interrupted by frosted conifers and tall, gangly winter hemlock. The image swung drunkenly as the *Blackjack* stalked forward, swinging its arms around to the right...in time to catch a blur of highly-polished metal erupting through a waist-deep snow-bank.

A laser mounted on the back of the enemy 'Mech's right arm slashed angrily below the camera's eye. On the *Blackjack's* wire-frame schematic, the leg darkened by several shades of gray as armor puddled to the ground. The BattleMech retreated before Cho angled in with his autocannon.

"Freeze that image and clean it up," Nikolai ordered.

One of the techs did so. It was a *Phoenix Hawk*, all right. No mistaking the lines. But the armor looked reinforced, and more angular than the traditional design. Wide intake ports on the jump jets. Better weapons, obviously.

"Upgrades," he spat the word out with a bad taste. General Motors had been busy, it seemed. It would make the OmniMech's job harder, but would not make the difference.

Except that *Sao-wei* Cho kept reporting a difficulty in acquiring solid target lock. "It keeps ghosting my sensors," he complained, suffering long-range strikes against his chest, his arms, and then a shoulder-to-shoulder slash that burned deep enough to melt through part of his engine shielding.

His return fire was sporadic, and mostly ineffectual. Flechette munitions sanded some armor from the 'Hawk's left side, a bit more from each leg, but more often than not Cho ended



up carving local conifers into kindling. Usually right behind where the *Phoenix Hawk* had been standing a moment before.

Nikolai stabbed angrily at the communications board, opening a direct channel to his test pilot. The officer was lower-grade, it was true, but his performance bordered on the embarrassing. "Quit sniping with that *hùn dân* pilot and stand up to him!" It was rare for an administrator to intrude on any live-fire situation, but there was more riding on this than Cho's reputation alone. "Force him to stand and fight."

It was a gamble, playing with a 'Hawk that way. Fifty percent faster and sixty meters of greater reach with its jump jets, Nikolai risked letting the redesigned 'Mech slip behind Cho where it could do a lot more damage.

Then again, as the Omni lost more armor from his left leg and lower waist, its rear-facing armor might just be stronger than whatever it had left up front.

The *Phoenix Hawk* let him come. It raced onto a dry expanse of hard-packed dirt and loose rock, swept clean of snow by the hard winds, and waited for the Capellan pilot. If Cho expected a great advantage in closing—or any advantage, for that matter—he did not see it. His autocannon continued to miss as often as not, while the *Phoenix Hawk* struck at him again, and again. One ruby lance cut deep enough to silence one of Cho's autocannon, halving his effective weaponry.

The 'Hawk had to be heating up by now, not that General Motors' MechWarrior ever let on as he continued to fire the 'Mech's large laser with regular accuracy. It sparked a thought that worried at the back of Nikolai's mind. "Give me a thermal profile of that machine," he requested, feeling a dead weight settle deep into his gut.

"It will switch Cho over as well," Xou started to explain, but the overseer pro-tem cut his manager off with a raised hand.

"Just do it!" he yelled as the *Blackjack* charged forward.

No, the 'Hawk did not appear to be running hot. In fact, its entire heat-dissipation system appeared to be banked toward minimal output. It was a thermal image that Nikolai recognized. So did the computer. Which was why it kept bouncing over to the *Vindicator* 3L variant.

Stealth armor!



"Cho! Cho! Break off from that 'Hawk."

His order went out a few seconds too late. Even coming up on point-blank range, the *Phoenix Hawk's* stealth profile made it so much harder to hit. It suffered no such penalty, though. Medium lasers and machine guns tore at the *Blackjack* with savage strength. The ruby fury of its large laser slashed hip to shoulder, finishing off the OmniMech's armor.

Then another laser lance skewered the *Blackjack* just to the right of centerline. This time the enemy pilot found Cho's ammunition bin for the *Blackjack's* autocannon. Lacking cellular ammunition storage equipment, which could have channeled the destructive force out specially-prepared blast panels, the resulting fireball tore through the OmniMech's entire chest cavity. Golden fire erupted in a catastrophic failure of the fusion reactor system, and the guncam screens washed to static.

For a moment Nikolai thought he had lost his man as well as his machine.

Then the camera's eye switched to the safety network built into Cho's ejection seat. Nikolai watched as the crash couch rocketed up and away from the exploding 'Mech, leaving behind a mushrooming cloud which was all that was left of several million C-bills of Capellan state property.

Likely all that was left of Nikolai's corporate career as well. He might be leaving Warlock, all right, but as something other than a civilian. Sending Cho in unprepared. Interfering with a live firefight. The Capellan state did not look kindly on failures of this magnitude. And the military would look for any reason not to blame their own man.

"Overseer," the communications technician said quietly, as if worried about disrupting the moment. She tapped the side of her headset. "We have a new transmission from the *Intruder*. They...they congratulate us on a well-coordinated exercise. And ask if we would like them to pick up our MechWarrior before he freezes to death."

Nikolai gripped the sides of the workstation as if his life depended on it, propping himself up, unsteady on his own legs. He had been staring at the death of his career. Now he shook himself out of it, his corporate survival instincts kicking in and recognizing that—for whatever reason—a possible lifeline was being thrown to him.

By the enemy. The competition.

What was General Motors up to?

This was the most unlikely raid in the history of Warlock, if not the entire Confederation. Was there something larger in play here? He perked up. There just might be a chance to salvage something from the ruins.

"Yes," he said, slowly, thinking it out. "Tell them we are happy to have them return our test pilot. And if..." What was the name? "If Gioavanni Estrella De la Sangre has further need of Ceres Metals, then Overseer pro-tem Nikolai Kwiatkowski stands by to receive word."

"Governor De la Sangre's representatives are standing by at your convenience," the tech said after relaying the overseer's response. Putting one hand over her wire-mic, she looked askance in his direction. "Sir, what is this about?"

"I think," Nikolai said cautiously, "the most bizarre inter-corporate memo ever placed."

Which put Ceres Metals, and Nikolai, in one hell of a bargaining position. Warm offices on Capella might not be in the offing any longer, but neither, he hoped, was a cold cell on Sian. He could get used to life on Warlock. Either way, he decided, after this the job would be one hell of a lot more interesting.

He just needed to keep his head above water, and one hand in the deal.



En Passant

Phaedra M. Weldon



*Robinson
Draconis March, Federated Suns
7 October 3065*

The click of Päl Wyndham-Sandoval's polished boots echoed off the corridor walls leading from Duke Sandoval's library and study. The braid from his top-knot swung around to brush his cheek. He moved it away with an impatient hand. The sword, which went with his dress uniform, bumped against his left thigh, and with every determined step he ground another piece of his own frustrations beneath a heel. Within an hour of his arrival on Robinson the world had turned one-hundred and eighty degrees.

Servants stood aside in the wide hall to let him pass. He acknowledged them with barely a nod. Broad events preoccupied his thoughts: James Sandoval no longer directed the course of the family dynasty. Mai Fortuna no longer led the Robinson Rangers. Tancred Sandoval now bore the ducal title, and he had shifted Robinson's support in the ongoing civil war away from Katrina Steiner-Davion to her brother, Victor.

Päl's life had been altered by events beyond his control. Just as it had when Arthur Steiner-Davion was assassinated. Päl had been in that stadium, listening to Arthur's address, seated with other cadets of the Battle Academy when explosions rocked the proceedings. Events born of that calamity played out at an alarming speed, enveloping him each time he caught his breath. Then-Duke James Sandoval, blaming the attack on the Draconis Combine. Tancred, choosing not to rejoin with the Rangers. Päl had been tapped to take his place, promoted to Lieutenant. The young scion, feeling like a chess piece being shifted about a board.

Returning to his family's estates on Exeter, saying goodbye to his wife and newborn son, and leaving to join the First Rangers for their ill-fated assault on House Kurita.

However, no matter the whys or the what-happeneds since his last visit to Robinson; Päl was excited to see his parents. They had been in the room earlier, when Tancred arrived to accept the mantle of dynasty leadership, but not for the military planning session that followed. Päl had so far managed only a handful of words with them.



Turning a corner in the spacious Sandoval Castle, he found them waiting just inside the foyer doors. His father, a roundish man of medium height and receding hairline, had once served with the Rangers. Päl had grown up on his father's stories of 'Mech battles, and considered it destiny that had stepped in to make of the Baron's son a MechWarrior and an officer.

The Baron Exeter took a few steps toward Päl, his expression dark and his mouth open to speak, but the Baroness stayed him with a hand on his left arm and a calm smile to her son.

Baroness Margarette Wyndham-Sandoval was a proud woman, rich in the heritage of the Sandoval family. Päl had always seen his mother as one of the braces of the family, the one whom others looked to for guidance. As her son, he had always done as she wished, and she had never guided him wrong. The Baroness was a strong and silent partner beside his father, and he loved them both. He only wished, at times, his mother's stolid and stoic appearance in court had not carried over into her duties as mother.

Päl pulled the dress-white gloves from his hands as his mother directed them with a nod to the doors, and beyond to the waiting Avanti stretch hover sedan. He opened the car's door for his mother and gave her his hand as she gracefully stepped in. His father gave him a tight smile, placed a hand on his son's arm, then bent down to enter as well.

After the doors were closed and the car was underway, the Baron could contain his curiosity no longer.

"Well?" He raised a graying eyebrow at his son.

Päl shrugged. Tancred's loyalties were no secret, although the particulars discussed behind closed doors might be. But Päl had never kept information from his father. In only a few sentences, he relayed the meeting's proceedings—including Tancred's plan to ease relations with Theodore Kurita.

His words garnered exactly the reaction he'd expected from his father.

"What?" the Baron's voice boomed inside the sedan's doors. "Is the man mad? How can he give up those worlds to the Dragon? This is outrageous." He traded a glance with his wife, who nodded. "Unacceptable!"

Päl was no longer so certain. He turned his attention to the passing scenery, considering.

It was early autumn on Robinson, and the display of browns, oranges, yellows and reds reminded him of fall evenings at home, spent with Khim. He missed her terribly after almost three years apart, and felt guilty for abandoning his son at such an early age. After the unit's disastrous retreat from Ashio, Päl had remained on Mallory's World with the rest of the regiment. He'd sent word to his mother, asking if he should request leave to return home until the First received new orders.

His mother advised him to remain on Mallory's World. She had taken a lead in his son's education, and Päl shouldn't worry himself with such details. According to the Baroness, Päl was where he needed to be, in support of the Duke's orders. And so he'd remained with his regiment, wrote letters to his wife Khim every day, and practiced with his knives.

Until Mai tapped him to accompany her here to Robinson for a meeting with the new Duke.

He sighed as he finally looked back at his father. "That's the way it is, father. And truthfully, I see no flaw in what Tancred proposes."

The Baron's eyes widened. "You support Tancred in this nonsense? Turning the loyalties of Robinson toward Victor."

"I support the decisions of my commander and Duke, sir, as any good soldier would. You taught me that." Päl clasped his hands in his lap. The filtered sun glinted off the gold of his Battle Academy ring. "Tancred feels our attentions are wasted attacking the Combine." He paused for a beat. "I agree."

"You can't be serious..." the Baron began. "James would never have allowed such a thing."

Päl kept silent. The young Wyndham-Sandoval knew not all decisions were the right decisions—and sometimes one had to make a choice on his own. That much he'd learned during the battle on Ashio, when choices in battle saved or destroyed lives. Where officers played their soldiers and their regiments like pieces on a chess board. After the retreat, he had begun to see himself and his fellow soldiers as the pawns—those pushed out in front—expendable to protect those with the power.



And there might come a time when Päl would need to make a choice with his loyalties, but now wasn't it.

"Päl, answer me. Are you serious?"

Päl leaned forward. "Yes. I am. Father, I'm a MechWarrior, and a son of the Sandoval dynasty. I supported the former Duke in his decisions, and I will support Tancred's orders as well." He wanted to add how he knew that his cousin had warned Mai not to lead the Rangers into Combine territory. Tancred's reasons had been sound, and proven right in the end.

"In support of Victor? Päl, have you not been paying attention? He's in league with the Draconis Combine. Everyone knows he's sleeping with a snake. How can you trust a man who's in bed with the enemy? How can Tancred know Kurita will accept concessions and not wait until our forces are drawn elsewhere on foolish attacks against our own people then attack our worlds, murder our children and rape our worlds for their own—"

The Baroness calmly reached out and put a firm hand on her husband's knee. She gave no other sign, her gaze drawn out at the passing scenery as the Avanti stretch-sedan began its crawl along the drive to the Wyndham-Sandoval estates.

The Baron became silent.



Chill wind caressed the beaded sweat on Päl's forehead as he closed his eyes and opened wide his other senses. He smelled the crisp decay of autumn leaves, heard the soft, whispering shuffle as the wind tossed them about on the grounds of the gardens. He cocked his head to his right shoulder, felt the bite of steel between the index finger and thumb of both hands.

With a spin he directed and controlled the blade from his right hand to the top of the target, then followed the release of his left blade to the bottom, forming in the air a double-strike he'd perfected years ago. He saw in his mind's eye where the blades would strike the target. That was the key—to know the direction and visualize it.



The spin completed, Päl came to land in a crouch, the thrown blades now replaced by new ones pulled from hidden sheaths beneath his clothing. The simultaneous *thwack* as the blades hit the tree twenty meters away brought a smile to his face. The first of the afternoon.

My son doesn't know me.

Again the realization yanked away his momentary glee and he lowered his arms and straightened. He recalled the young boy's formal bow—his son's dark, even gaze that measured and sized up the room, analyzed things in an almost combative style. Much as his mother did at times when she entered a room.

I don't know my son.

"Päl?"

The familiar voice of his wife brought his thoughts into a happier place as he turned to see Khim and Chauncy approaching. Khim held a large ceramic mug with the Wyndham-Sandoval crest painted on the side. She was just as beautiful now as the day he'd met her. Her dark, raven hair contrasted with his own blond tresses now held back in a single ponytail at the base of his top-knot. She was the night to his morning. She was his place to run to when the world turned chaotic and cruel.

And he loved her unconditionally.

Chauncy's stately form was the opposite of Khim's. She was a short elderly woman, rising to Päl's shoulders, with wiry gray hair and a cherub face. His former nanny and foster-mother had lost weight since he'd seen her, and her skin, though usually pale, seemed much more so in Robinson's evening light.

He retrieved and resheathed his knives and stepped toward them.

Other than Khim, Chauncy had been the only member of the house to greet him with a smile and a warm embrace. Just as she did now. "What are you two doing out here?" he took the offered mug from Khim and kissed her cheek. The cup warmed his fingers as he inhaled the aroma of spiced wine.

"Com'n to fetch you in to get ready. Guests are already arriving," Chauncy clasped her thick hands in front of her green skirts.



Päl had completely forgotten about his parent's social event to supposedly welcome their son home from the war.

He groaned.

"Forgot, didn't you?" Khim's voice wasn't as light as it had been earlier when he'd arrived home. They'd spent most of the first hours of his homecoming in private, rediscovering each other again.

Päl nodded. "This party is little more than an excuse for my mother and father to renew their presence within the family. It's all politics—in which I will never participate."

Chauncy gave him a light laugh. "You're a Sandoval, Päl. It will pull you in anyway."

"Not if I stay with the Rangers," he sipped the wine and felt its warmth spread through his extremities. It was indeed becoming colder in the advancing evening. "I've no time to worry about the larger picture there." He flashed back to the last battle on Ashio and then quickly tucked it away. *I can't think of fallen friends now.*

"And why the long face?"

He shrugged.

Chauncy put a hand on his shoulder. It felt warm and comforting. There was so little contact outside of private rooms in this house, or on his family's estates on Exeter.

Päl handed the mug to Chauncy. He absently pulled his knives from their sheaths and in unison began weaving their blades between his fingers. He looked at his wife, whose own gaze was locked on his hands and their movements. She looked extraordinarily pale in the waning light and her eyes were wide holes filled with shadows.

"Khim?"

She looked up into his eyes.

It was the knives. Khim had always hated his knives.

"I'm going in, Päl," she turned and then paused. "You need to get changed."



He watched her walk away as he continued to move the blades between his fingers.

"She's not much into your choice of weapon, is she?" Chauncy shifted her position and set the mug on a nearby garden bench.

He shook his head. "No. And with our earlier discussion of our son's education..." He let the sentence trail off as he turned and abruptly threw the knives into the dark. He spun, retrieved his second set in a fluid movement born of practice and control, and threw again.

Chauncy followed him to the tree and stood beside him as he judged their placement.

Four blades in a cross pattern. Shoulders, neck and lower abdomen. He pulled them from the tree and resheathed them before reaching deep into his trouser pocket to retrieve his Battle Academy ring.

"You still have that thing?"

Päl nodded. It had been a gift from his father. Päl's abrupt promotion and draft into service had precluded his official graduation, and so Marquin believed it was right he have one. "Yeah, but I learned knives from Master DeGigli before I had the ring. I can't wear it and throw. Disrupts my aim."

He gestured for her to step toward the house and he followed. "I'm sorry I've been away so long, Chauncy."

"If you're thinking of me in that, and hurting my feelings—please don't. You're my life's work, child. And even if I didn't give you life's first breath, I was there when you learned your greatest lessons." She gave him a sideways look. "But if you're fretting about your son, he's a Wyndham-Sandoval, Päl. Keep that knowledge close. He's the Baroness' pet project." Chauncy pursed her lips. "I think at times she sees him as her own."

Päl nodded as the two trudged up the hill and through the gardens to the estate. *Another pawn for the board.* And yet, as they walked, Päl didn't know where that thought had come from.



Khim's ire eased as she helped him get dressed. Layering on bit after bit of his dress uniform became almost a game between them, and Päl believed they might not make it to the party.

Khim left first, answering a summons from the Baroness. Päl finished the final touches and checked himself in the mirror. He looked presentable enough, an officer of House Davion.

Päl moved to the bed where his knives and their sheaths lay. He yearned to put them on, but did not want to anger Khim. If she saw them or suspected he wore them at a social event, his nights afterward could be...uncomfortable.

With a sigh, he wrapped them in their case of black velvet and placed them within the drawer of his nightstand.

The murmur of voices and laughter filtered up from the downstairs to the family's apartments. Päl left the suite and walked to the stairs.

A movement to his right stopped him at the first step. A figure in dark clothing stood near the door to his father's private study. The figure turned and froze when he saw Päl, then moved away from him and down the opposing hall. Päl chased after the man. He didn't know if the dark-clad figure belonged in the estates or if he was an intruder.

Although, guests usually didn't run away.

He rounded the corner of his father's study to face an empty corridor. The intruder had vanished.

Päl concentrated on the hallway, and pushed aside the ambient noise from the party below. He calmed his breathing and sought out each nearby sound.

A door opened behind him. Päl dodged back behind the bend in the hallway. He peered around the corner to see several courtly dignitaries, family and close friends, file into his father's study. Curious, the Baron's son tiptoed back down the hall to the side door he'd discovered as a child. It was hidden deep within the ornate decoration of the wall. He had found it once while following the Baroness about the halls. His mother had used the small door several times—yet its existence had never made him wonder why.

Until now.

Dust tickled his nose as he eased in, careful not to allow his sword to clang against the floor or walls. Gray smudged his white dress-gloves and he brushed them on his pants. There was only a bench and when he sat, the walls pressed in on his knees and back. His dress sword made stealth difficult, but he managed to sit and look out through the room's peephole.

The study was filled with more than ten stately dressed men. Several women stood to the side, among them his mother the Baroness. The Baron stood at his desk and raised a hand. Quiet descended.

"I'm sure you've all heard of the new Duke's plan to pull troops from Combine space and move against Katrina in support of Victor."

Some of those in the audience nodded, others looked about with shocked faces.

The Baron nodded. "You that are gathered here are the few remaining that still support Duke James Sandoval's belief that the Draconis Combine is the enemy, not our sovereign. Word was given to me this morning by a reliable source that House Kurita will move against the Federated Suns. They will not accept the new Duke's offer of an accord, but will be swift in their revenge of our attacks on their worlds."

Päl frowned. What was his father talking about? That wasn't what was discussed in the meeting he'd attended that morning. Tancred had seemed confident that Theodore Kurita would agree to the terms set for a cease-fire. Päl had always believed the Duke's son a viable leader, not easily taken by rumor and innuendo.

Where had his father gleaned this information?

"Marquin," a man in a blue brocade coat raised his hand. "Are you saying we're all in danger?"

"I'm saying that the new Duke is making us vulnerable by pulling our troops away from the border." He shook his head. "I stand here before you to give warning. I myself fear for my family's safety. My own son participated in those attacks on House Kurita. My own family is at risk."

"They wouldn't dare!"



Päl didn't see who had spoken out. His own thoughts wrapped around what his father said. *This is ridiculous—there had been no mention of any possible attacks of retribution.*

"I'm afraid they might, Peter," the Baron put his hands on his desk, palms down, and leaned toward his audience for emphasis. "Tancred isn't thinking—he's too caught up in his friendship with Victor to see the truth. The Combine cannot be trusted. It will take a new assault on a Davion world by the Combine to prove we are right. I pray it doesn't come to that..."

The Baroness moved then, her eyes narrowed in his direction. Had he made a noise?

Once outside the hidden room, Päl straightened his uniform's vest and adjusted his sword as he turned back down the hall toward the grand staircase.

The Baroness Magarette Wyndham-Sandoval stood at the hall's end, her hands clasped together before her. Her face was composed and belied only a small amount of surprise. "Päl?"

"Mother," he increased his step, his heels clicking against the tiled floor.

"What were you doing back there?"

He furrowed his brow. "I thought I saw an intruder, earlier. I had been on my way downstairs to join Khim when I saw him." He shrugged. "I'm afraid he got away."

"An intruder?" Her expression changed little, but he did see her gaze flick downward, to his sword.

Päl glanced down at the dirt-smudged glove he rested on the sword's hilt.

He looked up at his mother. She gave him a smile that did not touch her eyes.

A chill traveled down his spine.



Päl and Khim stood in the dinner reception line for nearly half an hour, greeting guest upon guest. Faces blurred with names and Päl felt a dull pain creep along the base of his skull. The muscles around his mouth ached and he worked his jaw back and forth as he preceded his parents into the dining room.

Most of the conversation centered around the transfer of power to Tancred Sandoval, who had declined tonight's invitation, begging pardon and needing to attend to his own family.

Several guests asked him on occasion to retell the battle of Ashio—some wanting the bloody details of the Ranger's retreat while they ate. But the young MechWarrior wasn't ready to recount to strangers some of the more painful events of his life, and bowed out with grace and politeness most becoming a Baron's son.

As the meal ended he excused himself, pleading a headache, which was the truth. The Baron escorted Khim toward the veranda where he and the Baroness had planned an extravaganza of fireworks.

Päl went down into the kitchens in search of Chauncy. The house Mistress claimed no knowledge of where his nanny had gone. Remembering aspirin in the medicine cabinet of his and Khim's apartments, the Baron's son took the steps two at time, pausing only briefly at the top to cast a glance at the door of his father's study.

So much of what he'd heard earlier jumbled about in his head. He suspected his father had lied to those family members—for he doubted Tancred would have agreed to work with Theodore Kurita if he suspected sabotage. And Päl believed the lie was meant to turn their family's support away from Victor.

Political intrigue and posturing was what had killed Arthur. Päl wanted no part of it. In the field there was no place for such games, but here within the walls of the Sandoval family, that was all that seemed to exist.

Once inside his darkened bedroom, Päl pulled his sword from its sheath and set it on his bed. With a sigh he tucked his gloves into his belt and strode into the bathroom where he



turned on a single light. Ignoring his tired reflection in the mirror, he found the aspirin and swallowed several without water.

An old familiar noise, one he'd not heard since childhood, came from the bedroom. It was the sound of the old service door beside his and Khim's bed. As a small boy Päl had often hidden inside that door, and sometimes traveled the tunnels behind it for adventure. But he'd sealed the door years ago.

He looked from the bathroom to his bedroom. He saw nothing at first and he feared the events of the day—especially spying the intruder earlier—had him jumping at shadows. But since caution had often saved him in battle, he turned the bathroom's light off to shroud himself in darkness and then crouched behind the door's frame to peer out at the bedroom.

Light from the hall gave subtle illumination to a movement in the wall to the right of their bed. As he suspected, someone was opening the hidden door. From the secret entrance came a dark-clad figure that crouched once it gained admittance. The door closed with an audible click.

Päl couldn't be sure if this was the intruder from before. He couldn't see the figure's detail in the shadowy light. The figure stood and pulled something from within the folds of his garment.

Light glinted off metal. Recognition gave him pause. He had a Nakjima pistol.

An assassin.

Päl's sword lay on the bed, between himself and the intruder. His knives lay nestled within the drawer of his nightstand. He had no weapon readily available to him.

From the assassin's movements he read that his presence was still unknown. It was best to remain hidden, and to watch. The dark-clad figure crept to the bedroom door. With his free hand on the frame, he looked from the left to the right, as if checking for someone.

Once he was gone, Päl ran to the bed, grabbed his sword. He then pulled his knives from the drawer and tucked them, unsheathed, into the belt of his dress uniform. He then moved to the door and peered cautiously around. There was no sign of the assassin.



With the sword ready, Päl moved to the stairs and caught the fleeting glimpse of dark robes at the foot of the stairs as the figure turned to the right in the direction of the ballroom.

Once at the foot of the stairs, Päl told a guard of the intruder. "Gather the others and find him."

The guard gave the Baron's son a quick nod, then turned just as Päl's father and mother approached from the other direction.

"Päl, where have you—"

He put up a hand to silence Marquin. "I believe an assassin has entered the estate from the old door of my bedroom. I've alerted the guards."

"An assassin?" Marquin Wyndham-Sandoval's usually ruddy expression had gone quite pale. "In my home?"

"Where is Khim? I need you to take her out of here but don't panic the guests. I'll find him." He turned to go.

The Baroness pulled on Päl's arm as her son turned away. "Päl—Khim went to look in on your son. She's gone to the open nursery." The open nursery was on this floor—opposite the ballroom.

My son.

Päl ran as fast as he could toward the nursery wing. His feet pounded against the tiled floor as guests yelled after him, curious as to his alarm. He hoped none would follow. When he entered, the room was dark. Autumn moonlight filtered in through the open windows, casting shadows over the bed and crib. Päl held his sword ready. The light flashed off his blade as he crouched low and looked into the bed where his son should be sleeping.

It was empty.

In the dark he heard the familiar sound of a weapon powering up. He moved out of the way as a blast lit up the room, the weapon's energy discharge narrowly missing his head to splash off the far wall.

The assassin stood just inside the door. He held Khim in his arms, her windpipe cut off by his left hand. He held the pistol aimed at her temple.



Päl's heart froze.

"Drop your sword." The assassin's voice was deep, unassuming. The Baron's son found no accent, no place to claim the man's heritage. "Drop it."

"Where is my son?" Päl dropped the sword to the ground with a loud clanking.

"I don't know where your son is—he's not why I'm here."

"Then who is? My wife?"

The man's head moved back and forth slowly. Päl couldn't make out his features in the subdued light. The assassin turned the pistol on Päl and fired again.

A bright flash illuminated the room. Päl had anticipated such a move, though, and lunged for the safety of a nearby toy-chest. But this time he hadn't moved fast enough, and as he landed, he realized the intruder's Nakjima had struck its target. His left shoulder burned with fire as if someone was holding a hot branding iron to his muscle and bone. He stifled a cry as he landed on the burned flesh and was able to right himself into a crouch.

Khim called out to him, but her voice was abruptly silenced. The assassin had closed his grip on her throat.

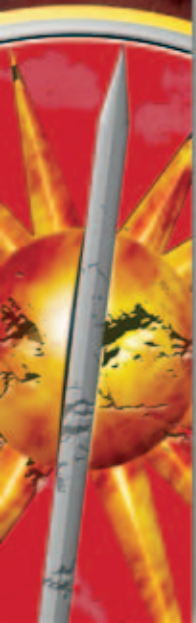
"Who sent you?" Päl reached down to his belt and pulled out a set of knives. Their cold steel blades felt good in his hands. He peered around the box. The assassin had pulled Khim back several meters, into the shadows.

The lack of light did nothing to sway Päl's confidence, but the injury to his arm did. The pain when he rotated it experimentally was solid, and it would grow more intense until it was treated. He felt the warm trickle of blood down his chest as he sized up the distance and speed he would need.

To compensate for his handicap, he needed an opportunity—a second when the assassin wouldn't be expecting an attack from the dark.

The assassin shifted.

That was the opportunity Päl needed.



Too late he realized he still wore his Battle Academy ring. He aimed, allowing his knowledge of position and skill to determine the best placement of his weapons. He might have made better aim if only his left shoulder hadn't protested with sharp fire, or his ring had not caught the knife's edge.

But fate was on his side and the right knife found purchase in the assassin's weapon hand, the blade piercing the palm. The assassin yelled and dropped the weapon.

His second knife shot wide to Päl's right, and embedded itself in his wife's side beneath her breast. Blood streamed down her milk-white dress.

"No!" Päl dove forward to catch his falling wife as the intruder released her and fell back into the corner's shadow. She clung to him, her eyes wide.

He lowered her to the floor as he realized the assassin moved toward the door.

Vengeance drove him as he pulled the second set of knives from his belt. He narrowed his eyes as he studied the shadows, turned a practiced ear to the sounds of footsteps and gauged their distance. Päl pulled his ring from his finger and set it on the floor with swift ease. The assassin stumbled near the nursery's entrance and Päl let fly his weapons, shutting out the fire that burned into his shoulder with the movement.

A cry of pain answered the Baron's son as he struck his target. The man collapsed in an untidy pile.

Khim was hurt badly, bleeding to death. He had to take care of his wife, but there were things that Päl had to know. Duty pulled him in two directions, and he was too-recently a soldier. With a glance at Khim, he moved across the floor to the felled enemy. The assassin lay on his side and Päl pulled him onto his back. Both knives had found a home in the man's neck, one to either side. Blood fountained over Päl's hands as he grabbed the man's collar and pulled him close.

"Who sent you?"

The assassin shook his head.

He pulled the attacker closer. The coppery smell of blood was everywhere. No time! Päl had to attack quickly and with ruthless strength. How his mother would handle it.



"I will know your name. Give over your employer, or I will see your family held accountable for your treachery this night."

The man shuddered in Päl's hands and he feared the assassin would expire before speaking. When the attacker opened his mouth, blood pooled over the sides as he whispered in a gurgled voice, "The Baroness Wyndham-Sandoval."

Päl released the man, and the assassin's head slapped against the floor. He was dead, his last breath uttering the one name Päl had never thought to hear. He stood on shaky legs and moved away as if afraid the man's body would ignite in flame. He stared at the dead man, his mind a jangle of unfocused thoughts.

He lied...it had to be a lie.

Chauncy came to the door at that moment, her arms filled with stacked blankets. She yelled out and dropped the blankets when she saw Päl standing over the dark-clad corpse. Her gaze traveled back to her charge and her hands flew to her mouth as she went to him, staring at his bloodied uniform. "Päl, you're..."

He put up a hand. "I'm fine." Though the pain from the assassin's weapon was now a debilitating vice around his shoulder. He turned and moved toward his wife, so still on the floor. He knelt beside her as Chauncy joined them, the house-mistress' hands gentle as she touched Khim's neck to find a pulse.

"She's alive," Chauncy said, then looked into the gaze of her grown charge. "What happened?"

"He came in through our rooms—the old door," Päl reached up and rubbed at his temple, unaware of the blood he smeared across his brow. "Mother said Khim had come here to check on our son."

The house-mistress' eyes narrowed in a confused expression. "Päl, your mother had me bring him into my apartments before the party started. Away from the noise...."

His gaze fixed on Chauncy's wizened face. Päl swallowed back the nausea that threatened to overwhelm him, though he was uncertain at that moment if it were a reaction to his injury, or the realization his mother had just attempted to have him assassinated.



"Päl?"

He blinked at the pommel of the knife protruding from his wife's chest. He knew better than to remove it. It would only hasten her bleeding. He saw the glint of his ring beside her and with a burst of anger he grabbed it and tossed it across the room. He hissed at the pain in his shoulder that threatened to pitch him into unconsciousness. He bent and kissed his wife tenderly on her cold cheek, then stood on uncertain legs. "Watch her, Chauncy. I'll send for a doctor."

Päl knelt beside the assassin and retrieved the Nakjima, then moved slowly out of the nursery toward the elevated voices below.

Guests had spilled out of the ballroom and were now creating a ring of enclosure about the Baron. Many had been muttering and whispering among themselves. As news spread, the crowd grew louder.

"It was as the Baron warned, the Dragon has come."

"The snakes have tried to kill the Baron's son!"

Someone else was more certain. "Dead. He must be dead!"

Päl stood in the shadows beneath the stairs, away from the guests. His shoulder burned and again he felt himself grow light-headed. He watched with distant fascination as the panic spread. Simple words, spoken with just the proper emotion—and all of them would turn on Tancred. Realization of what his true standing was within the family did not come as a surprise, but more as a sad revelation. *I am a pawn. Nothing more. Nothing less.*

Carrying the Nakjima, Päl Wyndham-Sandoval stepped forward. Sharp intakes of breath greeted him as the crowd parted to allow him through. Many, seeing his bloodied uniform, gasped aloud. His father leaped forward, braced him with a hand on either shoulder, and then grabbed the weapon from his son.

"Nakjima." He nearly spat out the name. "Combine manufacture."

Neither Baron or Baroness appeared overly worried about Päl's condition. But then his father was lost to his hatred for House Kurita. His mother, though, was calm. Far too calm. He



found her eyes, and just below the surface of her calm, proud mask, he saw the truth of what the assassin said.

She wanted the family's loyalties turned, as did his father. As did most of those here in this room. But she had been the one willing to sacrifice her only son to achieve it. And why not? She had a new son to raise.

The truth was there and then gone in an instant. As Margarete Wyndham-Sandoval stepped from behind her guests, a grand show of concern washed over her face toward her son. "Päl, was it the Dracs?"

He matched her gaze with his own and said simply, and quietly. "No." He turned to the nearest guard. "Please, could you summon a doctor? My wife..."

But the Baroness wasn't going to be ignored. She moved even closer to Päl, the flash of her eyes toward the crowd of guests making it obvious to her son that she knew she was on stage. It was time to call the play together. "But it *has* to be."

Päl kept his voice even, though the fatigue he heard in his words was genuine. The pain in his shoulder was like a smoldering fire, constant and fierce. The loss of blood was making it difficult to stand. The guard hurried off to summon help for Khim, so Päl allowed himself a moment. "Because he told me," he said.

"He *told* you?" The Baron stepped forward. "Tell us, Päl. I demand to know!" A murmur of assent swept the assembled nobles. When the baron looked to his wife for support in his demand, however, he found only stony silence. Frowning, glancing between his wife and son, the Baron fell back on the will of the crowd. "Who did this?" he asked.

A hush settled as all eyes turned to Päl. His own vision wavered, though nothing could erase the still image of his mother, standing close enough for assumed concern, yet far enough away should her son betray her to the assembly. He blinked several times, willing himself to stay conscious. Focused.

He narrowed his eyes at her. Their very way of life depended on his answer, and he knew the use of ruthlessness at that moment. Understood it, for like his mother who had wagered the life of her son on the turn of history, Päl too had put the



assassin's family on the table to force the confession that now would change his life forever.

He swallowed, blinking with sluggish control as the world seemed to spin slower around him, and looked to his father, who stood within the nexus of this moment.

Päl saw the board clearly now—saw the position of the pieces. The game had just started. The Baroness held the kingdom in white—but it was Päl who now controlled the black. He saw the carefully placed moves that might have sent him and Khim to their deaths.

Two moves of a pawn across the board.

In truth, he knew she hadn't expected him to live.

But there was a little known move in chess called the en passant, where the first move of a pawn with two squares can be met and defeated by one move of the enemy's opposing pawn.

"Päl! Who has done this?"

With a sigh, the Baron's son moved his gaze from his father's red, flushed face, to rest it calmly upon the serene visage of his mother's composure.

"Katherine Steiner-Davion."



Highlander Chronicles: Isolation's Weight

Randall N. Bills



*Jacob's Mountain
Tortinia, Kiamba
Benjamin Military District, Draconis Combine
15 April 3067*

Lieutenant Cameron Baird watched as the odious-black smoke trail dissipated on the stiff mountain winds. Burning debris rained down across several kilometers. It looked as if the sky was bleeding.

"Can you believe that?" His comm system pounced to life as James broke the silence. "Wow. Too much."

Wow? Watching a Clan *Broadsword*-class DropShip falling through a cobalt sky had been sobering, true. Like a flaming thunderbolt tossed by Zeus's own hand. But Cameron read deeper. What the hell was a Ghost Bear force doing raiding Kiamba? What could be of interest to a lone DropShip on Jacob's Mountain? Surely they could care less about elements from MacLeod's Regiment of the Northwind Highlanders.

He shivered, though he knew the cockpit didn't hold a chill and would soon be anything but cold. He hated it here. Hated the snow and the isolation from anything living beyond the small force around him. Hell, he would've preferred Hecate's Swamp to this eternal cold. But not James. Wherever the action was.

Had Cameron ever been that young? That naïve? He hoped not.

"Yes, James. Wonderful." Did the boy hear the sarcasm? Probably not. The starch of his new cooling vest (handed to him, what, six months ago upon graduation from the NMA?) probably pushed up against his ears, making it hard for him to hear anything. Beyond his own voice, of course.

Cameron couldn't help but let a quirky smile spread his slim lips, a sparkle flashing in hazel eyes. He knew a certain lieutenant colonel who shepherded a younger, stupider Cameron through *his* first year after the Academy. Who almost throttled him on at least ten different occasions. At least.

Cameron reached forward and toggled from the topographical map that displayed across the secondary screen, to radar, as the ghost of Geoff McFadden's words



seemed to rise up like holography, temporarily blotting out the forward view screen and the snowy terrain beyond.

When you're a leader, you lead And protect. One comes with the other. If you can't protect those under your command to the best of your ability, if you can't lead them to be leaders themselves—well, then you've no business wearing The Bars.

Always the capitalizations in his voice.

Geoff's words seemed to echo in the confines of the cockpit. The man had been the father he never knew; regardless of the weight, Cameron tried to carry the responsibilities he now held with the same dedication and honor his mentor did. How could he do anything less?

The radar began sweeping, pinpointing Caden's lance, Geoff's Old Guard lance and the lance on loan from the Third Proserpina Hussars. Twelve 'Mechs—several green warriors. What would they find over the hill? He checked his secondary monitor and radar screen once more, which showed a pair of *Tatsu* aerospace fighters whipping away at well over Mach two, vanishing over the mountain.

"Thanks for the fire, Hussars. Kind of cold up here." Lieutenant-colonel McFadden's voice broke over the commline.

Cameron smiled and checked the radar to see Geoff's lance the next ridgeline over, but more importantly, several hundred meters closer to the crash sight. He shook his head, feeling the comforting weight of his neurohelmet. "Going to get yourself in trouble, boss," he said, but softly enough not to activate his own mic. With that flight actually attached to the Hussars' Third battalion, and O'Riley's touchiness over having to do combat exercises—regardless of how few were involved—with *mere* mercenaries in this northern, frozen wasteland, Cameron just knew ol' Harrison would make his voice known. Later of course. Always later. And much worse than the original offense. You'd think the Third Proserpina were a Sword of Light regiment for all their prickliness.

"No problem, Old Guard. Glad to bring a match to the barbecue. Just make sure what we tossed onto your grill is crispy black when you're done. *Hai?*" The unknown pilot's voice boomed laughter, lively and good natured. Cameron felt shock. No way could he be part of the Hussars.



"Okay Highlanders," Geoff's strong voice began, "they've downed some bad guys. Time for us to put them away. Move forward at best speed and engage at will," with the unspoken tag line *before the Hussars lance has all the fun*. A series of affirmatives echoed across the commline.

Of course Cameron would've loved to be taking command of this by himself, but with the Old Guard command lance on hand to help smooth the training issues between elements of MacLeod's Third Battalion and the Hussars' Third...well, he couldn't be happier to have the old man along for the ride.

Cameron reached over and pushed his own throttle forward a half, sending his *Wolverine* into a smart step forward—difficult through the deep snow. One of these days he really did mean to send a surprise gift to the quartermaster who'd managed to acquire several of the new WVR-8K from the DCMS. He'd been in it less than a year, but knew already he never wanted to pilot another machine. He could've probably gotten one of the Clan machines taken off of Huntress due to his credentials at the Academy, but he felt confident nothing would've felt this good. This right.

"Okay, boys," he spoke up to his own lance, "you heard the boss. Bad guys over the ridge and we get to clean up the mess. Provided the fly boys left us any scraps."

The responding laughter felt good. Although he was serious. With the way the DropShip had come down, he wouldn't be surprised if they found nothing but a black smear against pristine white.

Ten minutes passed way too slowly. Manipulating pedals and joysticks to maneuver through the thick powder and heavy woods, he kept an eye on the radar, which showed almost a dozen green darts moving forward to the guesstimated position of the downed craft. With the high iron-content of the mountain, good readings of what they would face were simply not coming in. He knew the DropShip held a capacity to carry five Clan 'Mechs. But how many of them could possible have survived?

The Old Guard made contact first; the heavy boom of autocannon fire echoed across jagged rocks and lonely corpses of trees as McFadden drew first blood with his *Hatchetman*. Cameron's own lance simply could not move quickly enough



and McFadden wanted a taste of action before the Hussars. Typical.

"Okay boys. Let's show 'em young bloods can keep up with geriatrics."

He stomped down on his petals and vented plasma lifted his fifty-five ton machine into the air, sublimated snow blasting around him in a send-off halo. He landed smoothly and launched again, just about cresting the ridge where the battle unfolded. Then remembered only Karli's *Starslayer* mounted jump jets. Ben's *Hollander* and James' *Wolfhound* didn't have the benefit and he couldn't leave them over the ridge.

Had to lead. Had to protect.

"Come on boys. I know the Academy gives you better pilot training than that. Let's get a move on, eh?" He tried to infuse as much good natured humor into his voice as he could, tried to hide his worry. Regardless of the strides to narrow the technology gap between the Clan and Inner Sphere, Clan 'Mechs still outclassed Inner Sphere pound for pound.

Geoff could pilot circles around almost anyone he knew, but depending on what lay over the ridge...Cameron's own lance could make all the difference.

Flashes of sapphire and ruby lit the sky over the ridge, along with the detonations of multiple heavy explosions. Cameron gripped joysticks in sweat slicked hands. Willed his lance to move faster.

"They've got some serious life left in them," Geoff's voice startled him with its immediate urgency. "If we don't take down that *Mad Cat*, and I mean now, we're going to be in a world of hurt. Lance, target the *Mad Cat*. I'll deal with the *Rifleman*." The commline descended into a low babble once more.

A *Mad Cat*! Damn. A *Rifleman*? His mind swirled. What the hell. Did he mean a *Rifleman IIC*? Why would the Clans be fielding an Inner Sphere design?

He had to wait. A single 'Mech might not make the difference, but a lance would. Beside, he couldn't leave them. Had to lead.

He stared at his radar, demanding it provide more information. Suddenly he realized at least one of the Hussars had been



able to move around their own ridge onto the plateau and appeared to have engaged as well; the tag read *Tai-i Matsu*. His assault *BattleMaster* would lend considerable weight to their side.

His own lance finally pulled even. "Okay boys, over the ridge and give 'em everything you got," he said. Cameron prepared his weapons to follow his own advice and ignited plasma once more, sending his *Wolverine* up and over the ridge...to hell.

Spread out before him, a small, but terrifyingly urgent battle unfolded on the under-sized plateau. The downed DropShip still burned, sending up a huge bloom of smoke; a fallen *Thor* next to the massive rent in the *Broadsword's* flank told him not all the 'Mechs survived. Yet a thousand meters in front of him held a *Mad Cat* and *Rifleman*, with an *Arcas* off to the side, all weapons blazing and hammering the Highlander forces and the Proserpina BattleMaster.

He saw the Rasalhague logo inside a bear's head outline on the machine: First Rasalhague Bears. The *Rifleman* addition to a Clan force made sense now

As Cameron brought his own machine down to earth once more with a last gush of flame and stretch of myomer, he watched as fire lit underneath Geoff's *Hatchetman*. Time seemed to dial down until he could perceive individual autocannon shells and PPC beams hung suspended in mid-air. The *Hatchetman* flew forward, on a collision course with the *Rifleman*. The pilot simply squared its feet, lined up both rotary autocannons and let loose a barrage that practically obscured its outline. Twin, horrific streams of vomiting death slashed into the *Hatchetman*, eating and tearing away at armor like a bear savaging its meal, mortally wounding the metal giant.

"No!" Cameron managed to scream, as time swooped back to normal.

With an expertise few might have managed under such circumstances, Geoff kept the *Hatchetman* on course as limbs began to tear away under the murderous fire.

Like a metal rockslide, the *Hatchetman* crunched into the *Rifleman* with a sound that could be heard even above the



din of battle. Both toppled down in a mangled heap of metal limbs.

Cameron would never be able to remember the next ten minutes. A haze—formed of tears and rage—seemed to blanket out his perception. One moment he watched his idol (his father) die and the next he stood over a fallen Ghost Bear machine, firing endless kilojoules of energy into the blasted scraps—all that remained of the *Mad Cat*.

As silence descended, shame replaced his rage. Geoff would be rolling over in his metal grave at such a loss of control. *He* had done what needed to be done. Had lead.

Had sacrificed himself to protect his command.

Though Cameron tried initially to do the same, he too easily fallen off. Too easily besmirched the bars (The Bars) he wore. Too easily forgot his heritage.

He blinked away the tears and the last shreds of his incapacitating haze. His command needed him. They needed to mop up and find out what might be here that would tempt the Bears; the rest of the raiding force to deal with elsewhere.

He swallowed several times. Tried to set aside his shame for another day and opened up a general frequency commline.

Time to lead.



Broken Blade

Steven Mohan Jr.



Melrose Valley, near the Defiance Industries Vehicles Facility
Outside Maria's Elegy, Hesperus II
Lyran Commonwealth
28 December 2787

First Leutnant Denver McEdwards of the Thirtieth Lyran Guards pushed his battered *Sentinel* into a panicked lope as the world came apart around him. Heavy beams of ruby light smashed down into the hardscrabble earth and splashed outward in prismatic scattering; the lasers vaporizing dirt, rock, and 'Mech armor with equal efficiency. Someone had called in naval gunfire support.

And someone had done it *wrong*.

The laser fire rained down in the middle of the battlefield, indiscriminately toppling Combine and Lyran 'Mechs alike. It didn't matter whose WarShip was up there, Kurita or Steiner.

Whoever it was, it was the enemy.

McEdwards glanced at his rear monitor in time to see a DCMS *Dragon* chasing after him. Suddenly the great machine was nothing more than a black silhouette against a wall of crimson fire.

And then it was gone.

McEdwards *ran*.

Ironically, the disastrous attack had probably saved his life. Before someone had opened up with orbital fire the Thirtieth Guards had been facing the Kuritan regiment in a long front that stretched across the south end of the valley. The DCMS had nearly managed to punch through the defenders' line at a weak point, and McEdwards's unit — First Company, Second Battalion — rushed forward to blunt the point of the Combine attack. Instead, the Kuritans had sliced right through First Co as well.

The fire from on high had broken up an emerging Combine victory and provided the perfect opportunity to slip away.

McEdwards watched a *Panther* stumble and fall, as the earth suddenly opened up beneath it. The 'Mech tumbled into the new crater, light the color of blood tracing across its exceptionally humanoid form. The *Panther* struggled half-way over the crater's edge and then fell back, swallowed by hell's fury.

There wasn't any question of staying.

So focused was McEdwards on the danger behind him that he didn't notice the danger in front until it was too late. A *Thug* stepped out from behind a dun-colored bluff and a flight of Bical-6 SRM's rippled across the ovoid shape of his *Sentinel's* body.

McEdwards staggered backwards, stumbling as his weakened left leg almost gave out.

The enemy machine stalked forward, pressing its attack. Before McEdwards could answer, violet PPC fire washed over the dilapidated armor shielding his cockpit. The temperature spiked, burning his lungs, and almost, *almost*, stealing away his consciousness.

This was the end.

Six years of nothing on Hesperus II and now *this*: black-jacked by a *Thug*.

The *Thug* took another step forward. It was painted for city fighting: sharp-edged camouflage pattern of concrete grays and asphalt blacks. The only visible color on the DCMS machine was the emblem on its left shoulder, a blue circle with a stripped tail down the arm, marking the 'Mech as a member of the 18th Algedi Regulars.


The *Thug* was a monster, eighty tons of muscular fighting machine protected by the latest Ferro-Fibrous armor and armed with a particle projector cannon mounted on each thick arm. Its massive head was centered on its torso, far below its powerful shoulders, giving it a brutal, primitive look. This machine was a schoolyard bully, designed to pound weaker 'Mechs.

Like his *Sentinel*.

The *Thug* raised its arms and McEdwards swallowed hard.

And then the sky opened up and a curtain of crimson light divided him from the DCMS 'Mech.

His mind unhinged by terror, McEdwards fled.



Tai-i Aiko Makita jerked her *Thug* to a stop just as soon as she heard the burst of coded chatter over the Lyran freq. "Picket," she shouted over the 'Mech channel. She carefully scanned the battered and scarred rocks of Hesperus II, searching for the source of the radio signal.

Nothing.

During the confusion of the naval bombardment, she and six of her 'Mechs had slipped through the Lyran line, a fact unknown to the LCAF. Right now that secret was Makita's principal tactical advantage, one she would lose if she allowed the picket to transmit.

"Found him," shouted *Chu-i* Brian Smith. "Heavy Tank." Smith stepped his *Kintaro* to one side, so he had a clear shot behind a jagged escarpment. Twin ruby beams sizzled through the hot, dry air, followed by a SRM. "Narc pod away."

Makita immediately heard a ringing tone and loosed a flight of her own SRM's. The missiles' white contrails ran straight for the friendly *Kintaro*, then *turned*, arcing around the escarpment and following the Narc beacon right in.

Makita pounded her way over to Smith's position, aimed her PPC's at the terminus of his lasers, and poured megajoules of killing energy into the tank.

The transmission suddenly cut out.

"Cease fire," Makita called out. She stalked forward.

What she found was the thoroughly mangled remains of a AC/2 Carrier caught in a half-turn.

The Carrier had never stood a chance. Makita's force completely outgunned it. The tank's commander had done the only thing he could, turned to run, but thanks to Smith's quick reflexes that hadn't worked either.

"Got him," said Smith jubilantly.

"*Hai*," said Makita angrily, "but not before he revealed our position. Come. Daylight's shadows grow no shorter."

She was answered by a chorus of *hai*'s.

Makita started running, and the rest of her improvised force followed.

Standard tactics after a break out was to turn and attack, shattering the enemy's line and sending him fleeing. But the standing orders for Operation Broken Blade were different. Any unit that punched through was ordered to proceed immediately against the nearest DefHes facility.

To wreak havoc on the very heart of the Steiner war machine.

So Makita set off at a dead run.

It still surprised her to be piloting a *Thug*, or that her force consisted of previously almost exclusive Terran Hegemony 'Mechs...or that the Lyrans fielded their own number of such designs. But how many soldiers were wooed away from the Star League before Kerensky's Exodus with most of the Star League Defense Force? And how many of them found their rides 'reassigned' to other soldiers. Serves them right...can't trust such turncoats.

She brought her attention back to the here and now as her massive *Thug* bounded across the broken, rocky landscape at a stately 65 kph, barely two-thirds of the speed of the Lyrans *Sentinel* that had escaped her grasp in the horror and confusion of the naval attack.

Many of the 'Mechs in company with her were faster, but she kept them in a tight formation. They were going to encounter the automated defenses soon. Better to husband her meager forces than to go off on a headlong chase that might very well lead to ambush and disaster.

They were no more than a knife's edge from disaster anyway.

It hadn't started that way. Broken Blade was a daring operation designed to smash the Lyrans war machine with a single devastating blow. Defiance Industries' massive 'Mech and Vehicles Facilities on Hesperus II were the key to the Commonwealth's military power. Destroy Defiance and the Commonwealth would not long stand. And with the Cameron's dead and their Star League Defense Force gone there was nothing to keep the Draconis Combine from taking its rightful place at the head of the Inner Sphere.

To accomplish this the DCMS had assembled an awesome force: a squadron of WarShips escorting DropShips embarked with four 'Mech regiments led by the Fifth Sword of Light.

The 'Mech's would slice through the Lyran defenders dirtside, while the WarShips pounded the factories from above. It was a beautiful concept.

Unfortunately, it hadn't quite worked out as planned.

Lyran resistance at the jump point had been much heavier than expected. The Kuritan WarShips had managed to slog through the Lyran naval forces and get close enough to Hesperus II to destroy a few orbiting factories, but that was it. They couldn't get into position to engage in a heavy bombardment of the real prize, the Defiance facilities.

Things had gone little better for the 'Mech assault. Three regiments led by the Gold Dragons had moved against the 'Mech facility only to discover that the Lyran defenders fielded an astounding number of powerful assault 'Mech's, all built on this very world. The main thrust of the 'Mech assault staggered under a punishing counter-attack led by a brace of Lyran *Zeuses* and *Atlases*.

Both the naval forces and the Jade Dragons had found themselves engaged in a bloody stalemate.

Only the 18th Algedi Regulars were actually advancing.

Makita's reverie was interrupted by a flash of emerald light and the armor on her right knee flashed from green to yellow on her wireframe schematic. What the— Wait. *There*. The rock. She targeted a massive boulder with both arm-mounted PPC's and simultaneously released a double flight of SRM's.

The actinic flash of violet lightning carved deep furrows in the rock's surface, followed a second later by multiple missile impacts.

The boulder erupted into an incandescent orange fireball that rose twenty meters into the air, showering her force with a hard gravel rain.

"Good God," Ohno swore over the 'Mech channel, "what did you use on that thing?"

"That wasn't me," said Makita. "Secondary explosions. We're into the automatic defenses. Watch yourself."

"*Hai*," said Ohno with feeling.

As if his word were some kind of signal the valley floor came alive with the emerald and crimson crossfire of multiple lasers hidden among the rocks, missiles arcing in from magazines sunk into the hills, spent shell casings bouncing everywhere — a thousand kinds of death left by the Lyrans to welcome them to Hesperus II.



McEdwards's company commander, *Hauptmann* Grün, had left standing orders for all badly damaged 'Mechs to fall back to the DefHes Vehicles Facility. The goal was to get wounded 'Mechs patched up and back in the fight. And those machines that couldn't be fixed were to remain in place, using their weapons as a last ditch line of defense. The facility was to be protected at all costs.

As McEdwards limped his badly damaged *Sentinel* over a rise he saw that it was too late for that.

The Combine had already hit the Vehicles Facility, probably from orbit. The factory was housed in a massive structure built of reinforced concrete. It was so big that it looked squat even though its ceiling reached thirty meters into the sky. (The building had originally been used to build assault 'Mech's before security concerns forced the 'Mech Division into a facility hollowed out of a mountain.)

The building was so big that it was rumored to have its own weather patterns. Once, when the AC went down, storm clouds had formed *inside* the building and the Day Shift had been treated to a gentle spring rain.

The massive building still stood, but something had brought down part of the building's south wall, leaving a pile of gray rubble in its place. McEdwards shuddered. Another sign of the end.

The war was only twelve months old, but it was already clear it was going to be a bloody, nasty business. That should've been obvious even before the war began, back in '85 when the Free Worlds League had violated the Ares Conventions and nuked an entire continent.

After that the atrocities had stacked up, each one worse than the last. Bandits attacking Bone-Norman. The Combine taking Gram and Trolloc Prime and then smashing the Bolson Shipyards at New Kyoto. And, worst of all, the DCMS slaughtering civilians by the thousands on Skondia just to draw out LCAF forces.

Wanton, unspeakable destruction. Honorable combat transformed into murder. A thousand years of civilization traded away for a fleeting advantage in battle. That's what McEdwards saw when he looked at the damage done to the Vehicles Facility.

Naked, brutal barbarism stalked the Inner Sphere.

Today it had found Hesperus II.

He sighed, a long wavering sound that left him feeling weak and sad, and then he

hobbled down toward the factory.

It looked more like a field hospital than a state-of-the-art defense facility.

The lawn in front of the factory was covered with bodies on stretchers and more still in black, nylon bags. Medics moved from stretcher to stretcher, treating those not yet beyond help. Healthy soldiers and factory workers mingled near the building's ship dock where scores of Hunter tanks sat on the ground or on massive trailers, waiting to be shipped to LCAF units.

McEdwards was startled to see there were almost no 'Mechs. Badly hurt machines were supposed to fall back and he'd seen plenty of his mates absorb grievous blows. And yet, all he saw was an *Archer* flat on its back, a badly-damaged *Zeus* nearly stripped of armor and missing its left arm, and another *Sentinel*, clearly hurt, but perhaps with a little fight left in it. Had the rest fallen?

Two damaged medium 'Mechs to defend the factory.

McEdwards hoped *Hauptmann* Grün had a helluva plan.

Without thinking he reached over and touched the haft of the short sword mounted on the 'Mech's bulkhead. The sword had been in his family for generations beyond count, a treasured symbol of the McEdwards' tradition of keeping the peace. The sword was a symbol of honor, of bravery.

Of civilization.

The haft felt strange to the touch. McEdwards glanced over. And realized that the polished silver blade had shattered, breaking in two. Probably during the attack by the *Thug*.

Something lodged in his throat.

And at that precise moment the scorched strands of myomer holding his left leg together finally gave out. One instant McEdwards felt the 'Mech going over and the next his vision grayed and his jaws clacked shut.

It happened that fast.

For a moment he just lay there, unable to summon the will to move, just staring through the starred ferroglass of his canopy at the rocky landscape now tilted *up* at a crazy angle.

McEdwards blinked hard a couple times and shook himself out of his stupor. He undid his safety restraint and managed to force open the *Sentinel's* access hatch. He pried himself out of the charred and broken remnants of his cockpit and worked his way painfully over the left shoulder joint to the AC/5 Ultra Autocannon and then to the ground.

The long barrel of the cannon was smashed against the hardscrabble deck. The fall had happened fast, but apparently not so fast that McEdwards hadn't managed to get an arm out to brace himself.

As McEdwards surveyed his 'Mech he realized that was about all the good news there was. Aside from the fact that his left leg was a mess, a long black scar sliced through the *Sentinel's* ovoid torso. It would take only a few good hits for an enemy to punch through to his gyroscope.

It would only take one to punch through the fractured armor of his cockpit.

A young MechWarrior approached and saluted, a *leutnant* judging by the insignia clipped to his cooling vest, though absent the rank McEdwards would've guessed him to be a cadet. McEdwards fumbled for a name. Gavin something.

McEdwards returned the youngster's salute. "What happened here?" He jerked his head at the hole in the building.

"Kuritans took out the orbiting factories. There's debris strung out half-way across South Whitman. Some of it came down here."

McEdwards chewed on that for a moment. The fact that the Combine navy hadn't gotten close enough to finish the job meant that the laser fire he'd just danced through had to have come from an LCAF WarShip. Exactly how much of First Co had been taken out by friendly fire?

"Can you take me to *Hauptmann* Grün, *Leutnant*, uh . . ."

"Hill," said the boy. "*Leutnant* Gavin Hill, as you please, sir."

"That's fine. Take me to Grün, would you?"

"Sir." The boy licked his lips and turned to point.

McEdwards's gaze followed the boy's finger to one of the black nylon bags lying on the green, green grass.

"The *Hauptmann* is dead." He jerked his head toward the silent *Zeus*. "That was his," he said, as if that explained everything. "You are the senior officer."

A warrant in Steiner blue ran up and saluted. "Sir, we have a report from one of our pickets. Enemy 'Mechs moving this way."



McEdwards huddled around a comms set with young Hill, the warrant, and a fortyish woman in a yellow hard hat: Tricia Coleman, the factory's Day Shift Shop foreman. My command staff, McEdwards thought sourly.

A thin patina of dust coated everything, a mix of metal and rock particles blasted into the air by errant fire. The dust coated his mouth, dried his mouth. He placed the handset to his lips and said, "Second Battalion, actual, this is *First Leutnant* McEdwards."

Hauptmann-Kommandant Krieg's deep voice emerged from the speaker. "I'm busy here," he growled. His statement was

punctuated by the high-pitched whine of lasers followed by an autocannon's staccato rattle.

"Yessir," said McEdwards. "I'll make this fast. We have a force of enemy 'Mechs moving towards the factory." He released the send button and met the warrant's gaze. "Did you get a count?"

The warrant shook his head. "Our guy's report was cutoff mid-way, but at least a lance. Maybe more."

At least a lance, McEdwards thought. Maybe more. Against two medium 'Mechs. He glanced back at his damaged ride. Scratch that. *One* medium 'Mech.

"You're just going to have to hold, *Leutnant*."

McEdwards brushed sweat his forehead with the back of his hand. Damn, it was hot! "Sir, we have only one medium bravo mike against a lance plus of—"

"Doesn't matter," said Krieg gruffly. "We're barely holding the line as it is. If we pull back they're going to punch through. Better to take our chances with your medium 'Mech and the automated defenses."

McEdwards cycled through all the possible things he could say and finally settled on, "Yessir."

"Godspeed, *Leutnant*. Krieg out."

The channel went dead.

"Surely, ah . . ." The warrant swallowed hard. His face had lost all color. "Surely we're going to withdraw."

McEdwards glanced at the warrant. The man was a comms specialist, not a warrior. He looked at Hill and Ms. Coleman. Both were silent, their faces tightened into grim expressions.

"You can't expect us to stand and fight," said the warrant. "Not against a lance. It's suicide."

No. They could retreat. And what would they give up? A thousand years of civilization, McEdwards thought, traded for a fleeting advantage in battle.

McEdwards glanced at Hill. "Is your *Sentinel* working?"

The boy nodded. "Yes, sir. I would be happy to surrender it to you, if—"

"No, you keep it," said McEdwards, glancing back at his own machine, "I'm not quite done with mine yet."

McEdwards drew a deep breath. The sweet smell of spent munitions mixed with the acrid taste of smoke. The perfume of war. He glanced at Coleman. She was a pretty woman, but there was strength in that face, too. "Will your people help, Foreman?"

"Just tell us what to do," said Coleman in a cool, level voice.

"Sir," said the warrant his face twisted with dismay, "You can't seriously think—"

McEdwards cut him off with a raised hand. "Do you have an ETA on the enemy 'Mechs?"

The warrant pursed his lips, but said, "Maybe twenty minutes."

"More if they're slowed down by the automated defenses," said Hill.

McEdwards glanced at the hole in the building and then he looked back at them. "OK, here's what we're gonna do."



Makita sprinted through a sea of laser fire, driven by nothing more than the need to *escape*. She heard the angry rattle of autocannon fire and saw Carter's *Mercury* fall out of the corner of her eye.

She'd abandoned her Ares-5 fire control system, giving herself over to instinct, firing on the run, her only aim to disrupt the endless rain of death that fell all around her.

She saw a flicker of motion out of the corner of her eye. Her heat sinks were still cooling from a double PPC blast, but she wheeled and let loose with a flight of SRMs.

The nearby turret shuddered, but didn't stop its turn. Her attack had bent the laser's barrel, though. The turret stopped

suddenly, the dark end of its barrel pointed straight at her cockpit. Makita saw a flash of emerald light and then the gun erupted into molten orange flame as its own misdirected energy tore it apart.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Smith firing his pair of Magna medium lasers.

She covered twenty clicks like that, sprinting past the automated defenses where she could and engaging where she had to, until the laser fire suddenly stopped.

"Hey, I'm suddenly clear of fire control radar," said Smith.

"Must be close," muttered Makita. She glanced at her rear monitor and a cold chill suddenly wriggled down her spine. "Where are the rest?"

"I saw McDill's *Crab* go down," said Smith. "And Ohno."

"And Carter," said Makita remembering his *Mercury* crashing to earth. "*Jigoku*. We can't be the only survivors."

Smith said nothing.

"Well, then we shall have to be enough," said Makita firmly. She strode toward a small rise. She looked up over the hill.

And saw it.

The Defiance Industries Vehicles Facility.

Guarded by a massive *Zeus*. The same class of 'Mech tearing apart the Fifth Sword of Light.

She blinked.

Perhaps "guarded" was too strong a word. The *Zeus* was missing its left arm and her sensors told her it was dead, no heat signature at all.

A wounded *Sentinel* lay on the rocky ground, propped up on its damaged autocannon. She noticed the long ugly scar that stretched across the 'Mech's ovoid body and the blackened armor near the cockpit. Makita realized this was the *Sentinel* she'd nearly killed before the naval laser fire had knocked her aside.

"What do you think?" Smith asked.

Makita's eyes marked many things: the pile of rubble that had once been the building's south wall, the collection of black bags spread across the perfectly manicured lawn, the clutter of paper and gauze and scraps of bloody cloth, the light tanks secured to flatbed trailers with steel tie downs . . .

All of it, every single sign, pointed to a hurried retreat. Makita could close her eyes and almost see them scrambling to evac the wounded, but leaving behind their damaged 'Mechs, their light tanks.

Their dead.

It all made sense. *Perfect* sense.

Somehow she knew it was a trap. She felt it like an itch deep down in her belly.

Makita licked her lips and centered a reticle made of crimson light over the *Zeus's* chest. The reticle turned golden, a sweet tone sounded, and suddenly a flight of SRM's was away.

Count one and *impact*.

The massive *Zeus* shuddered but did not fall, the rippling blasts of the missiles' warheads echoing off the mountains that ringed the valley.

And suddenly Makita was up and over the rise, charging toward the assault 'Mech, her powerful eighty ton stride shaking the ground.

"*Tai-i*, what're you—"

"Cover me," Makita snarled.

It took ten seconds to cross to where the *Zeus* stood, plenty of time for a hidden enemy to open up on her.

But none did.

She reached the *Zeus* and hit, arms extended, fingers splayed to spread out the impact, careful not to damage either of her arm-mounted PPC's.

The *Zeus* took the momentum of her charge and toppled backwards. The *Zeus's* fall fractured the rocky ground, kicking up a cloud of dust. The sound of the great 'Mech hitting

the earth was like the sound of the end of the world. It echoed against the building and then settled into silence.

Nothing else happened.

She signaled for Smith to join her and he lumbered up over the rise, stopping at a distance that allowed them to cover each other, though against what was unclear.

She was still certain there was a trap here, but she had no idea what it might be.

But if she moved against the factory she could do a lot of damage. And she might just pull an *Atlas* or two toward her position, giving the Eighth Sword of Light a better chance to punch through and hit the 'Mech facility.

She keyed in the command channel and said, "This is *Tai-i Makita*, proceeding against the Vehicles Facility." Then she stepped through the breached south wall and into the factory.



The facility was spooky.

It was illuminated by immense lamps placed in the high roof, the light tinged yellow by the accumulation of time and welding dust. A parade of half-completed tanks sat frozen on a massive conveyor line that looked like the silent fossil of some great Sauropod, long dead. Nothing stirred, not a single worker remained. More evidence of a panicked retreat by the Lyrn forces guarding the Vehicles Facility.

Except.

The high-pitched jump tone that warned of enemy fire control radar filled her cockpit and she saw multiple hot spots on her thermal sensors. Makita didn't really believe she and Smith were being stalked by a battalion of 'Mechs. All the heat signatures were motionless and the only footsteps that broke the silence were those of her *Thug* and Smith's *Kintaro*. No doubt someone had engaged the AGART system of the partially assembled tanks and turned on every fusion reactor they could find.

Still, that didn't sound like people lost to panic, did it?

And between the WarShip attack and the hard flight through the sea of laser fire their armor wasn't in the best of shape.

"Be careful," she said. "Something doesn't feel right."

"Hai," said Smith, and the tension in his voice told her he felt it, too.

She glanced down at the facility schematic, provided courtesy of the ISF, and raised one massive arm to point at a three-way junction of aisles. "Looks like we turn right here."

"Hai."

They stalked past an incredible collection of industrial equipment: yellow bridge cranes mounted on rails in the ceiling, jib cranes set on thick steel columns rising from the reinforced ferrocrete floor, weld robots, precision machining centers, and a whole collection of machinery she couldn't ID.

They came to another junction and turned left this time, moving fast, staying on plan.

The schematic was sketchy and incomplete and there was always the chance that it was wrong altogether, but it was best they had. It showed the Reactor Testing Room at the north end of the building.

Their objective.

Each fusion power plant had to be tested before installation and since this was a factory, efficiency mattered. There would have to be a bulk tank of deuterium somewhere close to the RTR.

It wouldn't be hard to turn the pressure vessel into a bomb. Place a fusion reactor close to the vessel and set it to overload. The nuclear reaction Makita was planning to set off wouldn't be self-sustaining — once released the plasma would cool far too fast for that — but the initial explosion would be big enough to knock down the building's north wall and irradiate the whole factory.

Even better, the spray of golden plasma would start a fire, feeding on everything in its path. When she was done House Steiner would have to knock down and bury the charred and blackened skeleton of their Vehicles Facility.

Just the kind of destruction she'd been charged with over-seeing. A grim smile touched Makita's lips.

Just as a nearby jib crane swung around and smashed her *Thug* in the right shoulder. The blow caught her in mid-step and for a moment she teetered on the edge of falling.

Then the steel arm smashed into her again.

And this time it knocked her down.

Makita managed to get her left arm out in front of her, absorbing most of the impact, but crushing the barrel of her PPC.

She saw a trace of motion behind her and glanced down in time to see Smith's *Kintaro* turn and—

"Don't," she shouted.

—melt the jib crane down into glowing slag with his two medium lasers.

"Cease fire," she shouted.

Smith dropped his right arm and turned his great machine to face her. "I-I don't understand. We were attacked."

Makita reached down and pushed herself up with her right hand. "The jib must be radio controlled. We weren't attacked by the crane, *Chu-i*. We were attacked by the *person holding the remote*."

"But—"

"Someone's here," she hissed. "Every shot you take telegraphs our position. And there's no need. It's a jib crane. *All we have to do is walk away*."

The giant *Kintaro* bowed from the waist, looking like a repentant samurai. "*Hai*. Of course you are right, *Tai-i*. Forgive me."

"We shall speak no more of it," said Makita. "If this is the best our enemy can do, we are indeed fortunate. He will try to distract us, *Chu-i*, but we shall not allow it. Our objective is the RTR. We *shall* obtain it."

"*Hai*," Smith barked.

"Come."

The two 'Mechs started forward again, their heavy footfalls echoing through great caverns of machinery. Twisted shadows cast by industrial robots marked the aisles, belts paralleled their path and then veered suddenly away, the abrupt hum of a compressor kicking on pierced the silence.

Somewhere, *somewhere*, amidst all this junk was a soldier or maybe a factory hardhat with an overdeveloped sense of duty. Makita's eyes did a little dance right to left, rear monitor to thermal sensor, looking for the enemy.

Finding nothing.

She stumbled, feeling *something* holding her right leg back. She jerked the leg forward and then pivoted around on her left leg. A welding torch thrust at her like a sword, its tip glowing incandescent blue. The torch was wielded by a massive robotic arm mounted to the deck.

Makita raised her right arm and centered her PPC. Manmade lightning crackled and popped, vaporizing the business end of the weld robot's torch arm.

Makita glanced down. The robot had been aiming for her knee. The welder hadn't done much damage to the delicate joint itself, but it had cut long black furrows in her armor.

"With respect, *Tai-i*," said Smith, "I thought we weren't supposed to—"

"It is perfectly plain that our enemy knows every move we make," she snarled.

Her eyes flickered across and down, her gaze brushing past her thermal sensor and to—

Jerking back.

One of the reactors was *moving*. The deck shook with the heavy footfalls of an approaching 'Mech.

Her head snapped up.

A *Sentinel* stepped past a ferrocrete wall and opened up with its powerful AC/5, the autocannon chipping away the armor around Smith's cockpit.

Smith roared and raised his right arm.

The Lyran 'Mech ducked clear an instant before the lethal red beams hit.

Smith pounded after him.

"lie," Makita shouted, but Smith's blood was up, and he plunged after the smaller 'Mech. Darted around the wall.

Makita hobbled after him, favoring her right knee while she tried to push her slow *Thug* to catch up.

She made it to the wall in time to see the *Sentinel* taking a wide turn around another corner, Smith's Magna lasers slicing through the other 'Mech's already damaged rear armor.

Alarm bells rang in Makita's mind.

Smith moved to cut off the smaller *Sentinel*, angling for a tighter turn around the corner.

"Wait," Makita shouted.

But it was already too late. Smith's *Kintaro* leaned forward in pursuit. It took a step and its massive foot slid out from beneath it. For a moment the giant samurai looked like a comedian doing a pratfall, arms out sliding across the floor as it fought for the balance. And then it disappeared into some kind of sunken bay.

Makita could see lines where its feet had dragged through the grease someone had smeared on the floor.

Trap.

She stepped forward, careful to follow the *Sentinel*'s path. The great *Kintaro* lay on its right side amidst more mysterious equipment. The 'Mech's fall had managed to crack open a giant pressure vessel and a foul black sludge was leaking out.

"Report your status, *Chu-i*," Makita barked.

"I, uh, I— Sorry, *Tai-i*," answered Smith. "I think . . . I might be able to get up."

Makita realized there was lettering on the side of the leaking pressure vessel: WASTE TREATMENT. Safe in her *Thug*'s cockpit she couldn't smell the sour stink of hydrogen sulfide, but it would be there. Along with the odorless presence of methane.

"Get up," she shouted, "get up, NOW."

Just then the *Sentinel* appeared and fired its small laser at the leaking tank.

The bay exploded into a molten orange tower of fire, the flames tinged blue by burning methane. A wave of heat pushed Makita back. She glimpsed the *Sentinel* racing toward an external freight door. She actually took a step forward, intent on following and destroying the Lyran 'Mech, until she realized that's just what they wanted her to do.

Makita clenched her jaw and brought her *Thug* to a halt. For a moment she watched the *Kintaro* writhe, listened to Smith's screams as the fire roasted him alive in his cockpit. She shuddered. It was a horrible way for a MechWarrior to die: trapped and helpless, skin charred to a crisp, lungs burning from the inside—

Unable to do anything to save him, she turned away and resumed her mission.



Makita stalked forward, careful to avoid the reach of cranes and industrial robots. Twice mechanical arm had reached out for her and both times she had slagged them with her remaining PPC.

She wasn't worried about the *Sentinel*. If it appeared, she'd stand her ground and go toe-to-toe with the forty-ton 'Mech, but she wouldn't be drawn away from her objective. Not any more.

Perhaps the Lyran commander understood that, because she hadn't seen any sign of the *Sentinel* since the ambush at the Waste Treatment Plant. So much the better

She came to yet another intersection and stopped. She glanced down at the schematic and saw that she had at last reached the main north-south aisle. The long ferrocrete avenue hugged the facility's eastern wall. It was a supply avenue, linking up with freight doors at 100-meter intervals, so that

parts and material could be brought into factory and moved efficiently to point-of-use.

All it meant to Makita was that she had a clear shot to the north end of the factory and the deuterium bulk tank.

She took a step forward.

Her life was saved by a faulty timer.

She heard a pop and jerked back as a section of racking to her right started to fall. A moment later the rest of the spoil-sport charges went off like a string of firecrackers rapidly popping off, followed closely by a rain of broken and twisted steel.

Makita quickly stepped her *Thug* back, narrowly avoiding the deluge of racking and cranes and turret assemblies. As the crashing echo died away, Makita found herself facing a barrier of wreckage. If she hadn't moved when the first charge had gone off, she would've been buried in a steel grave.

She stood staring at the pile of broken equipment. Her advance along the main north-south aisle was effectively cut off. She might be able to cut her way through with her remaining PPC, though it would take some time and she was wary about walking through all that crap with her damaged knee.

Besides that's what they'd expect her to do. No telling what awaited her on the other side of this barrier.

She glanced down at her rear monitor and her eyes fixed on one of the roll-up freight doors.

Perhaps there was a better way.

Makita turned and strode back to the door. She raised her *Thug's* right arm and slugged the door with her PPC. Then she punched through the shards of the broken door and stepped outside.

Enough. Enough of that damned factory. She would proceed northward *outside*, avoiding all the clever Lyran ambushes and booby traps. Then she would enter the building from the north, find the deuterium tank, blow it, and be done.

She glanced at her rear monitor. She was already a couple hundred meters north of the factory's ship dock, so she didn't have to far to—

She saw a flash of orange light.

Makita pushed her 'Mech into a sprint, running to her right, away from the factory where she was boxed in. A flight of missiles rippled against her right side.

The tanks. It was the tanks on the shipping dock, letting loose with their FarFire LRM's. She could see the launch flashes from the tanks' low-slung box launchers.

Makita charged forward, running a zig-zag course in an effort to disrupt the missiles' solutions, all the while blasting the Hunters with her PPC.

A tank erupted into an orange fireball and she targeted the next even as her *Thug* shuddered from a missile blow. The tanks weren't moving, making them easy targets. If she could just take out enough before her armor gave out.

She sprinted towards a low outcropping of rock. She could use it as an improvised revetment. And it was close enough she could bring her own SRM's to bear. She could open up on the Hunters with her own missile barrage and sharpshoot them with her PPC.

Missiles fell all around her, shaking the earth and gouging out craters in the rocky ground. For a split-second her weakened knee joint locked up, and she stumbled. She nearly went over, knowing it would mean her life if she did, and then somehow she regained her balance and made the outcropping.

She crouched down behind the rock formation listening to the heavy *whump, whump, whump* of missiles hitting brittle sandstone. She didn't have much time before her barrier shattered.

She stepped past the outcropping just long enough to release a double flight of SRM's then stepped back. It took only a three-count before she heard a satisfying ripple of explosions.

She sighted in on a tank's missile box and set up a shot with her PPC, exposing only her right arm to counterfire. Lightning crackled and the box exploded into a towering fountain of fire.

That turned out to be enough for her friends in the tanks. When she stepped out from behind the outcropping to fire another salvo of missiles, she saw men and women fleeing.

Men and women in yellow hard hats.

Makita howled with rage and charged after them, firing all the way. The first PPC blast dropped the fleeing factory workers, cooking them where they stood. Her successive blasts were aimed at the Hunters' missile boxes and they transformed the ship dock into a garden of fire of death.

When she reached the tanks, none had survived. All the ship dock was burning.

Makita saw the fallen *Sentinel* she had confronted during the naval battle and realized with a start that she was nearly back where she began.

Enough of these foolish cat-and-mouse games, it was time to—

The *Sentinel* stepped out from behind the southeast corner of the building, took aim with its autocannon, and fired. Makita staggered backwards as the Ultra flensed armor from her right knee.

She raised her right arm and blackened the ferrocrete of the building's wall, but not before the *Sentinel* had ducked back behind the corner.

Enough.

Makita charged forward. She would make this foolish *Sentinel* pay and pay dearly and then she would finish the job she'd come to do.

Makita reached the building's corner. The *Sentinel* was racing toward the safety of the next corner, but in this case the massive size of the building had worked against him.

Makita lined up a shot with her lone surviving PPC and poured angry fire into the *Sentinel*'s rear.

She must've hit the gyroscope, because the medium BattleMech suddenly fell, sprawling on the hardscabble earth, face first.

She stood over the crippled 'Mech waiting for the pilot to emerge. After a minute the hatch cracked open and the *Kisama* pulled himself out. He knelt on the wide flange of the left shoulder, hands clasped behind his head.

"No, my friend," she snarled, "you will not get off quite that easily."

She bent down and batted him with her right arm. All her fury and frustration powered that blow and his body skittered across the earth and was still.

"NO!"

She glanced at her radio. The voice had come from an open frequency.

An alarm warbled, signaling that she had been targeted. Where was the danger.

That was when she glanced down at her rear monitor. It was the fallen *Sentinel*, the one she thought she'd dealt with before. Somehow it was still working. It poured laser fire into her right knee. She wheeled around intending to slag the downed 'Mech, but the turn was too quick, especially after the careful surgery the *Sentinel* had just performed with his small laser.

Makita's abused right knee finally gave out and her *Thug* went down hard on its right side.



An infantry squad dressed in desert cammo fatigues pulled her from her *Thug*. She cradled her right arm in her left. She could see where the bone's broken edge had pushed up against her smooth, brown skin. Compound fracture. Agony pulsed in her damaged arm, but her mind made it a distant agony, like it was happening to someone else.

The Lyran squad leader pressed his needler into the small of her back and marched her toward the factory. None of them spoke.

And the squad leader's grip on his weapon never wavered.

Makita had no doubt what would happen if she flinched, if she stumbled, if she made any move at all.

She briefly considered making a break for it. Better to be cut down from behind than what was going to come next. After a

moment of reflection she was shamed to discover she didn't have the courage to end her life.

So she kept walking, at a steady, careful pace.

They led her into the factory and deposited her in an empty office. After a few minutes a grim-faced doctor appeared. He cut her cooling vest free and gently probed her broken arm. Her breath caught as tendrils of molten pain laced through her arm.

She vomited, all over herself and a little on the doctor.

He didn't react at all. He merely took firm hold of her arm and jerked.

Suddenly the world flashed nova white followed immediately by absolute darkness.



The first thing Makita noticed when she came to was that her arm had been bandaged and where there was agony before, now there was only a pleasant warmth.

The second thing she noticed was the Lyran officer standing before her, legs splayed, arms clasped behind his back.


He was young, his head completely shaved, and not bad looking. He had a thrown on a Steiner blue uniform shirt, but he still wore MechWarrior shorts. He must've just come from the battlefield. A smear of grease marked the line of his jaw and the sour tang of sweat hung heavily in the air.

And something else, something strange.

He wore a sword at his hip, what looked to be a broad, short blade. It was hard to tell for certain because the tip of the sword had been snapped off.

"*Konnichiwa*," she said steadily followed by a polite little bow of her head. She would show no fear.

It was the only power she had left.



The young MechWarrior nodded. "I am *First Leutnant* Danver McEdwards of the 30th Lyran Guards. What is your name *Tai-i*?"

"Makita. Aiko Makita."

He nodded. "Very good, then. You should know, my comms team just copied down a message from our force commander. The DCMS 'Mechs are withdrawing to their DropShips." He paused and a grim smile touched his lips. "And the Vehicles Facility still stands."

Makita blanched. *Withdrawing*. Meaning there was no hope for escape or rescue. She imagined the things they would do to her. They would use her.

Break her.

She swallowed in a dry mouth.

"What is to become of me?" she said in a calm voice she hoped did not betray her desperate interest in the subject.

"You murdered fourteen factory workers," said McEdwards savagely, "and a boy who was trying to surrender."

Makita remembered the young *Sentinel* pilot down on his knees, his hands clasped behind his head. She licked dry lips. No doubt the Lyrans were going to make her pay for that.

Then she remembered Smith burning alive.

"That's no better than what you did to *Chu-i* Smith," she said darkly.

McEdwards's raised his eyebrows. "The *Kintaro* pilot?"

She jerked her head down in an unsteady nod.

His mouth tightened into a grim line. He favored her with a curt nod.

Makita frowned, unsure of what he meant by the gesture.

A pair of soldiers entered the room, their weapons drawn. Makita suppressed a shudder.

So it was about to begin.

"Get up," said McEdwards.

Makita tried to rise, but she suddenly felt she couldn't make her body obey. Her legs and arms were leaden weights, heavy with terror.

McEdwards frowned. "You will be given a clean uniform." His eyes flickered down to her tee-shirt. It was soaked with sweat, leaving little to the imagination. "The arm will be hard. I'll send a female medic to help you. And we'll get you something to eat. After that you and *Chu-i* Smith will be returned to your unit."

Makita blinked, unsure she had heard right. "W-what?"

"After you stalked away from the Waste Treatment Plant, we activated the fire suppression system. We recovered Smith from his *Kintaro*. He is badly hurt, but he is alive."

Makita shook her head, hearing the words, but not really understanding them.

"You are a prisoner of war," said McEdwards stiffly. "You shall be treated with every right and privilege accorded to you by your status under the Ares Conventions."

One of the guards hauled her to her feet.

This had to be a trick, Makita thought. Give the prisoner hope. It would make the torture that much more devastating later on.

The two soldiers led her away. She was quite surprised when they really did give her a clean uniform and something to eat.



First Leutnant Denver McEdwards strolled out of the Vehicles Facility, his hands clasped behind his back. He came upon a field medic wrestling a body into a black nylon bag. He held his hand up and the woman stopped what she was doing.

"I've got it," he said softly.

An uncertain look crossed her face. Then she nodded and stepped away.

He knelt and studied the body.

It was Gavin Hill, the young officer who had piloted his *Sentinel*, so bravely.

"I am so sorry," McEdwards whispered, "I thought I was taking the dangerous role."

Hill's body was broken and bruised by the *Thug's* blow, bones shattered, face swelling into an unrecognizable purple-red mass. *Leutnant* Gavin Hill would have a closed casket at his funeral, no doubt about it.

It wasn't too late to make Makita pay for what she'd done to him. McEdwards didn't have to return her to the 18th Algedi Regulars. She could be made to pay and pay and pay. He let loose a deep sigh, zipped up the body bag, and stood.

A thousand years of civilization traded away for a fleeting advantage in battle. No, he wouldn't hold her. He'd honor his promise to make her part of the prisoner exchange. He couldn't stop all the atrocities, but he could run his own little corner of the war with honor and decency.

He pulled the claymore from his hip and held the shattered, blackened blade up to the light. It would never be quite the same again, but maybe, just maybe, he could fashion the blade anew.

Heart of Dixie

Blaine Lee Pardoe



I've always had a soft spot for the Third Succession War. That was where I (and some of the other writers in the series) cut our teeth. That was the good old days. You could defend a planet with a company of 'Mechs and support. Salvage was important because the technology had been lost to mass produce 'Mechs. I even have my old battered copy of BattleDroids that said that water was rare and the Ryan Cartel used to haul ice between worlds for a profit. New 'Mechs, let alone units the size of regiments were the things of the past. The Star League was a legend, ComStar was a mysterious technocult, the Clans were unheard of, and you lived for the day that Hanse Davion was going to stick it to Max Liao soon — if he ever married into House Steiner.

God those were the days!

This story is one I toyed with about 18 years ago or so as a scenario set or something like that. I found the original notes and liked it because it: 1. dealt with militia troops and, 2. dealt with how an invasion began in the first place. Something neat, fun and dangerous. I wanted to capture the concept of militia and their role and function. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did writing it.

Fifty-Six Kilometers North of New Wichita
The Northern Continent
Dixie
Lyran Commonwealth
1 May 3025

It looked like a grass covered hill, not trimmed in generations, just tall light green and dead-brown field grass thigh high waving with each gust of breeze. Against the stark blue sky they could see the insects fluttering in the air above the grass, seemingly immune to the wind. The hot summer sun made the sunburns on their bare arms sting.

"You sure this is the place?" Randolph asked, checking his GPS system for the hundredth time that afternoon.

Fletcher smiled. "Yeah. This is it."

"Kinda obvious isn't it?" Randolph frowned. "I mean it's a the biggest-honking hill in the middle of the plains. I thought

that these things were concealed a little better than this." The sarcasm rang with each word.

Fletcher only smiled more broadly. "You'd think that by now you'd have more faith than this. It *is* a good hiding place — nobody else ever found it did they? Besides, from the geological survey that I ran, the hill is natural and has always been there. It's not a construct. The locals would have always thought that it belonged there."

Randolph crossed his arms. "You were always the dork. So how do we get inside?"

Fletcher did a check of the paper that he carried, validating position. "Each Castle was built individually, customized to the world they were on. Entrances were hidden intentionally, you know that. Finding the way in is going to take some time." Tossing down his backpack into the grass, he pulled out the metal detector and attached the field coil onto the collapsible rod, wrapping the wire carefully around the pole. "We need to run some ground penetration scans with the detector. If we're lucky, we can find the metal support structure. Follow that signal and we should be able to reach some sort of opening."

Randolph ran his fingers through his balding head, tossing his comb-over to the side. "Sounds like work."

"Always looking for a quick buck eh?"

"Don't you know it. You find this mother load and we are set for life."

Money. Fletcher shook his head and started a sweep as he walked through the grass along the base of the hill. The headphones were almost over-sized on his narrow head. Swinging the detector's head in the grass was difficult, the grass seemed to resist each pass of the head over the ground. Each swing stirred the insects into the air. It was hot work but exciting.

Three years of research had gone into this day. Three years of digging through the records from the Star League Defense Force's engineering corps. Three years of long nights after work; puzzling the data together from buried bits of information. Countless hours of checking old shipping requisitions from centuries ago, learning where thousands of tons of construction supplies could have been hauled to. It had been time

well invested. The hill in front of them represented the ultimate prize — a Castle Brian.

Castle Brians had been built during the peak of the Star League centuries before. Hidden complexes filled with BattleMechs and supplies, they were fortified and hardened against even the force of a nuclear blast. They were a deterrent against attack. An enemy would have to deal with defenders with a hidden base that could harass and harangue them. With the fall of the First Star League many of these bases had been searched out and raided for their priceless military hardware. Such caches were filled with such contemporary treasures that they spawned armed invasions.

That wouldn't happen on Dixie. Fletcher and Randolph had often talked about what they would do if they ever found the Castle Brian. They would secretly take the contents out and sell them in small batches, make their money over time. Strictly cash, tax-free, right under the noses of the authorities. Besides, the property that they were on was owned by someone else. Moving a company of BattleMechs out was bound to attract attention. Best to do it covertly.

"Listen," he said after a half-an-hour of walking through the thick grass, "Randolph, you go ahead and pitch the tent."

"Tent?" his associate queried. "Why? We've found it right?"

"We *think* we've found it. And even if we have it might take days to find a way in."

"Fletcher," he chuckled. "You have to have hope."

Fletcher was not so optimistic. "If I do find the opening, you may have to make a run back to New Wichita and rent some earth-moving equipment. This complex has been buried for centuries and may take forever to get out."



It took two days of searching and digging by both of them to locate the tunnel entrance. The doorway, or the top of it when they located it, was a good 150 meters from the hill itself. It was a hatch of sorts, obviously not large enough for a vehicle or a 'Mech, but quite large. It was metallic and resembled more of a bank vault door, mounted low and in the ground so

deep that it had taken more time to dig it out than to locate it. Randolph was sure that they would need explosives to blast the door open, but Fletcher found that it was unlocked. It was a discovery that bothered him. Was it possible that someone had already looted this Castle Brian?

They wrenched the door open and the air inside came out reeking of stale water, must and mildew. The molding air had a dead smell like a dead animal. From their packs, Fletcher and Randolph took out their flashlights and aimed the beams inside.

The antechamber was small with another door and a decontamination unit on the far wall. The paint had mostly peeled away, but the faint after-image of a Cameron Star, the seal of the Star League, was still somewhat visible on the one wall. The electronic control unit for the door had corroded heavily, leaving thin rusting streaks running down the reinforced fer-concrete wall. The floor was dust, dirt, water that had seeped in.

Forcing the inner door took a prybar and three hours of hard, intense, sweaty work. The tunnel beyond was a personnel access tunnel that stabbed deep into the hillside. It was a dank tunnel. Many parts of it had pooled water several inches deep. The water had a thick lay of slime over it, a mold of some sort, one that loved the darkness. They walked on a raised side portion of the tunnel that housed ductwork. In some places the reinforced tunnel had collapsed, chunks of the wall fallen into the pools on the floor.

There was some evidence of people. Storage crates, long abandoned, had rotted away to nothing and their contents, from what Fletcher could tell some sort of decontamination suits, had also dissolved over the centuries. The air was heavy with moisture and the deeper that the tunnel ran, the more it angled downward into the hill. Each dozen or so meters the pooled water got deeper until both of the men were up to their knees in the ooze.

At the end of the hallway they found a larger door, cracked open, that seemed to lead to larger chamber beyond. "This is it," Randolph said. There was a dim light coming from the other side of the doorway, tinted yellowish-orange.

Fletcher was not as optimistic. "All of this water...there must have been some sort of leak."

"That doesn't matter, we are talking BattleMechs here."

"Mechs are tough, but not tough enough to sit in water for centuries."

Randolph didn't care. Wading through the water he wedged himself through the hatch. Fletcher moved in behind him, water sloshing as he tried to keep up. The chamber on the other side opened up to the beams of their lights.

The chamber was some sort of central core. Several other tunnels led off in different directions from the room. In the center of the room, rising out of a deep pool of stagnant water, was a pair of BattleMechs. Crates, half collapsed and semi-submerged, were tossed everywhere. The walls had thick growths of mold or slime of some sort. Emergency lights orange in color, probably powered from a small fusion reactor somewhere, were still on somewhere up near the ceiling. Their orange-ish color altered the color of things in the room.

The 'Mechs — the treasure, stood there and Fletcher found his eyes following them from the pool of water upward. They were lightweights, a *Hussar* nearest to him and what looked to be a *Mongoose* behind it. The *Mongoose* had slipped from her support harness ages ago and had bent at the waist down, as if bowing to the peeling paint walls of the chamber.

He aimed his beams at the 'Mech gantry and was stunned by what he saw. The *Hussar* was a mess. Not only had one of its legs apparently given way a long time ago, it was held in place by a series of thick stalactites stabbing down from the ceiling. Like stone icicles, these reached downward and literally enveloped the shoulder of the *Hussar*, encasing it in a concrete-like form. The leg that had given away was contorted and fallen from the knee actuator, held up by a handful of rotting myomer strands.

The light showed him even more depressing details of both 'Mechs. The *Mongoose's* cockpit looked as if it was filled with water. Eerie colors of black and green mixed in a pool in the cockpit glass. Coolant leaks from long rotted hoses had seeped out of the armor plates and drizzled down the sides of the 'Mech. On the *Hussar*, Randolph's searchlight beam showed that the left arm was encrusted with a stalactite which had seemingly split open the armor plating there. The fist of the *Hussar* was gone, the fingers had literally dropped off over

time, their actuators and myomer wrenched open and rotted. The armor was gone, under the sickening pool of water.

The Castle Brian on Dixie had never fallen to siege or even nuclear attack. It had been abandoned by the SLDF, abandoned and long forgotten. While designed to withstand the fury of war, it had fallen to the forces of nature and time.

"What a waste," Fletcher said sadly.

"Damn!" spat back Randolph. "Nothing here we could salvage. Those 'Mechs are shot. They couldn't be salvaged even for museum pieces."

Fletcher made his way over a half-toppled mountain of fiber-plastic crates. Some were open and their contents were spilled out into the slime-filled ooze. Others, the heavier ones, were still sealed. "Don't jump the gun Randolph. We haven't explored all of these tunnels and these crates. There's bound to be something we can recover and sell."

"You think so?"

Fletcher flipped the latch on one of the crates and peered inside. "Yes...definitely."



*West Buford
Dixie
Lyrn Commonwealth
15 May 3025*

"So, where did you get this?" the man asked, staring at the pistol as Randolph slammed the rest of his beer.

"Let's just say I found a source for these and other assorted arms," he replied as his cheeks took on a reddened glow from the dark ale. He pulled the laser pistol back across the bar, his fingers fondling it almost obscenely.

"That little blaster is a classic," the one man in a suit said. "I must admit Mister Falconi, your source is a good one. A Star League Defense Force issue Mark II laser pistol. This one still has the bluing on it and has obviously never been fired. A mint condition antique. Needless to say, I'm suspicious."

"Suspicious?" Randolph was caught off guard.

"We are on Dixie. How would such an obviously well preserved classic firearm end up here — and not in a museum or some wealthy private owner's collection. No," the man said waving his hand in the air between them. "This is so good that it's got to be a fake. A reproduction."

Randolph's mouth hung open for two seconds in disbelief. "You're kidding right?"

"It's a remarkably high quality reproduction, but it's simply too good to be true. My compliments to your forger."

Randolph chuckled once and his face got redder. "Show's what you know. This is the real McCoy. I know, I pulled it out the crate I got it from myself. It's not fake. In fact, if you were to run the serial number off of this you would find that it was probably never issued. You wanna know why?"

The man in the suit signaled the waitress with two fingers, a beer for each of them. "I must admit Mister Falconi, I am a little curious. If you could shed some light on where you got it, it could alter my purchasing decision."

The beers arrived and Randolph took another fresh cold sip, licking his lips as he finished. He glanced around nervously as if to make sure that no one in the busy bar could hear his voice. "This is authentic SLDF hardware because it came out of a Castle Brian right here on Dixie. I pulled it out of there a few weeks ago, along with my friend."

The would-be-buyer leaned back and took a sip of his own beer, far less than Randolph had. "Intriguing, but there is no Castle Brian on this planet. Everyone knows that. There've been treasure hunters seeking one for years. If there was one, someone would have found it long before you."

"Ha!" Randolph laughed. "Shows what you know. We looked for it, mostly in researching the archives and libraries. It took forever but we found it."

The man paused and leaned forward on his elbows on the coffee table, reaching out and holding the laser pistol with a whole new respect. "You found a Castle Brian here?"

"You bet I did."

"And this pistol came from it?"

Randolph seemed almost proud. "It sure did. I pulled it from the crate and peeled off the sealing compound myself just a few days ago. There are crates of them there."

The man turned the weapon in his hands. "Interesting. Tell me Mister Falconi, what else was in this alleged Castle Brian?"

For a moment Randolph hesitated. "There was a lot of stuff there, mostly ruined."

"BattleMechs?"

He took another long drag on the sweating beer. "There were a few but I wouldn't say that they were in the best condition." Randolph chuckled as an acknowledgement that he knew something that the other man didn't.

"I assume you're going to let the Lyran government know of your find, especially if there are 'Mechs involved?"

"Shaa...right," he said sarcastically. "We don't even have permission to be on the property where this Castle is. I bring in the government and suddenly I'm cut out of any and all profit."

The man put down the pistol between them. "I'm prepared to make an offer for your entire collection Mister Falconi."

"It's not all for sale right now. My associate and I have an understanding about the disposition of these goods." He slurred the word, "disposition," slightly as he spoke. "Sorry, but I have to honor that."

The man reached into his suit pocket and took out a small pad of paper. He jotted down a note on the paper. "Mister Falconi, this is the amount of C-Bills that I'm willing to pay for a crate of these weapons in similar condition. Please look it over before you make any rash decisions." He slid the pad in front of Randolph.

Randolph's face got even redder and his jaw hung limp and open for a moment. "You're serious."

"Very serious."

"I'll have to check with my associate before I commit to this."

The man pulled the pad back. "I'm afraid that this offer is contingent on a decision right now. If you were not empowered to negotiate, you shouldn't have contacted me in the first place."

He hesitated for a moment, but only a moment. "Fine, I accept."

"Excellent Mister Falconi. I will arrange for the account transfer. I will need to inspect the goods as well."

"Of course," he said, gulping down the rest of the beer.

"You've made a good decision...an excellent bargain."



"You did what?" Fletcher squealed. His tiny apartment seemed to suddenly get a lot smaller with the worlds that his friend had uttered.

"You heard me. Don't be so reactionary," Randolph said, grabbing onto his friend's arm and guiding him back to a seat in the chair he had leapt out of. "Don't worry, I have your piece of the profits."

"You don't even know this guy. Randolph, we have to play this low key, quiet."

"He came highly recommended from a good friend of mine," Randolph countered. "You're just nervous."

"I'm leaving," he muttered, rising from his chair. He moved to the closet and pulled out a suitcase. "If you've got half-a-brain in your head you'd do the same."

Randolph frowned, then got mad. He took the thick wad of C-Bills and cut it in half with his stubby fingers. He tossed them onto the now-empty chair. "Look, if you want to panic like some schoolgirl at a fraternity party, you can. We did this for the money, you've got your share."

Fletcher stopped. "You just don't get it do you?"

"Get what?"



The man in the suit sat at the terminal that logged onto the Dixie HPG. He glanced again at the Mark II laser pistol and ran his finger across the handle. It was perfect and its perfection was going to help his people. Dixie was a border world between the Free World League and the Lyran Commonwealth. He had been on the world for nearly twenty years, a deeply planted agent. Posing as an antique buyer granted him the right to ask many questions and to travel freely on buying trips. Over the years he had learned a lot of things, but now he had learned the biggest secret Dixie had to offer.

A hidden Castle Brian. A storage warehouse that held God-only-knows-what.

The message packet was data only and priority. Code phrases were used in case ComStar "inadvertently" let the wrong people see the message, but he doubted that would happen. His contact was another antique buyer in the League, one that was also another agent/controller. With any luck, in a few days, matters would be set in motion to change the fate of Dixie once and for all.

TRANSMISSION CODE: 392847KT —DATA STREAM
COMPRESSION HIGH, ENCRYPTION DELTA EPSILO
BRAVO ONE

From: Francis Hollander

To: Marcus Dale, Marcus Antiques and Collectables,
Colfax, Free Worlds League

Text:

Marcus,

Have recently purchased a collection of rare SLDF issued pistols. It came from a warehouse that only recently has been opened here on Dixie. I believe that I will, with your assistance, be able to secure other items in this warehouse for possible resale. I was deeply impressed with the size and quantity of the goods available.

I am working with a seller named Randolph Falconi. Upon your confirmation, I will secure from him the address of this new warehouse. Speed is of the essence in that no other local buyers have been included on the bidding.

I look forward to seeing you soon.

Your Most Sincere Friend,

Francis

The code words were chosen carefully so as to not attract attention. "Warehouse" was a key word — a phrase that SAFE had long ago set up to indicate a Castle Brian. "Local Buyers" indicated that Lyran intelligence had not picked up on the possibility of the Castle Brian. The closing phrase, "Your Most Sincere Friend," was the key. It was one indicating that a military operation was required for the operation. He reviewed it one more time and stabbed his finger on the send button. Now the die had been cast. Everything else was in the hands of his handlers, superiors, and the Captain-General.

▲▼▲

Task Force Extractor
DropShip Hawk's Shadow
Approach Assault Vector
Dixie
Lyran Commonwealth
17 June 3025

Colonel Eve Hansi moved across the bridge of the *Hawk's Shadow* smoothly, almost coolly. Some of it was the low gravity, some was her calm demeanor. Every eye on the bridge followed each of her floating steps. She had inherited the Fourth Brigade of the Fusiliers or Oriente a while ago when many of its officers had been embroiled in a conspiracy against the League. When she assumed command it was because of her SAFE background and her ruthless character. The conspirators, either in action or thought, had been dealt with brutally. If rumors were believed, tortured to death at

her own hand. She commanded both fear and respect at the same time.

"Message coming in from the Lyran governor, a man named Herr Vonderholf, demanding to know our intentions," the communications officer said cutting through the silent tension.

She smiled. "I show up with a reinforced battalion and he wants to know why I'm here? Leave it to the purse-pinching merchants of the Commonwealth to try and bargain their way out of this. Patch it through to my station," she said, running her hand back through her jet black hair. "Governor Vonderholf, this is Colonel Hansi of the Free World's League. I demand your immediate surrender of Dixie to my Fusiliers."

"Who are you to make demands of me?" came back a barking voice from a man that had to be much older than her, older and more egotistical.

"I am the person that is going to take this planet from you. My way, you live. Your way, and countless people will suffer and die."

"The Dixie Militia will defy you. We will bathe your landing zones in blood for bringing war here."

Colonel Hansi laughed. "Excellent. I've always enjoyed a challenge." She stabbed her finger at the control button and cut off communication. "Make preparations for a combat drop. Deploy Combat Air Patrol in five hours when we enter range of the planet. Assemble my senior staff. If our precious Governor wants to put up a fight, I will not deny it to it."



*City of Vanceburg
The Northern Continent
Dixie
Lyran Commonwealth*

Fletcher listened to the earpiece carefully as the comm.. unit rang again. Fletcher had left town weeks ago but had kept up contact with Randolph, despite his stupidity. With the news of the approaching House Marik forces, he and he alone knew

the reason that they had come. The Castle Brian. It was the stupidity of Randolph that had brought them here, it had to be. Now his friend had disappeared. Would the same happen to him? He slammed down the personal comm. unit and wiped the sweat from his brow.

This had changed. It had originally been a quest for treasure. He had always felt that. It wasn't even the money but the search for it that had been important. He loved the hunt and the quest to find the Castle Brian had proven to be a fantastic challenge. Now that didn't matter. His discovery, his intelligence, had brought war to his home world. Damn. Damn it all to hell.

What now? Perhaps if he passed the information onto the authorities on Dixie they could negotiate with the House Marik forces, tell them that there was nothing on the world worth risking their forces for. No. That wouldn't work. This invasion commander would never believe the word of her enemy. Even if they inspected the facility they would claim that the Lyrans had moved away all of the military hardware.

Perhaps he could parlay with the invaders directly, tell them right where to go to seize the Castle Brian. He assumed that Randolph had been taken prisoner by spies on world already and would most likely tell them the location even if he didn't. Would they believe him or think he was luring them into a trap? And if they did take the Castle Brian, would they still think that the Lyran commander had already stripped the facility of the hardware? Of course they would...he wouldn't believe them.

Oh God, what have I started?



The tight and congested tactical operations room for the militia was not comfortable — in fact it was getting hotter. Colonel Fritz Volger of the Dixie Militia stared at hard copy report with a gray-eyed stare that would have melted glacial ice. Other commanders like using the holographic displays, he liked paper...it was tangible, real. And when you were pissed off, you could wad it up and toss it at someone or across the room to make a point. He wanted to do just that but knew that it would do no good. The other men and women in the room

with him were is subordinates. The last thing they needed was for him to shatter their morale.

Besides, the House Marik forces were already doing that.

"What do you think sir?" his aide de camp, Hauptmann Angela Dickerson asked.

"I think," he said, rising to his feet and staring into her heart. "We're going to earn our pay in the next month or so." He ran his fingers through his cropped salt-and-pepper hair

"Sir, they're dropping with a battalion if not more," a junior officer piped in. "We've barely got two companies of militia against everything they can toss at us — front line troops and all. Our troops are mostly infantry and vehicles. They will be coming with 'Mechs."

"Don't wet yourself Leutnant Oak," he replied sarcastically. "I've sent a message for reinforcements. The Archon will provide. God Bless Katrina Steiner."

There was a pause. "Sir, what is your plan?"

"Simple," he said. "Win."

"Sir?"

He laughed, just slightly, to let them know he wasn't afraid. He had been through military operations his entire career. The truth of the matter was something he knew, he wasn't the best officer. If he was, he wouldn't have been assigned command of militia in some obscure border world. He had seen combat before but had been wounded two times, both times at the outset of operations. Colonel Volger knew he hadn't kissed enough ass over the years for another chance to prove himself. No, House Marik was serving that up to him. *I just have to make sure I don't get downed in the first five minutes of battle this time around...*

"They're here for a reason," he said calmly. "We need to figure out what their objective is and keep them from it. The name of the game here is to stall, to wear them down, let them get frustrated and hopefully sloppy."

"Stall sir? I assumed we'd dig in for a defensive fight at one of the fortifications."

He shook his head. "I have a healthy respect for the Free World League. This is the Fusiliers of Oriente...tough sons of bitches. They'll want us to dig in because they have the firepower to take us out. I have not intention of obliging them.

"Why have they hit us?" Hauptmann Dickerson queried.

"For them to strike at Dixie, not part of a general campaign, tells me that they believe that there is something here important enough to raid us. They've come in battalion strength. That's more than enough to take the world but to hold it, this far across the border, is going to take more troops. It doesn't make sense because the Commonwealth can toss in troops to retake the world pretty easily. They're looking for something, I can feel it in my bones. We simply need to deny them whatever it is."

An officer stepped up to the table and handed him a note. He looked at it and smiled. "And it looks like I win the prize for being right." He nodded to the messenger who saluted, executed a perfect about face, and left.

"Sir?" Oak asked.

"We know whey they're here. It appears that some locals discovered a Star League era Castle Brian here on Dixie. Word must have leaked to the Free Worlds League."

"A Castle Brian? Geez, we're saved. All of that hardware..." Leutenat Oak started grinning. "We've got it made. All we have to do is refit with that gear."

"Don't get your undies in a bunch Oak," the Colonel countered. "One of the guys that found it has told us that there is nothing there." It's an empty ruin."

"Crap."

Colonel Volger rubbed his chin in thought. "No, not crap. In fact—" he glanced at the flight trajectory reports for the approaching DropShips and smiled. "we might just be able to turn this to our advantage."

"How's that sir?" his aide asked.

Volger smiled broadly. "Now, we just need to figure out how to turn what they don't know against them."



Dixie
Fast Burn Approach Vector
Lyrar Commonwealth
22 June 3025

"Damn needle in a haystack!" she spat, staring at the sensor display on the bridge of the *Hawk's Shadow*. Colonel Eve Hansi wanted to smash the display screen but knew that that sort of action would not be interpreted well with the bridge crew. *Things were so much easier when I wasn't in command. Flunkies can throw tantrums. I have to be a leader.* Her Combat Air Patrols had been running search patterns but had not found any sign of the elusive Castle.

"Sir, a planet is a large place," the sensor tech responded.

"Really?" she sarcastically snapped back. "I should write that down for future reference."

"Without knowing exactly where this Castle Brian is located it makes our landing zone choice difficult at best. Castle Brian's were designed to be undetectable and hidden even from ground forces. It takes time Colonel."

"We don't have time," she said through gritted teeth. "You need to look for construction equipment concentrations, signs of digging or attempts to conceal large-scale digging efforts. We have to know where to drop so we can seize that facility quickly."

She scanned the eyes of everyone on the bridge. They feared her, she could feel their fear. It all had to do with when she assumed command. She as a SAFE operative and her first job in the unit was to remove those individuals not loyal to the Free Worlds League. Most of the key officers found themselves stripped of command, some sent off for further, "interrogation."

"Let me make this clear. We are operating behind enemy lines. Yes, it is local militia down there and we can take them. We're the fightin' Fourth of the Oriente Fusiliers. The Commonwealth does not take kindly to these types of raids. They will send some front line regiments after us. Each day we are there brings reinforcements closer, reinforcements that are not militia but troops who would like nothing more than taking us out." With each sentence she gained more

composure, more control over her temper. "We need to move and move fast. Landing is in two days. Sensor Tech; I need a LZ. You need to make that happen."

The sensor tech had beads of sweat forming on his brow as she spoke. "Yes sir. I will give you my best."

"That is the minimum that I ask," she said. Pushing away from his console, she floated across the bridge to her seat. With a graceful motion she turned and pulled her lean frame into the seat, putting on the restraining strap.



"Look at those flight patterns," Colonel Volger said, more to himself than to anyone else in the tactical operations center.

"Sir?" an adjutant officer asked.

"Grid patterns. Their Combat Air Patrols are not flying to find or fight us. They're searching."

"What does it mean Colonel?"

Volger grinned. "It may mean that my hunch paid off."



Banner Andersen moved the ConstructionMech forward, plowing a huge furrow as he walked. Sod curled up as he moved forward and the stark tan clay under the topsoil stood out brightly. There were five of the heavy "working man's" Mechs and numerous dumptrucks working the hillside. In the distance he saw a lonely militia BattleMech standing on the ridgeline at the edge of a cluster of trees. He had seen other troops as well but they seemed to be hiding.

"Damn strange if you ask me," Andersen said into his comm unit to his boss from Fogerty Construction. "What exactly are we building?"

"Andersen, cut the chatter. The government asked us to plow up this hillside according to that Militia engineer. They are paying us triple the going rate to do what they ask as long as we get started now. In the distance tents were being erect-

ed along the hillside and tarps were being spread, apparently with no reason.

"Damn weird. We're not building anything."

"For the bonus you're being paid, who cares?"

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Dixie
Lyran Commonwealth
24 June 3025

"Sir," the tech called out. "I think I've got it."

She drifted across the bridge like a hawk ready to drop on her prey. When she arrived at the workstation she looked at the ground imagery. Enhanced with the sensors and systems, it was a remarkably clear picture. Construction equipment, recent work, tents equipped with electronic filtering gear to obscure sensor penetration. "It was the tents that got me too. Why would you obscure a routine construction project?" The sensor tech added, noting where her eyes were focused.

"Location?"

"Southern continent. It's miles from any city. In fact it's out in the middle of nowhere. I almost missed it."

"You catch that in the trees?" she said poking her finger at the display.

"I couldn't make it out, even with enhanced imaging."

Colonel Hansi grinned a predatory smile. "You might not see it but I do. That is the arm of a *Centurion* sticking out. That is the spot alright." She patted the sensor tech on the back hard. "You earned your pay this month," she said and he let out a low but audible sigh of relief. "Feed the coordinates to the helm. Captain, alter your trajectory for a landing near that site. I will review the terrain and let you know the exact coordinates in the next two hours."

Almost gloating she broadened her smile. "We've got them."

▲▼▲

"Rainbow Company Actual this is Iron Crown," came the voice of Colonel Fritz Volger over Leutnant Hollister Raven's neurohelmet earpiece. She stopped the slow walk of her *Centurion* to a complete stop and surveyed the terrain from her hilltop cover under the massive oaks. The centuries-old 'Mech actually creaked as it stopped. It had been in her family for generations and was all between her and being dispossessed.

"You're a go Iron Crown," she replied.

"They've taken the bait," Volger said.

Great...or is it, 'aw crap?' "Understood," she settled for.

"You will be executing orders marked Tango, One-One, Bravo," he stated.

"Confirm," she said keying T, 1, 1, B, into her battlecomputer. "Tango, One, One, Bravo."

"Enemy ETA is 40 hours. Landing Zone is projected in your sector."

"It worked sir."

There was no gloating in his voice. "Yes, apparently it did. Good luck and keep your head down," Colonel Volger replied.

"Yes sir," she replied. *Like I have a friggin' choice.* She keyed in the command frequency for her company. "Alright Rainbow company. Here's the latest. Our shell game worked. Get those civvy 'Mechs out of here before they get toasted. We have inbound DropShips from the 4th Brigade of the Oriente Fusiliers coming to pay us as visit. They probably know we're here but not what we're up to. Our mission is simple; buy time."



Colonel Hansi pushed herself back hard into the command console seat and let the automatic five point safety harness's auto-tightening system do its job. *If it got any tighter it would be considered kinky,* she thought to herself. The DropShip *Hawk's Shadow* was quaking slightly as it began its drop through the atmosphere. Even in her *Atlas* she could feel the rocking and buffeting. She adjusted the latching and locking

mechanism to hold her neurohelmet in place and surveyed her own display.

Thirty seconds to drop. She tied in to her the scrambler channel for her entire command. "This is Colonel Hansi," she said firmly as the *Hawk's Shadow* rocked heavily. "Our target is below, just as planned. We are going to do this by the numbers. Command the Second Company will move to the hill, secure the Castle Brian and the high ground. Third company; you will split your Lances out and form a perimeter two kilometers out. Primary objective is securing this facility. Rest assured it is defended."

As she spoke there was a massive buffeting as the DropShip door opened. A red warning light came on in her cockpit warning her that it was too early to drop. It began to blink every second on and off — letting her know that they were on drop approach. "I will see you on the ground. Hansi out!"

The light turned green and she sprung out from her restraining harnesses that held her *Atlas* in place. Hansi allowed herself a moment of satisfaction — this 'Mech had been a Lyran build. She had taken it out with her family *Archer* eight years ago. The *Archer* had been trashed, but this *Atlas* was hers, a prize of war. The 100 ton behemoth lumbered down slowly, its feet sinking into the sod over half a foot with each stride. Dust and loose debris billowed out in every direction as the *Hawk's Shadow's* massive fusion drive landed the DropShip safely at the foot of the hill where she had seen the construction and excavation taking place.

The signs of plowing were everywhere, dirt piled, tents ripping in the wind. She saw hardware there as well. Okay you Lyran buggers, where in the hell is the entrance to this place? "Third Company, you know the drill, get out there and secure the perimeter."

The explosion cut her off. Her command company's most recent replacement, Sergeant Sharpe was piloting a *Vindicator* heading for the mangled forms of the wind-whipped tents. There was a solitary explosion nearby, rocking her *Atlas* as if it was the first rumble of a thunderstorm. She missed where it came from but saw the smoldering crater and the fallen form of the 'Mech. The lower right leg of the BattleMech was peeled up like some sort of Capellan slipper, curled up at the toes. Combined with the crater, Colonel Hansi knew what she was facing. Mines.

"All units, hold up. We have mines in the area. I want the sappers out here and out here now." In the distance she saw clods of turf rising into the air and felt the rumble of another blast. *Stinking bastards, of course they mined it.*

She moved slowly forward as the sappers deployed, mine detectors in hand. Hansi heard another rumble, this one very different, crisper. A flicker of light off to her right forced her to turn. She saw the now standing *Vindicator* of Sergeant Sharpe and just past that Olsen's *Quickdraw*. The *Quickdraw* shook violently and a wisp of gray smoke rose from its back and from the ground near it. Another cracking blast rose causing a crater just between them. These were not mines. No, this was the enemy. This was an artillery barrage.

She had few choices. One was to order her units back to their DropShips and depart, find another LZ and secure it. Another was to wait, let the sappers do their job, then deploy out after the attackers. The other, the one she arrived it first, was to risk the mines and rush out to take on the attackers.

"Company commanders we have incoming artillery. All units are to deploy per our plan. Better to ignore those mines and take out that arty. Move and move fast. I want these defenders found and destroyed!"



Leutnant Hollister Raven watched as the Long Tom fired one last barrage over the hillside. Then, unceremoniously, it tore up the sod as it beat a path out of the staging area. Raven's *Centurion* could feel the massive Long Tom rumble past and she focused on her long range sensors. They were out there all right, the House Marik troops were sweeping the hills looking for her and her force.

The artillery barrage had been aimed at damaging a number of their 'Mechs, hopefully forcing them to move into the mine fields the dotted the area. This was not going to stop them. This was the Oriente Fusiliers after all. All she could hope to do was to wear them down and run and hide.

They were securing the hillside which they assumed was the Castle Brian and setting up a perimeter. Fine. That was right

out of the House Marik military operations manual. Let's see how they like something out of the ordinary.


"Sweep Lance, this is Rainbow Actual. They have a patrol moving to the east towards your position. Make one pass then take them for a stroll." She switched to her tactical display and saw Sweep Lance, hidden in some broken boulders, move out. A Pegasus, a Packrat, a Savannah Master, and a Galleon slowly crept out. By now they would be painting on the perimeter sensors of the Fusilier's force. They should run. Doctrine said that they should. But they didn't.

The Galleon and the Packrat fanned out to the flanks. The Savannah Master and the Pegasus charged forward, straight at the approaching company of 'Mechs. Leutnant Raven allowed herself a smile as the hovercraft dodged side to side, making themselves harder to hit, punching up their speed. She knew what was happening. The Marik company commander was confused. Was this some sort of decoy? A diversion? Who would send in two small hovercraft against such a force? It was an insane. No one would. It had to be a trap. He ordered his lances to fan out and hold their ground. The advance turned into a slow perilous gait.

Raven didn't pull back the hovercraft.

The Galleon and Packrat peppered away at the enemy at maximum range while the two hovercraft charged right into the walking Marik company. The Savannah master was lightly armed and had toilet paper for armor. Its only protection was the speed which it moved. Dodging side to side in jerky motions it dove past the advance line of 'Mechs, getting off a few small laser blasts to the rear of the 'Mechs. It was like a mosquito taking on an elephant and the Fusiliers simply ignored the tiny hovercraft.

The Pegasus was a different matter. Its short range missiles twisted and contorted in flight, their white smoke trails filling the air between them and the lead BattleMech, a lumbering *Ostsol*. All of the missiles found their marks, mangling armor plating all over the *Ostsol*'s front and legs. The Fusilier 'Mech and three others returned fire, a quad burst of medium laser fire, crimson red, stabbed out at the militia hovercraft, half of them hitting the right flank skirting. The Pegasus began a low meandering arc as it revved even faster, an arc added to by the crumbling of its hover skirt.



A wave of missiles, probably from the nearby *Archer*, Lieutenant Raven couldn't tell for sure, rained down on and around it. A cloud of dirt, sod, and smoke rose up like a funeral pyre from where the Pegasus had been a moment before. Raven's heart skipped. Was it alive?

From within the cloud there was a blast of short range missiles and the burned remains of the Pegasus emerged. Streaks of smoke from the holes in her armor marked her flight path as she raced to get away. Crimson laser beams stabbed at her, hitting the ground, burning streaks of black into the grass, but nothing else seemed to hit her. The Savannah Master, as if in cue, darted back through the front line of the 'Mechs — giving the *Archer* a parting shot to its legs that did nothing but sear the gray-purple decorative trim there. The two hovercraft raced away, swaying side to side to make themselves more difficult to hit.

The Oriente Fusiliers smelled some sort of a trap and advanced but did so cautiously, carefully. This allowed the Packrat and the Galleon to fire off a final volley and start to flee. The Packrat was hit by a long range laser burst, its rear door melted into place by the blast. A salvo of long range missiles hit the Galleon and chewed it up. The right tread of the tank was blasted by two of the missiles and after twenty meters or so, it ground to a sickening halt in the soil. There was no way to save it.

"Rainbow Actual to Rainbow Four. Punch out. Head for rendezvous coordinates Alpha." As if to accentuate the point, a large laser beam sliced up the top of the Galleon, peeling away armor plating as it went.

The crew bailed from every hatch on the tank and ran. Against the wall of approaching 'Mechs it didn't seem like much but Lieutenant Raven knew it was the best that they could do.

"Rainbow Actual to Iron Crown," she said, signaling the rest of her lance to fall back. "We've found and engaged the enemy. We are in full retreat."

"Good work Rainbow Actual," came the Colonel's voice. "Stick to the plan and good luck."

The Rasgali Game Preserve
The Southern Continent
Dixie
Lyran Commonwealth
29 June 3025

The thunderstorm's massive rumble shook Colonel Hansi in her cockpit seat as sure as if she had taken a direct hit from an autocannon round. It had been five days since she had arrived on Dixie, a world that she had grown to dislike. Five long, tedious, patience eroding days. The southern continent was apparently prone to rain showers each afternoon during this season. The effect on the ground that had been driven and walked over by her battle force as well as the exposed earth from the digging done there had turned the hillside into a sea of bright tan mud and muck.

She wouldn't have minded it if it had washed away the opening to the Castle Brian, but it hadn't. She would have been happier yet if it had flushed out the two lances of force that had been harassing her vastly superior Fusiliers. It did not. They struck once every day or so, firing off a few rounds and running. She had caught one lance with a company of her 'Mechs and had obliterated it. Her losses thus far had been one 'Mech, a light *Stinger* that had taken an autocannon burst in the cockpit from an older model *Hunchback*. Payback had been just...the *Hunchback* and a militia *Catapult* had been taken down after a long and painful pursuit.

Every 'Mech had shown sign of wear and tear, occasional damage, irritating occasional damage. Frustrating occasional damage. Like everything else about Dixie, it simply was getting on her nerves.

"Colonel, we are receiving a message on a SAFE coded frequency, scrambled for your eyes only," came the voice of the Communications Tech aboard the Hawk's Shadow.

"I was not anticipating a message," she muttered to herself more than to the Tech. "Fine, patch it in to my cockpit."

"Audio only sir," the Tech replied. There was a hiss, a crackle, then a voice, a calm almost regal voice. "Colonel Hansi this is Satin Sheet, SAFE code niner-niner-Tango Bravo. Request authorization."

She knew SAFE codes, they had been her lot in life for years. "Satin Sheet. Code authorization is Whiskey, Bravo, Charlie, five, three, zero."

"Colonel, you are a difficult person to locate. It's taken me days to find you."

She didn't know who this agent was but assumed it was one of a number of operatives that SAFE had planted on House Steiner worlds. "I was not in the mood to broadcast my location to the general public."

"You are here to capture the Castle Brian I reported I assume."

"No comment."

"If you area Colonel, I have a bit of news you will be interested in."

"I'm listening," she said, only slightly irritated at his cocky tone of voice.

"You're looking in the wrong place."

Her eyes narrowed at the words. She didn't like being told she was wrong, ever. Her hands clenched on the armrests of her command couch. "Proceed," she said slowly through gritted teeth.

"I'm transmitting the coordinates to you now," the spy reported. She saw that her battlecomputer downloaded the coordinates and autoloading the map. "I located one of the two men that found the Castle Brian. Apparently the local militia commander lured you on a proverbial wild goose chase down on the southern continent."

"What were you able to learn about what is in this warehouse?" she asked. The legends of Castle Brians and their contents, in some cases mysterious and deadly lostech, was the stuff of childhood stories and adult nightmares.

"Nothing I'm afraid. My subject suffered a cerebral aneurism during our, eh, 'discussions.' While he had a partner that man has disappeared. I assume that he is in the safe custody of the local government."

Colonel Hansi's BattleMech rumbled again as thunder creaked and finally burst outside. It gave her a moment to pause, to contemplate. She pushed her anger down deep

into her mind and soul. She'd been misled; plain and simple. Fine. Now she had what she needed to achieve her mission. "I appreciate your efforts. Your service the Free Worlds League is noted. I will pass word to your superiors."

"It is an honor to serve," the voice replied. "But I must forewarn you. The local militia commander who tricked you down to the south is likely to be prepared for your arrival. I wish you the best of luck." With a static-filled pop and hiss his voice disappeared.

She switched channels. "All commands," she said in a cool controlled tone. "Prep the DropShips for departure. All units, break camp and fall back to your ships. I want pre-flight checks run and departure plotted in the next three hours." She surveyed a tactical readout of the area where the real Castle Brian was as she heard the chorus of, "yes-sirs," in her earpiece. Rolling hills, very few trees, deep knolls that would obscure line of sight. One city near by, New Wichita — not close enough to factor in for the coming fight. There was better terrain for a battle, but not too much. This would be a place where she could prove her combat acumen.

Yes, this would be perfect.



She crawled in the soaking wet grass. The thunderheads had moved on only a few minute before, but Leutnant Raven didn't care if it was pouring down rain. Her scouts had told her that the House Marik forces were loading up. She had to see for herself.

Lifting up the enhanced binocs she scanned the DropShips off near where the mock Castle Brian site was. The teams were hosing off the muck and mud from camp area. Crates were being loaded. The perimeter defense had contracted to the cover from the DropShip turrets.

Raven stared at the DropShips and the lines of men and material. "If we only had that kind of force and firepower at our disposal..." she said longingly. Militia units never got the top of the line equipment and never enough material. The cold wet feeling on her thighs and chest stirred her back to reality, brought her to focus.

She picked up her comm. unit. "Rainbow Actual to Iron Crown. It appears that our guests are packing it in. I'm willing to bet that they are heading your way."

There was a pause before Colonel Volger replied. "Iron Crown to Rainbow Actual. Compliments to you and your unit. Get down to the barge and head our way." Militia units didn't have DropShips making sea barges the best way to travel between continents. It would take two or three days in the best case to reach where the rest of the Dixie Militia would be, most likely too late if it boiled down to a straight-up battle. Arrangements had been made a while ago for the evacuation, but there were certain laws of physics that could not be changed. Still, she had to try.

"See you soon Iron Crown," she said, shutting down the channel. "Aright boys and girls," she muttered to herself. "Time to shag it the hell out of here."



*Fifty-Eight Kilometers North of New Wichita
The Northern Continent
Dixie
Lyran Commonwealth
3 July 3025*

Colonel Volger looked at the tactical display of the region around the Castle Brian and wondered what he had missed. Leutnant Raven's force had done its job, it had bought them time — precious time. He had used that time to harden the battered and rotted Castle Brian into a defensible position and to transform the terrain into something that he could use to execute his strategy. Despite that time and the hard work and sweat that his men and women (and the locals) had provided, Volger knew he had overlooked something. That was how military operations worked. No matter what, you overlooked things. On occasion you could get into the head of one of your opponents and see the battlefield through their eyes.

Volger did not delude himself. He was no Napoleon, no Patton, no Rommel, no Kerensky. In reality he was a semi-washed up Regular Army officer that was given a distant outpost to defend with a handful of militia. Most of the people in his command were veterans and had fought and fired in

battle before. They wouldn't run unless he told them to. At the same time they had friends, families, businesses, and lives tied up on Dixie. They were not the same as Regular Army.

That was where his strategy came in. Fritz Volger allowed himself a thin smile. Yes, he wanted to attack and destroy the Free Worlds raiders. Any Regular Army officer would. That wasn't the path he was going to follow. Volger did not lose his focus. *My job is to defend Dixie. Destruction of the enemy would accomplish that but was not the only way to achieve that goal.* His strategy was based on his goal, plain and simple.

His enemy would move quickly. Last time she dropped right on the fake Castle Brian and had discovered mines. What she didn't know was that he only had a handful of mines remaining in stock and her odds of hitting them were pretty limited. This Colonel Hansi was not likely to make the same mistake twice. She'd drop close, but not on top of the old Star League fortification. She'd come in from two or three directions at once with the intent of overwhelming the defenders. He hoped to blunt that kind of assault. That would confuse her, buy him a day or so while she planned her attack in greater detail.

Popping open his neurohelmet he rubbed his eyes. They stung both from lack of sleep and the pollen that he had waded through. Stopping he looked around his *Orion's* cockpit and drank in the details. *Am I setting us up for slaughter?* Perhaps. Probably not. It was all simply a matter of time...

He walked the *Orion* forward, way from the hillside where the Castle Brian was located. The technicians he had inside of the bunker were securing the last of the supplies inside the tunnel complex. *I hope this old girl has one more battle left in her,* he pondered as he stared at the tunnel entrance that had been cleared and made more operational in the last few days.

I hope I have one more battle left in me.



*Landing Zone Charlie
Sixty-Eight Kilometers North of New Wichita
The Northern Continent
Dixie
Lyran Commonwealth
7 July 3025*

Colonel Hansi had studied the terrain as best she could but until she saw it for the first time it was difficult to fully understand. The tall grass was something she had not counted on — something her satellites had not fully conveyed. She had seen what appeared to be trenches or roadwork around the suspected Castle Brian. In fact satellites and her own CAP had revealed at least one 'Mech-sized tunnel entrance.

She had to admit that for a militia commander, the man who led the Dixie Militia had done pretty well. He had tricked her into wasting days on a different continent while he had reinforced his position at the real objective. The Dixie Militia was a glorified company. Yes, they could muster some additional mixed arms, but she outnumbered them three to one and some of their force was days away on the southern continent.

Hansi knew her enemy was no fool. No doubt with a Star League Castle Brian in his possession he was busy doing what he could to rearm and reactive any recovered technology and BattleMechs that he had found there. Buying extra days could tip the scales to his advantage if she allowed that to happen.

She had not intention of doing that.

Her three DropShips were spread out coming down to the north, the south west, and the east of the hill that the SAFE operative had told her was the objective. Her plan was to deploy far enough away from the Castle facility to allow her to organize her forces and close in simultaneously from three sides. At the last minute, as she surveyed the terrain, she had reassigned several MechWarriors and their rides; specifically those with jump jets. Her intent was that she would not allow the ground to be turned against her again.

"Alright Fusiliers; deployment pattern bravo. Secure the LZ's and deploy skirmishers out two kilometers from the LZ's to probe for signs of enemy recon and surveillance. Await my orders for assault." She moved her massive Atlas forward at a ponderous stride as her sensors switched to long range.

There was nothing — no sign of the enemy. No, they had dug in at the Castle Brian. *If I have my way it will be their grave.*

One by one her commands signaled in. Just short of three companies of the Free Worlds League's best MechWarriors and fighters fanned out and prepared to rush the Castle.

She had the command company form up alongside of her, lance formations, in a wide V with her at the apex. The ground was dry, unlike what she had left in the southern hemisphere of Dixie. The waving grass billowed in the wind looking like a sea of brown and green. While it was spring in the south, it was fall here in the north.

"Fusiliers!" she barked in her best impression of a drill sergeant. "Roll!" She moved her *Atlas* into a slow run at the front of the formation while the rest of the command company followed. They tore paths through the tall grass as they moved forward driving the small animals in the grass before them.

Colonel Hansi led her company up over a long sloping hill. As she reached the crest she could see the downward slope leading outward to a much larger hill in the distance. There were huge piles of dirt and rock piled up, obviously recently dug. Some of the construction equipment was still there in place. Tracks from either bulldozers or tanks tore up the sod. This was it. A Castle Brian. Unconsciously she licked her lips and carefully pushed her throttle forward. *I never thought I'd live to see one — a virgin one.*

Off to the north she could see a trench where Treacher's Company was going to be coming from any moment. From space it had appeared to be more of a roadway, but now that she was on the ground she could make it out. It was at least ten meters and was very deep. An anti-Mech trench if she ever saw one. *Damn.* This was bound to blunt Treacher's assault. "Treacher this is Hansi on discreet. You have an anti-Mech trench to your front. Shift to the north and see if you can find the end of it. Put your jump-capable 'Mechs over. Flank that trench with everything else. We'll see you at the objective."

Treacher acknowledged the message as she felt her *Atlas* pick up a list leaning forward as he went down the hill. She was still in the front but her company's formation was now more of a jagged disjointed line than the perfect V it had been at the start of the run. "Hansi to command company,

dress that line," she said. She surveyed the hillside but saw no signs of the enemy. "Where are you hiding?"

Suddenly the ground in front of her *Atlas* disappeared. The tall waving grass collapsed down into darkness. Her *Atlas* slammed forward, hitting a wall of dirt and sod just below the cockpit. Her entire body weight was tossed in an instant into the side of the trench she had fallen into. Damage indicators flickered red at the loss of center torso armor from the fall. "Command company hold up!" she barked as she still attempted to contemplate the situation.

"Command Strike Lance, we're down!" came one of her Lieutenants. From what she could tell they had hit the same concealed obstacle she had.

Suddenly her sensors picked up fusion reactors suddenly coming to life, powering on in a quick-start mode. The 'Mechs had been hidden behind the massive mounds of dirt that had been piled up, obvious excavations from the trench. Her trench had been covered like a tiger trap, a thin layer of sod and grass put in over the top. "All units, be aware this is a trap. There are anti-Mech trenches here. Secure your lines where you are. Advance jump capable 'Mechs per our plan. Get some infantry forward," she said as a wave of short range missiles blasted into her *Atlas*, hitting her cockpit and right shoulder. A missile shrapnel fragment cracked her cockpit canopy, warning just how close death was.

She wanted to fire back but couldn't possibly raise her *Atlas's* arms enough. "Get me cover fire now. I want a Prime Hauler over here and pull me out of this hole!" She saw a *Phoenix Hawk* from her Eagle Claw lance rise into the air and land in front of her. It was firing at a target near the Castle Brian. Another wave of missiles came in, this time at the *Phoenix Hawk*. A chunk of armor plating from its left arm was blasted free and rained down in front of her cockpit. One piece came to rest on her shoulder as a PPC blast sent additional shards of armor in every direction. *Damn it!*

Troops jumped into the trench and on top of her *Atlas*, most carrying heavy cables. Lasers stabbed the air just above and to the left of her cockpit, obviously aimed at her 'Mechs. Waves of missiles came back along with brilliant bursts of charged particles. Above, around, and in front of her battle was raging. "Damn it. You guys get moving and get me up now!"




Hauptmann Angela Dickerson of the Dixie Militia watched as one of the companies of Free Worlds BattleMechs stopped just shy of the exposed anti-Mech trench. She had a lance. The odds were three to one. They fired down at her force. One of her 'Mechs, a *Locust*, didn't stand a chance. A PPC blast of azure energy lanced its right leg as it fired desperately back. The leg was cut at the mid-shin, severed with a wave of sparks and smoke. As it toppled to its side a ripple of missiles, long range missiles, caught it. The 'Mech quaked on the way down, sending up billows of black smoke. As if that wasn't enough, several medium lasers stabbed at the fallen form. Two red beams missed, cutting through the smoke, while three more hit the fallen *Locust*. They seared the carcass of the crumbled and smoldering BattleMech. The Senior Warrant Officer that was the pilot, Drain Hurst, never stood a chance. Flames lapped upward out of the space where the cockpit windshield had been, gutting the fallen militiaman as if a blast furnace had been turned on.

She flanked the debris of the *Locust* with her *Centurion* and spotted at least one of the assailants that had killed Hurst. It was an *Assassin* along with a *Stinger* that had lit their jump jets and had come across the trench. Further down she saw a *Vindicator* that had come across as well. She locked onto the *Assassin*, her targeting reticle fixed on her enemies sloped head-cockpit. Lock tone filled her ears as she hit the primary target interlock circuit trigger. *Payback...*

Her Luxor autocannon and long range missiles fired at the same time. A stream of autocannon rounds stitched up the right torso, each one violently rocking the Mark *Assassin*. The missiles followed a second or two later, plastering the BattleMech everywhere, including the already crippled chest. As she felt the cockpit temperature of her *Centurion* swell up around her she watched as the *Assassin* MechWarrior fought for control of his/her 'Mech and turn to face her.

Then came the explosion as the missile ammo stored in the torso went off.

The blasts inside the chest of the *Assassin* burst out in several areas, tossing armor plating off and into the nearby *Stinger*. The blast was fatal. The *Assassin* twisted at the knee actua-




tors and dropped down to the ground with a sickening thud. The *Stinger* and *Vindicator* turned to engage her as a wave of missiles from a Marik Archer on the other side of the trench tore into her. The *Centurion* rattled and shook as more than half of the missiles found their mark. Red and yellow damage indicators lit up on her secondary display, telling her the true story of the carnage. Smoke blocked her direct vision but she knew that the *Stinger* and *Vindicator* on the edge of the trench were there, preparing to turn and take her out.

She keyed in the code into her battlecomputer. It transmitted the signal to the detonation charges that were set. The militia had located several dozen barrels of petrocycloline, used primarily in inferno missile rounds. Nastier than napalm, this substance had been sprayed carefully into the tall grasses on the militia side of the trench. There was only enough to cover a few areas but she was sure that both of the enemy 'Mechs were in the right spot. As they had moved in the grasses both of them had been coating their legs and feet in the sticky flammable substance.

The charge went off to her right and from there a wall of intense fire shot up nearly ten meters into the air and at least five meters deep. She used the opportunity to swing in on the other side of the fallen *Locust* to see what happened. When her field of vision cleared Dickerson could see both of the Marik 'Mechs in flames. The *Vindicator* half-fell, half-stumbled into the trench, making matters even worse as its flaming and blackened legs poked up. The *Stinger* lit its jump jets, making the heat and flames worse, but managed to get back across the trench before it overloaded itself and shut down.

Hauptmann Dickerson locked onto the *Stinger* and blasted it with her autocannon. The rounds ripped up the arm and topped the already damaged BattleMech. As it dropped, the Dixie Militia officer juked her joystick and started to fall back before that Archer could reload.

"Hurst, I don't know if you can hear me, but I hope your death wasn't in vain," she said under her breath. Opening a channel she called out to Colonel Volger, "Iron Crown, the left flank is holding — barely."



Sergeant Hearn's of the Dixie Militia climbed the gantry at the rear of the *Hussar*. The old 'Mech was nothing more than a rotting shell, but the Colonel had ordered it brought out and supported with a steel gantry from the rear. They had salvaged what they could from the weapons, but so far the Castle Brian had yielded little more than junk and souvenirs for antique collectors. The rotted fist and leg had been tack-welded into place. Now that the tarp that had covered it had been pulled away the *Hussar* was basking in the light of day for the first time in ages.

What a piece of junk.

The fusion reactor of the *Hussar* was operational but its power feed controls had rotted away over a century before. They had test fired the reactor and it worked, barely. The power levels it produced could have lit up a desk lamp but not too much more. Hearn's and his tech team had wanted to remove it but the Colonel had other ideas. It seemed nuts to him but then again who could make sense from officers?

Reaching into the makeshift reactor startup controls he had wired to the rear of the 'Mech he activated the fusion reactor and throttled it up. It wasn't much, but it was working. It was the only thing that was running on the *Hussar*. Hearn's settled and watched in the distance as the battle unfolded. Hell of a place to be in a fight...hiding behind a rotting hulk.



Colonel Volger ignored the five-pack of long range missiles that slapped into his *Orion's* left leg and watched as Warrant Officer Kreiger's highly modified *Blackjack* stepped out of the Castle Brian tunnel entrance. The welders had been busy and had done a fairly good job if not sloppy close-up. Adding some additional armor plating on slowed the stride of the *Blackjack*, but it created a necessary illusion. The feet of the 'Jack had been trimmed away as well. Most of the work was sloppy but it only had to hold up to long range sensors.

The modifications had been to make the head more cylindrical and to alter the shape of the torso and arms. It was all cosmetic, the 'Mech itself was still essentially a *Blackjack*. There were a few other modifications but they had been done by the techs, not simply a welding crew. But to a long range

sensor, it would appear to be something else, something quite different.

Kreiger lumbered off to the flank where at *Atlas* was half-in and half-out of the anti-Mech trench. The arm-slung PPC that had replaced the autocannon in the right arm was the most significant modification. The weapon whined as its capacitors charged then Kreiger fired it. The searching white-blue energy beam cracked outward and slapped into the *Atlas* at its midriff. The hit was a miracle. The *Blackjack* was not properly balanced with the additional shaped armor plating and the targeting computer was jury-rigged to compensate for the weapon.

The Free Worlds 'Mech was left with a blackened hole near its waist, a hole billowing white smoke from the hit. Volger smiled. *Good job Kreiger.* The Marik recovery team wrenched it hard out of the trench onto its back and the *Atlas* pilot lumbered upright. A lance of Marik 'Mechs flanked it, pouring on cover fire as they all drifted back out of weapons range. Some shots hit the mocked-up *Blackjack* blasting off some of the cosmetic work — not enough to ruin the disguise.

While Hauptmann Dickerson's front had held, First Leutenat Oak's flank had been swarmed by a lance of jump-capable 'Mechs that had fought hard and fast. Oak had only a lance for defense and had fallen back so that the Free Worlds League force could not relay on the non-jump 'Mechs for fire support. The battle had been a slug-fest, literally, with the last combat being physical with 'Mechs punching and kicking. In the end Oak and the rest of his lance were down, but so were the Marik 'Mechs. He had held the front at the cost of every machine.

His augmented company was short with the battered remains of the lance with Leutenat Raven still days away. Half of his company that was there was gone. There were no reserves. Everyone including his own Orion had suffered some damage.

They only have to push and push hard and we're toast. In amazement the assault didn't come. In fact the Oriente Fusiliers began to drift back, laying down smoke and covering fire as they did. It was a waste of ammo — Colonel Volger had nothing with which to launch a pursuit. Fires lit the tall dry grass in areas where errant missiles, shrapnel or lasers had missed their targets. Smoke from the trip that Dickerson

had laid on her front still rose up, blotching out the sun like a fast moving storm cloud.

Don't tell me it worked?



Colonel Hansi was still furious when she reached her DropShip. She personally had been insulted when she had fallen into the trench leading her troops into battle. The Lyran militia had pummeled her and a number of her 'Mechs. They had lost eight 'Mechs, two full lances in the fighting. When she had deployed the jump 'Mechs to rush the trench, it had never dawned on her that there might be concealed trenchworks on the other two assault fronts. Then there had been the fire trap that had totally blunted one company's assault. *I hadn't expected each front of have some sort of trap and layers of defense.*

Captain Treacher came on the command channel. "We have all pulled back to the LZ's and are rearming and refitting sir."

"Good," she spat back. "They were tougher than anticipated."

"Sir, did you check your long range sensor data?" Treacher asked.

"No, not yet." *Why?*

"Colonel," the Captain came back, "we need to talk."

It took two hours to assemble the MechWarriors at the ad hoc command post at her DropShip — part of the price of spreading out the Landing Zones. Each brought burned data with them on disks. She pulled her own feeds and those of her troops and now understood why. Staring at the long range sensor feeds she then made eye contact with her company commanders.

"You are seeing what I see then?"

They all nodded.

"Star League era BattleMechs," she replied. One of them, a *Black Knight*, had fired a PPC right at her, hitting her *Atlas* in the waist. I was probably lucky it didn't move in to finish

me off. The *Hussar* was apparently only starting its power-up cycle during the attack but the fact that it was there was significant.

"This Dixie Militia has recovered some of the treasure from that Castle Brian and is using it," she said carefully.

"Those 'Mechs are equipped with lostech," one Lieutenant said. "We were probably lucky we stumbled into that trench. They might have eaten us for dinner if we'd gotten any closer."

Fear. She didn't like it but understood it. She heard it in the Lieutenant's voice and saw a hint of it in almost every face. "These Lyran money-changers are smarter than we gave them credit for. They are equipping themselves with Star League technology. Chances are if we had pressed them harder they had more hidden in that Castle Brian just waiting to come out. As it stands; our withdrawal probably saved most of our lives." She did what she could to spin the retreat. It probably wouldn't hold up with her superiors or her former peers in SAFE, but it was a start.

"Colonel," Captain Vargus asked, "What are your orders sir?"

She looked at the data, the three-dimensional image of the militia Black Knight that hovered in front of them, then stared down at the topographical map on the portable holotable. "We can't rush in like that again. We aren't sure what they have tucked away there. We have a solid perimeter around them so we know that they can't be reinforced with additional MechWarriors or supplies. We'll need a way to breach that trench for starters. We need to probe their defenses and get a better assessment of what we are up against. In a few days we will mass our forces along one front and hit them. That tunnel entrance will be secured and held as our primary objective. We can then move inside and take them on — one-on-one if necessary.

"For now set up perimeter patrols and sentries," she said slowly, "For now we rebuild and refit."



"They had us balls-to-the-wall," Hauptmann Angela Dickerson said. "Why didn't they just finish us off?" She leaned forward on the folding chair and into the light that

hung down in the old tactical ops room of the Castle Brian. The room had been pumped of water but was still a mess.

Colonel Volger allowed himself to smile. "First they were surprised when they hit that trench line and the one fire zone. It shattered their initiative. Then they thought they spotted Star League era 'Mechs. That caught them off guard and sent a little fear into them. They outnumber us but are afraid of what we may have pulled out of this Castle Brian." He spoke like a man quite proud of himself.

"But sir," Leutenat Oak said, wincing as he adjusted his seat. His arm was in a sling and his head was wrapped in field dressing. "We didn't get squat out of this dump. It's a bust."

"They don't know that," Hauptmann Dickerson said, now fully understanding the Colonel's plan. She gave her CO a knowing nod.

"We should have just let them take the facility. They would have seen it was a disaster."

"No good," Volger said. "They would have assumed that we had stripped it of the good gear. As long as they thought that, Dixie would not be safe. In fact, no matter what, they will assume that we have hidden or concealed the hardware that doesn't exist. That's fine by me."

"Sir," Dickerson pressed, "What's next? How do you take advantage of this?"

"We need to hold them off for a few days or so. At least one of those they are bound to be reassessing what happened to them and repairing damage. If we're lucky, we'll have Leutnant Raven's remaining force on the continent and moving in our direction. That will add some degree of confusion to our Marik guests."

"What happens after two days? How are we going to defeat this Free-Worlders?"

Colonel Volger smiled broadly. "Let's just say defeating the enemy isn't the key to winning this fight. We beat them with the one thing they can't control and don't have much of — time. Trust me."



*Landing Zone Charlie
Sixty-Eight Kilometers North of New Wichita
The Northern Continent
Dixie
Lyran Commonwealth
9 July 3025*

"Colonel Hansi," the sentry said as he stepped into her tent and saluted.

"What time is it?" she said, sitting up, wincing slightly at the light being turned on.

"0500 Hours sir," the sentry replied. "My apologies for waking you sir, but you said if we—"

"I know the orders Corporal. Spit it out. What have we got?"

"Air lance on Combat Air Patrol has detected a reinforced lance of 'Mechs and vehicles coming up from the Port Blue Savannah. It apparently is the force we faced on the Southern Continent. They must have taken a barge or ship and are heading this way to reinforce the militia we have bottled up in the Castle Brian."

She smiled. "They'll never make it. I am going to detach Treacher's Company. They should be more than a match. Then when he gets back we can complete our fascines and rush that Castle." The fascines were rolls of logs and sticks that she planned on pushing into the anti-Mech trench. Once there her 'Mechs and tanks could run over them and into their inner defenses.

"Yes sir," the sentry said, still at attention.

"Our hosts have made their first big mistake," she said with a feral grin. "Go wake up Treacher and tell him to prepare for immediate operations."



Colonel Volger's battle weary *Orion* moved to the forward position, a massive mound of mud, dirt, and rocks that had been excavated from the trench. Any further forward and he would be in range of the forward position of the House Marik forces. Likewise if they came only a few meters closer, they would

feel waves of long range missiles raining down on them. He could make out a Warhammer in the distance, watching him as closely as his unit watched the Marik invaders.

The weather had held and had almost been pleasant. His techs had salvaged a number of 'Mechs, some of which were cobbled together to operational status. He was short on MechWarriors and had gone so far as to press one of his technicians as a MechWarrior. All part of being in the militia.

"Alright Kraus," he said into his microphone that transmitted to the scout that had called him up. "I'm here. What is it that you've spotted?"

"They have stripped away a reinforced company," came back a Germanic accent in his neurohelmet's earpiece. "Started hauling ass and gear out just before dawn."

Volger adjusted his long range sensors and sidestepped out from behind the dirt mound. Sergeant Kraus was right of course, he usually was. Were they being sent out to another front as part of a general assault? Or did they have another target? He paused then activated his command channel. "Iron Crown to Rainbow Actual," he signaled.

Leutnant Hollister Raven came back in his ear and mind. "Go Iron Crown."

"It looks as if you have guests heading for you. One company reinforced."

"We are down to one lance Iron Crown," the voice said wearily back. "I am open to suggestions." There was a hint in her voice that she wasn't going to like what he was going to say next.

On occasion, I like to surprise those in my command.

"Break and run Rainbow Actual. You have hours before they are on you. Hit the road, best possible speed. Take these boys on a long hike away from here. Run 'em like dogs on a hunt — long and hard."

"Sir?"

"You heard me," he said. "Remember, God loves the militia."



Pirate Point Bixby
JumpShip Haberdasher
Dixie
10 July 3025

"All ships report safe emergence sir," the captain of the JumpShip *Haberdasher* said.

General Raymond Vargus looked out of the portal at the massive orb of Dixie that hovered below him, casting a blue/green light on the bridge. "Dump the data from the MILSAT satellite to my console."

He scanned the situation reports that had been beamed up from the Dixie Militia. It was a standard procedure, but the lonely militia was facing a non-unique situation. Most militia commanders when faced with a vastly superior force did things that made little sense.

Most dug in to wait for reinforcements. That worked if you were on Hesperus, but usually when outnumbered three to one or more, most positions were far too weak. Others tried to make a name for themselves and attack. Those militia commanders usually were dead. The good ones, the smart ones, called for help and kept the enemy busy and moving until reinforcements arrived.

So, what kind of commander was this Colonel Volger?

General Vargus looked at the reports. Castle Brian...decoy location...fortification. "Signal all commands. Immediate combat drop operations in ten minutes." He floated over to the egress door for the bridge. "A Militia commander who understands tactical and strategic concepts...that's a man worth saving. Comm — send a message to all Militia officers. Let them know we're here and the Archon and high command send their compliments."



Captain Treacher maneuvered his command lance to the far right flank. The area was a swamp and it was that swamp that had finally slowed down the militia force he had been tracking. They had led him on a merry chase across the coun-

tryside, wasting hours and forcing him to detach from the logistical support of the rest of the Fusiliers. When the small militia force had made a run through the swamp it gave him just what he needed, a chance to catch up and intercept them. Now they would pay for running.

"This is Captain Treacher of the Oriente Fusiliers, Forth Brigade," he said clearing his throat. "Militia commander, you are penned in. We have your flanks covered and the only road out. I will allow you to surrender. Power down and you and your troops will live. Slug it out with us and we outnumber and outgun you more than three to one."

There was a pause which he expected. Treacher opened his mouth to order the assault when a ragged female voice, dry, weary, came over the open channel. "This is Lieutenant Hollister Raven of the Dixie Militia," she said with an eerie calm. "You gave us quite a chase Captain. I compliment you for sticking with us."

"There will be plenty of time for pleasantries once you have powered down your 'Mechs and vehicles, Leutnant."


"I don't think so," she said with a hint of sternness creeping into her tone. "You pursued us quite far. Have you spoken with your commander lately?"

The question caught Treacher off guard. For the first time since the fight at the Castle Brian he felt a chill run down his spine. "Why?"

"Check in with her, then we'll talk," Raven said with a slight chuckle.



Rage. That was the word that best described how Colonel Hansi felt. Pure white burning-hot rage. The three jumpships had arrived at a pirate point undetected. Now the DropShips were only minutes away from landing. The transponder told her the story — The 8th Lyran Regulars. They were coming in with full force, nearly a regiment of troops. Their intended LZ was between her force and Treacher's detached company, far off in the hinterlands.



Hansi pounded the control console of her *Atlas* the release her fury but it didn't help. The situation had changed and wasn't in her favor, not at all. The commander of the Dixie Militia had been craftier than she had ever thought. He had tricked her into giving up the one commodity that he needed; time. He had no intention of slugging it out with her. He was buying time to trap her on Dixie.

She wanted to fight...wanted to kill. Reason crept into her thoughts. It wasn't going to happen today, not now, not in this situation. She had been outfoxed by a simple militia commander. It hurt but not nearly as much as if she lost her entire battalion to the 8th Lyran Regulars. A "strategic withdrawal" could be weathered, could be spun with her upper command. Defeat and destruction were permanent.

"This is Colonel Hansi to all units. We are evacuating immediately. We have less than an hour to withdraw. All commands report to your DropShips for immediate hot-lift."

A jostled voice came on the command channel. "Colonel this is Treacher," his voice seemed nervous.

This was the hardest part of all. "Yes Captain."

"We can't be back at the LZ in time...you know that. Request extraction at our current coordinates or others that you designate."

She licked her lips. An entire regiment of Lyran forces were dropping on Dixie — smack-dab between her and Treacher. He didn't know yet, couldn't know. Hansi bowed her head and took a moment to close her eyes and think.

"No can do Captain," she said.

"Sir?"

"We have a regiment inbound, regular troops. We can't make the hook-up." Her words rang like a bell. There was an uncomfortable pause before Treacher spoke up again.

"Do you have any last orders sir?"

"Yes, I have message I want you to pass on to the militia commander..."

Leutnant General Raymond Vargus, the acting CO of the 8th Lyrans Regulars took long careful steps towards the Castle Brian to avoid the numerous mud-filled holes. His uniform was a dress uniform, crisp and pristine, as opposed to the mud-encased militia men that stopped their work and saluted him. The man at his side was a MechWarrior followed by a Lyrans guard. The trio made their way to the massive door of the Castle Brian.

Colonel Volger saw the General and realized that he hadn't bathed or shaved in days. He ran his fingers through his short hair and realized it was a waste of time to try and improve his appearance. Instead he stepped forward and saluted. The General replied kindly and smiled.

"Excellent job here Colonel," General Vargus said, surveying the area. "You and your troops are to be complimented." He said his words loud enough for the non-commissioned troops nearby to hear them.

"Thank you sir. My troops deserve the praise. All I did was make sure that we followed the established battle plans."

"Indeed you did," he replied. "You held off the Fusiliers long enough for us to deploy. Their retreat left behind a company of force that surrendered to us. I want you to know that we refused their surrender until your Leutnant Raven could accept it on behalf of the Commonwealth."

"I appreciate that sir." He was more relieved to hear that Raven was still alive. He was worried that the Marik Company might opt for a military solution to their plight and would wipe out the small lance.

"In fact," the General said, stepping aside. "This is the Captain of the force that was pursuing your lance. This is Captain Vitto Treacher of the Oriente Fusiliers. He indicated that he carried a message for you."

Volger's eyebrows cocked as he gave his head a surprised twist. The Marik Captain appeared as worn out as he felt himself. He gave Volger a curt nod, an informal salute. "You are the militia commander here?"

"I am Colonel Volger of the Dixie Militia."

"I report — eh, reported, to Colonel Even Hansi. She was who you faced her. She wanted me to extend her compliments to your defense of this facility and this planet. She said that she hopes your commanding general will put you on front-line status and that you will offer her a rematch of this fight on the planet of your choosing."

It was a compliment — and a threat. For a Free Worlds League officer, it was the highest compliment that could be offered. Volger nodded. "If you are traded for prisoners in the future and see her, tell her that I look forward to the rematch."

"And," the General added, "I think it's safe to say that he will have his choice of assignments after his successful defense here."

Volger smiled broadly. Half to himself, half to the General, he muttered the words, "God bless the militia."

He was shocked when the General responded. "God bless them indeed sir," and with that he offered a congratulatory salute to Colonel Volger.

Not the Way the Smart Money Bets

Michael A. Stackpole

Chapter One



BATTLESPORES



*Galaport, Galatean City
Galatea
Lyran Commonwealth
3 October 3010*

Morgan Kell paused at the head of the gangway leading from the *Leopard*-Class DropShip's side to the spaceport's ferrocrete pad. He opened his arms, expanding his chest, smiling as he breathed in. His eyes closed for a moment, then he nodded. "Smell that, Patrick?"

His brother, not quite as tall or wide, but possessed of the same good looks, black hair and dark brown eyes, cocked an eyebrow. "Am I sure I want to?"

Morgan hooked an arm around his younger brother's neck. "It's the future."

"Smells like a 'Mech overheated and boiled out two heat sinks."

"Yeah, that, too."

Patrick hesitated and Morgan looked to the gangway's foot. A slender, well-dressed man waited there. He smiled politely, but his foot tapped impatiently.

Morgan smiled. "Wonder what we have here?"

"Trouble." Patrick gave his twenty-four-year-old brother a little shove. "I told you to wait to send messages until we made landfall."

"And waste the week it took getting in from the JumpPoint? No, thank you." Morgan, tall and wolfishly lean, bounded down the stairs, taking them two at a time. He let a childish joy at doing that light his face, all the while watching the man waiting for them. The man's expression soured, but only slightly and in a pained way that vanished beneath a reluctant smile.

This reaction inclined Morgan to give the man a chance. He took the last three steps at a jump, then thrust his hand toward the man. "Morgan Kell, late of the Tenth Skye Rangers."

The man, though much smaller, met his grip solidly and didn't flinch from pressure or eye contact. "Gordon Franck, Colonel Kell. I'm with the Lyran office of Mercenary Relations."



"Must keep you busy if you meet all the mercenaries arriving on Galatea." Morgan pumped his hand three times, then let it go. "Or are we special?"

Franck's smile broadened. "Oh, you're special. Not only are you the Archon's cousin..."

"...By marriage."

"Regardless, we take notice of that. Your family owns the Eire BattleMech Company on Arc-Royal, which is rather important to the defense of the nation." Franck pushed his glasses back on his face and glanced at a small noteputer. "The messages you've been sending while incoming have attracted a lot of attention."

"As we intended."

"Not the attention you want, I'm afraid." Franck stowed the device in his pocket, then offered his hand to Patrick. "You'd be Lieutenant-Colonel Kell. Gordon Franck."

Patrick looked at him for a second, then shook his hand. "Something we can do for you?"

"He's here to see we don't cause trouble, Patrick."

Franck sighed. "Actually, I'm here to take you to see General Volmer."

"'Viper' Volmer?" Patrick looked at his brother. "Did you know he was here?"

Morgan shrugged. "I think it slipped my mind."

Patrick punched him in the arm. "You should have told me."

"I'm sure he's forgotten all about that, Patrick." Morgan smiled, and rubbed at his arm. "So, are we walking, Mr. Franck?"

"No, the General sent transport."

Patrick jerked a thumb back at the DropShip. "I'll get our kits and haul them to the hotel, you think? You won't be needing me, will you?"

Franck hesitated, then nodded. "I'll tell the general you had a rough entry. He will want to talk to you, I'm sure; but he was adamant about seeing your brother."

Patrick smiled. "Thank you, Mr. Franck."

"You're welcome, but a word. Don't call him Viper out loud. Many ears here report back to him."

Patrick nodded, pressing a finger to his lips, then headed off toward the terminal as Morgan followed to the executive VTOL waiting near the DropShip's nose. Franck and he climbed into the rear and the door sealed behind them. The pilot—little more than a pair of eyes in the rearview—eased the craft up and headed away from both the spaceport and the center of Galatean City. They rose above the local vegetation, which grew lush and thick in a circle around the gray city—a monumental feat on so hot and dry a world.

Franck closed the partition between the passenger and pilot's compartments. "I meant what I told your brother. Antagonizing the General is not a good idea."

"But your being here means I already have."

The smaller man nodded. "Galatea is the mercenary world. Every guy who's got a 'Mech that can twitch a myomer fiber comes here hoping he'll get a job. If he's lucky his unit will have the techs who can put his 'Mech back together, and his employer will have enough ammo that he survives his next battle. If he's really lucky, he takes out an enemy 'Mech, salvages parts and uses them, or sells them on the open market. Most mercs would make better money using their 'Mechs to pull a plow, but they won't give up the romance and drama and excitement."

Morgan tugged on the black sleeves of his uniform jacket. "I'm a MechWarrior, Mr. Franck. I've long known the thrill of piloting a 'Mech, and the fear of losing one. I've no desire to be Dispossessed, and I can feel for those who are."

"Yes, but you have no fear of it." Franck held his hands up. "Meaning no disrespect, but you're from a very privileged family. You and your brother both graduated from the Nagelring with stunning marks. You've had your choice of assignments and were even allowed to resign to form this mercenary unit

of yours. But what you understand as life isn't what the people you'll be dealing with understand as life."

Morgan's brown eyes tightened. "I beg your pardon. Are you assigning virtue to being poor, or vice to someone who's been lucky enough not to have missed many a meal? If so, this conversation is over."

"That's not what I meant."

"Well, then, let's get to that point."

Franck nodded. "I'll break it down simply for you, Colonel. There are two Galateas. You're staying at the Nova Royale. Nice place. That's where all the big mercenary companies officials stay when they come here to negotiate contracts. Hansen's Roughriders, Twelfth Vegan Rangers, everybody. Even these Wolf's Dragoons we've been hearing about lately have sent a rep. It's a nice choice because it makes your unit look as legitimate as theirs. And I'm not saying that it won't be."

"What are you saying, Mr. Franck?"

"That's the platinum level of Galatea, Colonel. Elegant. Refined, the stuff of holo-dramas and diplomacy. I mean it when I said it's a good choice because all the liaisons you'll want to speak with will be there. You'll wine and dine them, they'll give you a contract."

Franck turned and pointed to a darker part of the city. Instead of tall towers that were brightly lit, this was a warren of crumbling and dusty warehouses. Here and there, the harsh glare of a welding torch broke the shadows. A 'Mech or two wandered through the city, but only half-armored and limping.

Morgan's guts tightened. They looked like the starveling dogs that whimpered and cringed at the fringes of battlefields. It wasn't hard to imagine that the pilots in those machines were just that slender, that wasted away, and that their metal shells reflected both their physical and mental condition.

"So then, you're saying there is this other Galatea. What would you be styling it? Tin Galatea?"

"Rust Galatea." Franck shook his head. "The place has a delicate economy. Sometimes wealth trickles down. A MechWarrior gets lucky and catches a berth in one of the

big units. Mostly, as I said before, guys just get by. But your recruiting offers are incredible. You've spawned more dreams than a new dancer at a strip club. There are dozens of mercenaries already painting their 'Mechs black and red. The streets already have bootleg shirts, black bodies, red sleeves with your logo on the chest, and folks are buying them so they'll look right when you interview them."

Morgan blinked. "Now that I hadn't expected."

"I didn't think so. You're not a stupid man, Colonel, but you come in here with money and celebrity and there are lots of people pinning their hopes on joining your unit. A unit that isn't even a 1 or zero in a database. And you can say that it's not your fault if their expectations are unreasonable, but letting them down is the least of your problems."

The young mercenary cocked his head. "Meaning?"

Franck sighed heavily. "It's a delicate economy here. Any idea what an arm actuator costs?"

Morgan shrugged. "Depending, fifty to a hundred c-bills per ton of 'Mech."

"It's a quarter to half again as much here, depending if you want salvage or factory new. Salvage will sell to brokers here at ninety-percent of what you quoted, so they'll make thirty-five percent if they flip it immediately."

Morgan frowned. He'd seen black market prices fluctuate, and had hoped having a line to a factory would be a way to keep costs down. For the MechWarriors living in the shadows below, the high prices—and they had to be artificially high—meant they'd never get their 'Mechs fixed. *And that only happens if someone is profiting from their remaining here.*

"There's another mine to step on, isn't there, Mr. Franck?"

"Haskell Blizzard. Forty-five years ago he came to Galatea, borrowed money from a loan shark, had his 'Mech repossessed for lack of payments. He went to work for the shark, cut him out, cut him up and replaced him. Then he diversified quickly, taking on bookmaking and deftly manipulating the black market, especially in 'Mech parts. While there are other loan sharking and criminal operation on Galatea, they exist with his sufferance and because governments back them. Mister B likes having people in his debt, and he doesn't like loans being paid

off. You are making folks believe they can have him out of their lives. It's also an odd-on bet that you won't pay him for the privilege of doing business on his world."

"His world." Morgan laughed aloud. "And what does the General have to say about that?"

"I wouldn't know. If the two of them discuss it, it would be when they get together for family celebrations. The General's son Thomas has married Blizzard's grand-daughter."

"Oh, now that's an ugly thought." Morgan ran a hand over his jaw. "And our offering those contracts is going to make your life tougher, since the General will be grinding on you to grind on us, is that it?"

Franck closed his eyes and nodded. "I know you've come here to realize your dream of owning a mercenary company..."

"No. Let me stop you there."

Franck looked up and adjusted his glasses. "Are you trying to tell me it's not your dream?"

"Mr. Franck, I know it's a common dream. I grew up driving 'Mechs. Rank hath its privileges. I know. I accept that. And being a pilot and fighting and winning glory, yes, I dreamed of that growing up. My brother, too. Just like every single one of the misery-sacks you've described as being out there. But their dreams haven't gone too well. It's because they're too small."

Morgan pressed his hands together and hunched forward. "My cousin was the Archon's husband. I got to see things through his eyes. You don't fight for glory. At the end of the day, killing someone else isn't glorious. It's brutal. Reducing someone else to ground meat reduces you, too. Sure, we sanitize it because we're destroying their 'Mech, and we like it when a pilot punches out. Fact is, war is nasty. Nothing clean about it, and while 'Mech battles make for great holo-footage, you don't see much about the buildings blown up when someone misses a target, or the little boys who cut through a minefield because they want to go fishing. No glory at all.

"But Arthur had vision. He said there was only one thing worth fighting for: freedom. Seems so simple, but so many miss it. It's out there. Our heroes: Robin Hood, King Arthur, Aleksandr Kerensky, they all fought for freedom. Other peo-

ple, they fight to deny freedom, to control people. But there's a need for a strong force to be in place to oppose that sort of thing, and the Kell Hounds will be just such a force."

Morgan tapped a knuckle against the window. "We didn't come here to make the dreams of down-on-their-luck mercenaries come true. We're here to build a unit that can make dreams of freedom come true for whole planets, and whole swathes of planets. And mark me, there's going to be wars coming that will prove the need for the Kell Hounds, and a hundred units like them."

Morgan sat back, weariness washing over him. The VTOL banked and a landing light flicked on. He retightened his restraining straps.

Gordon Franck nodded slowly as he did the same. "I understand your vision. I like it. Hell, it's the most sensible thing I've heard suggested since I've been on this rock. You hiring administrators?"

Morgan smiled. "Not quite yet, but I'd always be looking at a friend for such a position. There's an opening for that right now, and so far you're meeting the qualifications."

"I'll be happy to be your friend. I'll do what I can to help you out." Franck shook his head again. "Most folks think you're insane. Half want to rob you, a quarter don't trust you, and the others figure you need killing just because. Anyone looking to you for salvation will become your enemy when you reject them; and some folks are so sure of rejection, they'll be out to hurt you to postpone the inevitable."

"So, it would be a nest of vipers, then?"

"Sure, and the king viper controls his own militia regiment on world, has a spy network, a police force, and underworld informants and enforcers to help him out."

Morgan let a sly grin steal across his features. "So the smart money is betting against the boys from Arc-Royal?"

"Absolutely." Franck opened his hands as the VTOL settled to the roof of General Volmer's Headquarters. "Your only chance is to get in, operating in total stealth mode, and get out before they realize just how much you've accomplished. Calming the general down would go a long way to getting that done."

"Would it now?"

"It would."

Morgan threw him a wink. "Well then, let's see what happens when I call him Viper to his face, kick him in his dangly bits, and dance a step to whatever tune he happens to moan."

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