

# New World Order

Chapters 28-30

By: The Nice Guy

**Einstein, Deep Periphery**

**Copernicus Caldera**

**Planck's Quantum Hole**

"Go to hell, you bitch!" A furious Kety drew out his pistol and pointed it at Hamirah Rasouf just as Des arrived at the foot of Ian's *Awesome*, where many of the other commanders and warriors had gravitated to.

Before he could release his anger, his fellow Dragoons quickly pounced on him, grabbing away the slug thrower away from his fingers before he could fire it. They slammed him down onto the cold hard floor of the corridor, pinning him down as Frank quickly rushed over and knelt down beside Kety.

"Listen, I know you're mad at her, but let me handle this. All of us got out alive after all, right?" Frank whispered to Kety. The Dragoon calmed down, and stopped his thrashing, but his eyes continued to smolder. The others did not relax, however, and continued to press on him.

Frank got up, and glared at Hamirah. "You happy with yourself now?" He asked softly, but firmly. "We have more than twenty injured, and if Benny hadn't intervened when he did, we would all be dead. You have any idea what's at stake here, or are you too blinded by your hate for me?"

Hamirah did not even blink as she stared right back. Frank could feel her eyes boring into his as they pitted their wills against each other.

"You made a foolish decision." She said. "Why should I risk the lives of my men in an action meant to rescue our enemies, who might later turn on us?"

"Because we might need the extra firepower. Because there are times where enemies can become allies, even for a short while. The Falcons aren't stupid. They know what they're up against. These black mechs aren't choosing sides. They just want all of us dead!"

"So? We can handle them equally well without those parrots."

Frank shook his head. "You want me to spell it all out for you, huh? Ok, so here we are, relatively safe. But what about our jumpships? Our ticket offworld? How the heck are we going to get out if those bastards are still swarming outside? You want to open the Door now?"

"We can take them on our own..."

Frank was almost shouting now, exasperated at her stubbornness. "Did you miss what was going on out there just now? Some of the best warriors in known space barely survived getting chopped into pieces, and even together we almost got our asses burnt! There's no way in the whole goddamned Inner Sphere that we're going to have even a whisker of a chance of getting off this rock alive if we don't work together!" He paused, and inwardly regretted his loss of control, even for a short while. Getting angry would only exacerbate the situation.

Hamirah did not reply to his tirade, and simply walked off. She only took a few steps before Benny Greaves stepped in her way.

"Captain, you can't do this. We need to stick together, or we'll all be dead."

She looked at him and said softly, "You wanted to help them, right? I can understand what you did. For the duration of this campaign, you have command of the Rangers. I'm washing my hands of this matter. I do not wish to help that butcher over there, but I don't want to get us all killed either. Therefore, I will not fight, but I will not hold you back anymore either. I still expect you to return the Rangers to me in a satisfactory condition when this is over."

Benny nodded, and Hamirah went off into one of the dropships. Frank sighed, grateful that one solution had been found to their dilemma, and that Captain Rasouf was willing to let her men fight, though she was not prepared to do so herself.

Frank recalled the cold fear throughout his body during the fight. It got worse as the battle progressed, but he was able to shut off the part of him that wanted to cower in a cave, and more importantly to give orders without sounding afraid. After it was all over, it was all he could not to break down from the stress. And it all came out during his outburst at Captain Rasouf.

As he looked around to try to gather everybody together, including Kety who was busy massaging some blood back into his limbs after being sat on by three of his fellow Dragoons, Frank noticed that his arm was bleeding again. It had been injured when Star Captain Harga had tried to make mincemeat out of them several days back. Red stains could be seen spreading slowly through the tightly wound bandages around the arm. He had really overexerted himself for the last fight.

Frank grimaced. It was not so bad that he had to change the wrapping completely, but the wet cloth felt uncomfortable, even if there was little chance of infection.

An admiring whistle sounded through the corridor. Frank looked up to see one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen walking towards them, clad in a tight-fitting clan mechwarrior cooling vest that left little to the imagination and raised the blood pressure of every male nearby. Her hair, slick with sweat, whipped around her head, giving her face a blond halo around it. If she did not have a certain hostile intensity about her, she would have looked angelic.

*I have a fiancée already, I have a fiancée already*, Frank repeated the mantra like a prayer, trying to keep his own hormones in check. The others were practically ogling, while the women seemed irritated at the attention the clanswoman was receiving!

The woman, oblivious to the attention she was having, came up to them and said straight out, “I am Star Captain Daniela Mattlov of Clan Jade Falcon. I wish to speak to your Major Ian.”

Frank saw Ian blink once, then quickly shake himself out of his stupor as he answered.

“I am Major Ian. Do you require any assistance? I have already ordered our techs to help you with the repairs. I know supplies are short, but...”

Daniela cut in, “That is not what I wanted to talk to you about.” She took a deep breath before continuing. “Why did you even help us at all? You risked your mechs and lives to help us, knowing that we might later have to fight again. You are all money soldiers. Did you expect payment?”

Ian smiled. “No. We did not really expect any payment. But we aren’t too stupid either. We have no idea how things might have gone if we had to fight off those black mechs ourselves. Frank over there,” Ian gestured, and Frank gave an acknowledgement by nodding his head towards Daniela, “was the one who thought of it first. I’ll be honest with you. We did it not because of our kindly bleeding hearts, but because we hoped to make a deal.”

She frowned. “And what do you want?”

“In return for saving you, you will let us leave this place with our jumpships. That is, assuming we all survive through this mess. To sweeten the deal, we will let you have the rest of the data, as well as anything we might find here.”

Instead of being happy with the bargain, Daniela seemed to get even more angry. “Then what about the dead on both sides? Did you think we will let you go that easily? And your own troops, do they not seek vengeance as well? I know that some of you would sooner stab us in our backs the moment we turn them. How can I trust you?”

“Would you rather take your chances out there? As for the matter of vengeance, well, after my time in the Chaos March, I don’t care any more for such things.”

Frank noticed a faraway look in Ian’s eyes as he continued. “There’re no eternal enemies in the world, nor eternal allies. The dead can’t cry out for revenge, but the living do cry out for their lives.” He shrugged. “I’ve been placed in more uncompromising circumstances than these before. I’m willing to work with you, right now, right here. What the others think is up to them. If they’re smart, they’ll agree with me. What about you?”

She bristled at the implied challenge. “Very well. We shall work with you, for now. When Galaxy Commander Danforth returns, things might change. In addition, I also want you to ensure that my warriors are not harassed in any way. This is all in addition to your promise of the data. Should you fail to deliver on these terms...” She paused, “what is that saying you freebirths use? Ah, yes. All bets are off.”

“Bargained well and done.” Ian stuck out his hand, which Daniela shook firmly. For a moment, Frank could swear something was going on as they looked at each other. A glimmer of mutual admiration, perhaps?

“Well, since that’s settled, we had better get moving.” Frank announced, breaking the reverie that had settled on the group. “Just let me patch up my own wounds first, and then we’re off into the deep dark.” He turned towards a nearby commtech. “Any luck getting transmissions outside?”

The woman answered, “Nope. We can’t receive, and can’t send either. Ditto for the dropships. Something in the walls around us is preventing signals from going through. Guess we might have to either open the doors...” she hastily continued on seeing Frank’s dismayed expression, “or find something in this dump to transmit outside.” It did not take long for them to prepare for the exploration. The group consisted of several jeeps, enough small arms to wage a small 20<sup>th</sup> century war, as well as some mechs and battlearmor. Almost every unit in the corridor sent people, and the clans were no exception.

Frank found himself in the shotgun seat next to Des Winters as the clansman prepared to drive their jeep down the long corridor, leading the rest of the explorers. Deserk and Lorik clambered into the seats behind, normally meant for three people, but could now only seat two due to Lorik’s bulk.

Lorik was startled as he realized that Des was the driver. “Frank, I do not think having Des as the driver is a good... Yeargh!” His last words was swept away when Des floored the pedals.

It did not take long for Frank to realize what Lorik meant, as Des tried to drive like a race car professional, but his control was simply not up to it. The jeep swerved from side to side, and it was worse every time they rounded a bend, with Des overcompensating on the steering. Frank was astounded that the best mechwarrior he had ever seen had such atrocious car-handling skills!

As Frank turned his head to look at the other two passengers, he noticed Lorik and Deserk’s faces were turning a pale shade of green. He had to admit he was not feeling too good himself, the butterflies having run amuck in his stomach. They continued like this for two short kilometers, but that was enough to have Frank fearing for their lives. As they came up to a wall, the jeep came to a screeching halt. Frank and the others had to brace themselves as Des jammed the brakes, heedless of his passengers’ safety, going from over a hundred kilometers per hour to zero speed in less than two seconds.

Gripping the dashboard tightly as they finally ground to a stop, Frank disembarked shakily from the jeep, feeling weak in the knees.

“Star Captain Winters,” Frank asked, “Have you ever gone for a driving course?”

“Actually, no.” Des uttered as they waited for the rest of the force, who drove more conservatively, to catch up. “I just picked it up during the initial invasion. Hands on, you know, on my own, without any instruction!” He said proudly.

Frank heard Deserk mutter in a low tone, “And wrecked more than three cars in the process.” Des pointedly ignored the comment.

Frank and Lorik went on to examine the structure before them. The wall, which was about thirty by twenty meters, seemed to be made of the same ultra-hard material as the corridor, which was impossible to cut through, even with a dropship’s fusion torch. Thankfully, there was an opening, large enough even for mechs to pass through. It seemed like a gate of some sort, akin to the gates permitting entry to castles of ancient Terra. There were several consoles and panels near the door, and with alien writings. From the looks of things, someone had already opened it before, but did not close it.

*Must have been the earlier exploration party sent during the days of the Star League, Frank thought. But what happened to them? Why was there no reply whatsoever?*

He guessed they would soon find out, one way or the other.

The other jeeps and troops arrived in short order. Everybody got down, and it was not long before Ian and Frank had formed them up into several teams to enter in sequence. This was done to avoid having any significant portion of their warriors killed by hidden traps and the like.

Naturally, Frank got himself into the first team to enter, consisting of Descartin Winters, Kily Gonzalez, Patrice, Irina Federov from the Lancers, and Tina, who had insisted on accompanying her Seeker. Save for Tina, all of them were loaded for bear, armed with gyrojet rifles, armor piercing rounds, and various armaments, all geared towards dealing with armored targets like defensive turrets and the *Spidercrabs*.

As Irina peeked around one corner of the entrance, then moved into the doorway quickly to take up a position beside the brightly lit entrance, the others followed, their weapons in the ready position, their senses alert for any sign of danger.

“We are past the entrance, and are moving further in,” Frank informed the others over a headset he had placed on his head. The area they were now in reminded Frank of the reception area they had seen in the abandoned Star League base, but the shiny material and apparent newness of their surroundings made all the difference. There were many doors and portals along the entire room, all marked with the same flowing alien script.

There were also consoles and screens everywhere, along with alien script on the walls, and even a few pictures of strange beasts and familiar landscapes. The technology seemed highly advanced, and Frank was wary of what the devices might do.

Still, the whole place had a sense of calming serenity about it, and Frank was finding it difficult to maintain his alertness. The others were also visibly effected. Their stances slackened a bit, their gun-sights dropped a bit, and they all moved a trifle bit slower.

“Don’t touch anything!” He warned, which also served to jerk them back to awareness. “Look around, and secure the area...”

“I have found something!” Tina cried out suddenly from a room adjoining the area Frank had already come to think of as the reception area. Everybody rushed into the room she was in, only to be confronted by a gruesome sight. Only Des had the presence of mind to guard the rear as they entered the room.

There were several skeletons clad in scientist lab coats and Star League Defense Force uniforms in various positions on the ground. Their weapons could be seen gleaming on the floor, just inches away from the hands. One skeleton was propped up against a wall on the left. The rest of the room was occupied by a strange gallery of bizarre shapes, and a whole mess of symbols below the shapes, which Frank was unable to make any sense of.

Even the most amateur soldier could have guessed what had happened to the explorer party. From the positions of the skeletons on the floor and the direction they were facing, Frank guessed that the entire group had been ambushed from the rear. Only the skeleton on the wall and one skeleton lying on its back near the doorway were different from the others.

They inched into the room, careful not to disturb the dead, or the items they had scattered. Frank spotted a datapad in the lap of the skeleton near the wall, and he walked over to it.

As he squatted down to get a closer look at the device, he noticed it looked as if the person had been writing something on it before he died.

*Something important perhaps?* Frank thought.

He hesitated for a while, before deciding that the gains might outweigh the risks. Besides, what could possibly happen?

Des gave a roar when he saw Frank picking up the datapad and activating it. Mistaking it for a booby trap, he ran forward and clattered painfully into Frank, slapping away the datapad as he did so. The two warriors, already injured and exhausted from their battles, crashed to the ground, the datapad falling in between them to rest on one side, with the screen facing Frank.

“What gives?” Frank yelled out as he tried to get up, using his good arm to lever himself off. Then he noticed something.

There were some words on the liquid crystal display, and they fairly leapt out at Frank as he tried to clear his head.

It showed “Betrayed by Amaris”.

*That* shook Frank to full awareness immediately, as he scrambled to his feet, with Des right beside him.

“What are you doing? Get away from that thing, it might be dangerous!” Des protested as Frank picked up the datapad again. Des groaned and clutched his side, his wound acting up from the collision.

“Amaris again.” Frank spoke softly in reply. “No, I suspect this is somebody’s last message. A note from the dead.” He pressed several keys on the pad, and began to read aloud to the others from the words on the screen. He was amazed that the datapad could still work after three centuries of disuse.

“This is Captain Julian Reyes. I am, or was, an officer of the Star League Defense Force, currently on detached duty on Area 51. Our mission here was to uncover any alien artifacts and bases on this world. Two hours ago, our scientists were able to unlock the gates sealing this base, and we entered the facility. Almost immediately, our forces outside were attacked by unknown enemies. We managed to shut the doors, but lost our communications with the outside as well.”

“We went deeper into the base, hoping to find something that could help us. Our resident xenolinguist, Dr Andreas Tate, managed to decipher the readings and code signals on the panel near the entrance into the base proper, to let us in. She told us that there won’t be any hostile forces inside the complex. I guess we took her words too liberally, because we really slacked off.”

“After looking through the immediate area, Corporal Phillip Gaves said he had found something interesting, and we all gathered here in this room. We did not suspect a thing as he brought up the rear.”

“The fucker opened fire on us, at our backs. Everyone was hit, and I got shot in both my legs. I played possum, closing my eyes while hearing that bastard Gaves rant on about how pleased his Lord Amaris would be at our find, and how the Star League would pay for its arrogance.”

“Taking advantage of his inattentiveness, I took aim from my prone position on the floor with my needler pistol and shot him in the head. I crawled around, trying to check on the others, but it was too late. Much too late.”

“I’m now the only one left alive, and from the looks of things, I’m about to join the others soon. Instead of waiting uselessly for my death, I will end my life right now, but not before I had this written down.”

“Amaris is clearly a traitor to the Star League. First Lord Richard Cameron was foolish to trust him. I fear that the Star League would not last long after my death. Hopefully, the sacrifice of my people will not be in vain. Signed, Julian Reyes.”

Frank looked up, to see not just his own party, but almost everybody in the exploration expedition, who had entered as he was reading. Daniela Mattlov had a stony look on her face, and all the clanners, and quite a few mercs, were tense with rage. Anger that Frank could feel himself. Anger towards the most hated man for the last 300 years, Stefan Amaris the Usurper. Anger that a new Golden Age for humanity, promised by the recovery of the alien base, was foiled through the treachery of Amaris.

*Three hundred years later, and we’re still paying the price.* Frank sighed, switched off the datapad, and placed it into a small pouch by his side.

“Well, looks like our worst enemies are still ourselves.” He remarked. “I think we can probably trust their xenolinguist, even if it’s three hundred years later. Right now, let’s split up, and look for anything that looks like a map of the place. Lorik,” he asked the scientist, “you have some knowledge of their language, so you stick with me, and we’ll try to figure this place out. The rest of you just look around. Report once you’ve found anything interesting, but try not to mess around too much. We’ll gather back here in three hours time, and have our dinner in here. That okay?”

It did not take long for the entire group to disperse into their own cliques. Frank found himself in a group with Deserk, Descartin Winters, Ian Dorlacen, Daniela Mattlov, and their fellow warriors. While he was worried about possible conflicts between the various factions, he noticed that everybody were trying to be patient with one another, thus smoothing out a lot of differences. Daniela’s subordinate Jedec was even smiling and laughing along with Kily as the group moved down amiably to the furthest door away from the entrance they entered. The other mercs were examining the other rooms, but they were all dead ends so far.

Frank’s group stopped at the doorway, and he asked Lorik, who was taking point, “Where exactly are we going?”

“The few signs I have been able to figure out indicates that a command center of some sort is situated in this direction. The words I have for signs pointing this way are ‘network’, ‘center’, and ‘processing’. I cannot be sure, but I have a feeling this is the correct direction to take.”

“Lead on.”

They stepped through the portal, only to be confronted by what seemed to be a central hub area, a circular room with three levels of doors, accessible through ramps on the side gradually leading up to each higher floor. The room was about seventy meters in diameter, while the ceiling was an incandescent plane of brilliant light filtering down into the chamber.

“To tell you the truth, I have no idea where to go next. We do not have a map of the place.” Lorik looked stumped at the sheer amount of possible choices they have. Fortunately, somebody had come prepared.

Descartin took out a few glow sticks from his backpack, gave them several hard shakes, and bent them, snapping the glass tubes inside. The sticks instantly gave off a bright glow, the molecules excited by the energy given off by the chemical reaction shedding their excess energy via photon emission.

“Here, each one of you, take one of these.” Des said as he handed out the sticks.

“Uh, we’re not in the dark here. What’s the use?” Frank asked.

Des did not reply. He mutely took out a small knife, and cut a small slit in the plastic cover of the stick. He held it over the floor, with the slit closest to the ground. A drop of bright fluid mixture formed on the slit opening, and succumbed to gravity, forming a bright splotch on the floor as it landed. Everyone went “Ahhh”, as understanding dawned.

“We split up, and use the liquid to mark our steps. It might be even better if we trace out directions with the liquid on the floor to mark the direction back to this chamber, so that we can always come back if we feel lost. The light will last for eight hours, but we should be back here well before then. Don’t look so surprised,” Des grinned smugly, “Goliath Scorpion Seekers use this trick all the time. The benefits of having a varied education, quiaff?”

Deserk cuffed him gently on the head. “Sure your head is not suffering from excessive bruising during the battle? It’s swell enough already.”

“Try not to get any of the liquid on you. Phenol’s a known carcinogen.” Frank warned as they moved out.

## **System Einstein, Deep Periphery**

### **System Transit**

#### **Warship Blue Aerie**

Star Commodore Valten Folkner seethed quietly as he observed through the viewscreen on the bridge the tattered remnants of his aerospace forces limping away from the planet. The two *Black-Lion* class battlecruisers were almost crippled, and they had lost almost half of their dropships.

The *White Aerie* had lost all its port side weapons, while the *Blue Aerie* was scarcely better off, its armor completely gone on both sides. Valten had rolled the ship halfway through the battle to spread out the damage, but it had availed them little as they suffered blow after blow from the enemy ship, while inflicting little damage in return.

Near the end of the battle, some shots were finally seen impacting on the enemy ship’s hull, but it was too little, too late. Their own fighters had ran out of fuel, and were in headlong retreat from the enemy ships, which seemed not to have any fuel problems. Valten guessed that the enemy fighter’s poorer performance capabilities might be due to their larger fuel loads, which was largely neglected by human ship designers, who often supplied their fighters with just enough fuel to stay in a dogfight, which are normally no more than ten minutes long, based on information gleaned from centuries of air combat.

Who would have guessed that combat endurance would be so important? If not for the vastly greater numbers of the enemy, Valten was sure his forces would have been able to defeat them easily in an even odds battle.

No use crying over that now, Valten reminded himself. The loss of the fighters had convinced him that the battle could not be won today. He hated to leave just when they had finally broken through the enemy ship’s shields, but without any idea of how strong its armor was, they could have lost both their Warships in a futile attempt to destroy it utterly.

No, better to disengage, then think about how to tackle the enemy. Valten was now sure he had the proper plan to defeat the enemy forces, but he needed time to repair his ships, his dropships, and his fighters. He needed time to rest his weary pilots, time to tend to the wounded, time to instill fresh morale into his beleaguered troops.

It was a relief that the enemy had not chosen to pursue them as they accelerated away from the planet. Defeat in such a case would have been inevitable.

Valten was also worried about the state of the forces left on the world, both mercenary and Falcon. The loss of contact with Galaxy Commander Lizabet Danforth was the most worrying. It also drove home the fact that they were no longer assured of victory. In fact, he privately thought they would be lucky to survive through this latest twist in their campaign.

He grimaced as his eyes ran over the butcher’s list on his command display. Seventy fighters lost, and more than 30 pilot casualties. Eight dropships destroyed, two of them massive *Overlord-Cs*. Jump coils on the *White Aerie* damaged, damaged docking collars on the *Blue Aerie*. Over two hundred crewmen dead on the dropships and warships. Yes, it had been a brutal battle.

They had been surprised this time, but he swore that the next one would be different. Much different.

The machine intelligence would have cursed if it knew how, as victory eluded it with the shutting of the doors. It was certain that the flesh beings would not be able to withstand the onslaught of its forces. Instead it had suffered tremendous losses, with little to show for it.

On the other hand, it had observed a certain solidarity between its enemies. The alliance and cooperation of the two sides had plain surprised it, for it had predicted that the force sent out from the door would attack the machines marked with the bright green avian.

The new force had helped the besieged machines, helping to break free of the drone forces, and even to bring them into the Qlictorio base. This unexpected move had thrown all of the machine intelligence’s calculations into doubt. Even now, there were groups of flesh beings all over the planet. Armed with aerospace supremacy, the machine intelligence was sending its drones and fighters after each and every one of them, after they had rearmed on the motherships. It predicted that the flesh beings inside the base would try to aid their comrades like most instances in the past. To help them, they would have to use an exit, which the machine intelligence would most assuredly be looking out for. It would try to overwhelm the assisting groups by sheer numbers, then penetrate into the base.

As for its light cruiser, the ship had been heavily damaged by the flesh beings' own spaceships. Once its shields went down, its light armor could only endure an estimated two salvos from the opposing ships before succumbing. The enemy retreat due to lack of fighter cover had been calculated long in advance by the machine intelligence. This, at least, had proceeded mostly as predicted, though its forces did take severe losses and did not destroy either of the enemy capital ships. The machine intelligence kept the cruiser in orbit, to replenish its energy stores, its shields, and rearm the fighters. It also wanted the cruiser to provide orbital bombardment if such an opportunity presented itself.

The odds heavily favored its victory. It was only a matter of time.

**Einstein, Deep Periphery**  
**Copernicus Caldera**  
**Planck's Quantum Hole**

After two hours of trudging through corridor after corridor, Frank was almost ready to give up when they stumbled into a large room full of machinery. Consoles and screens were everywhere, as well as many machines and objects which they were unable to identify. All were shut down, and Frank had put finding a power switch as his first priority.

Nevertheless, like most of the rooms they had seen, there was a certain comprehensibility to the place; a desk here, a seat there. But equally, there was nothing to indicate that this room was anything special.

Frank poked here and there, trying to get something to work, just for once. He had a feeling of being a mouse inside an elaborate maze, where some higher power was observing and cataloging their actions.

He gestured to the others, and just as they were about to leave the room, all the lights on the consoles and displays suddenly lit up.

"What the heck?" Frank asked.

## Part 29

**Einstein, Deep Periphery**  
**Copernicus Caldera**  
**Planck's Quantum Hole**

Frank spun around to his left, his slung rifle sweeping around and rising up instinctively to his shoulder, the stock pressed against his cheek, the sighting scope placed right in front of his eyes, ready to shoot at any hostile enemies. He pivoted on his left leg, his right leg swinging around and forward as he went into a half-squat to steady his own aim and to present a smaller target profile. His instructors back at the OMTC would have been proud.

Problem was, there were nothing to shoot at in the room, but the flashing kaleidoscope of lights was definitely a sign of some importance. Frank held his aim for several long seconds, before he led the others back into the room, clutching their weapons warily.

Almost without warning, a large panel suddenly slid open. The spooked warriors pointed all their guns at the new opening, which turned out to be nothing than a flat piece of illuminated floor with a bright rainbow-colored field suffusing through the air directly above it.

*Don't panic, don't panic*, Frank reminded himself as he tried to calm his heartbeat down, now thumping painfully against the armored vest he was wearing. He looked closely at the field, trying to discern its purpose.

"Teleportation field, or portal, or gateway, or whatever you want to call it," Lorik said as he walked over, shoving aside Bryan as he came up to the strange area. "The research notes mentioned that the aliens had some form of advanced transportation device that could curve local space-time in such a way that it allows practical teleportation. Doesn't work well for interstellar distances due to the energy cost in bending larger areas though. Anyway, there was a portable version they uncovered, and their notes described the field. I think this is one such device." The huge man shrugged. "I guess somebody wants us to go somewhere. We're being led by the nose."

"So, who wants to go first? I mean, what's the problem?" Kily asked as he started walking to the field, only to be pulled back by a concerned Lorik.

"Not so fast. For all we know, it might lead to a granite wall. You wouldn't like being stuck in stone somewhere, with rock material interspersed throughout your body, would you? I can assure you it's not fun." Lorik paid no heed to Kily's look of indignation.

"It feels like an ambush to me." Des commented as he examined the field. "Let us get the others first, then consider whether to follow up this lead."

Frank agreed wholeheartedly with the suggestion, and Bryan was sent back to the main hub area to guide the others to the room. It was not long before almost the entire expedition force was inside the spacious room, all of them staring at the field and trying to decide if they had the courage to step into the unknown.

Meanwhile, Frank kept a close eye on Kily, as the young warrior seemed to have lost the confidence he had several days ago, and was again projecting an air of desperation, of wanting to do *anything*. Frank reckoned that the last battle was probably the reason for Kily's regained nervousness. Frank was also worried that Kily would do something rash that might give them cause to regret.

“Why don’t we try sending a transmitter through first? Maybe it could still transit from... wherever it ends up.” Frank suggested.

“Good idea.” Lorik waved at Yoshino. “Yoshino, give me your transmitter.” As the samurai turned clan warrior removed his transmitter headset, Lorik and Frank went around cautioning everyone not to shoot unless absolutely necessary.

Yoshino handed his transmitter over to Lorik, who tinkered around with it for a while.

“What are you doing?” Frank queried.

“Fixing it up so that a signal will be sent continuously. You don’t really expect to have someone from the other side speak into the device, quineg?”

“Eh, neg, I don’t.” Frank felt rather foolish for asking such a question.

It took only a few more minutes for Lorik to get the transmitter ready, while Pascal Thome and Denilson set up a dedicated receiver on a communications set.

Lorik did not waste any more time, as he confirmed the setups before sliding the transmitter into the field. There was no brilliant flash, no dematerialization, no gradual fading of the item. One moment it was there, the next it was gone.

“Anything?” Lorik asked Pascal, who was watching both the comms set display and the teleportation field.

“Nope, nada. *Nothing*.” Pascal emphasized on the last word to show his frustration.

“Let’s get on with this, okay?” Kily suddenly burst out. “All this sneaking and snooping around! Just for once, why can’t we go ahead and *do* without overanalyzing things to death? We’ve bad guys all over the place, and you guys are still worrying about this... this warp portal!” Kily had gotten the term completely wrong, but that was the least of Frank’s problems right now. He started to walk towards Kily.

“I can’t take this waiting around anymore! I don’t care what you guys think, I’m going through!” With that, the young warrior dashed towards the teleportation field.

“Calm down! Kily!” Frank tried to step and stop Kily, but the other man had built up too much momentum, and he just plowed into Frank like a rugby player, who fell backwards and pushed the people behind him into the portal as well. The whole mass of people lost their collective balance, and Daniela saw an irate Lorik shouting vehemently at Kily as they entered the shimmering field.

And then they were gone.

“What were you thinking?” Lorik demanded of Kily as the others looked around, seeking a way out of the huge chamber they had found themselves in. “Did you ever stop and *consider* what might have happened? We could have ended up in a lava lake for all you know!” He flung his hands up, exasperated.

“Well, we did survive the trip.” Kily said sheepishly.

“Argh!” Lorik almost lost it then, and it was all the other warriors could do to drag the huge elemental away to look at the various devices and consoles around the room before any permanent bodily harm was inflicted on poor Kily Gonzalez.

Deserk did not feel things were that bad, and Kily was right in one respect. They were wasting too much time thinking and talking, and not enough doing.

They had found the transmitter in perfect condition almost immediately on their arrival. No luck getting through to the others though, either using the transmitter or even their own communicators.

As he looked around, Deserk felt that at least this new area seemed to hold out some better prospects than the previous rooms they had searched. There were even more gadgets and items around, as well as a lot more of the teleportation fields. The center of the room was occupied by a gigantic computer-like machine, with various screens and displays arrayed around it. Ian Dorlacen had hazarded a guess that it was a central command and control hub for the previous occupants of the base. The seats arrayed around the central structure further served to illustrate his point.

The central machine stretched up to a very tall ceiling, which Deserk estimated to be about two hundred meters high. He was struck by sheer size of the base, which not even the clans could have achieved.

There weren’t that many of them stuck in the place, displaced by Kily’s reckless action. Frank Meronac, himself, Descartin Winters, Yoshino Ihara, Lorik, Patrice, Kily, Ian Dorlacen, Viola Bauer and Pascal Thome looked high and low, trying to find a way out.

“Greetings.” The word came out of nowhere, as Deserk jumped in fright, his gyrojet rifle swinging every which way as he tried to figure out its origin. He looked around, and saw the others doing the same, spooked by the sudden voice.

It spoke again. “Do not be alarmed. I am the digital sentience in charge of this base. My last instructions were to assist anyone who has managed to gain entry.”

This time, Deserk could make out that the flat dull tone it used was also unmistakably female. He glanced at Frank, who whispered to him, “Digital sentience means it’s a self-aware computer, I think. The wizards at NAIS have been trying to get one for ages, but no luck so far. Now let me or Lorik handle this.”

“How did you manage to learn our language?” Lorik asked.

“From the psi transmission. One of the reasons for requiring such a complicated method of entry was to enable me to have a certain amount of information required for communication. I deduced the rest by observation of your speech here.”

“What do you want from us?” Frank asked.

"I was instructed by my creators to impart to you the responsibility and importance of this base."

"Then who were these creators you speak of? Where are they now?"

"They were several advanced species that decided to pool their resources and science for the sake of progress. The closest approximation in your language to their name would be the Qlictorio Alliance. They were destroyed to the last by the Dark Army a long time ago."

"The Dark Army? Would that have anything to do with the black machines outside?"

"Yes. The black drones were left by the Dark Army to attempt to claim possession of this base, which contains all the acquired lore and knowledge of the Qlictorio, garnered over thousands of years of civilization."

"And when were they destroyed?" Ian spoke up.

"By your standards of time, about half a million years ago." Deserk's eyes nearly bugged out, as he tried to comprehend the time scales they were dealing with.

"Wait a minute. You said the drones were *left* by the Dark Army. So where are they now?"

"I do not know. Our hyperspace scanners only detected their departure from this galaxy."

Deserk could see the others gulping as they swallowed the implications of that statement.

"So, uh, they might still be around, somewhere, right?" Frank asked.

"Affirmative. In fact, the AI in charge of the drones has just sent a transmission out of this system to its masters."

*This is getting better by the minute*, Deserk thought sarcastically. "In other words, there might be a whole bunch of aliens which have already wiped out several species heading our way now."

"Yes, but I have no idea where they are, which makes it highly likely that you will have the time to prepare for their arrival."

*That's very reassuring*, Deserk had no doubt the Inner Sphere would have been as glad if the Dragoons had revealed the imminent clan invasion back in 3049. Yeah, right.

"So what do we do now?"

"You can access the information you will need from the consoles. The full assets of the base, including me, are at your disposal. I have already applied your Intergalactic System of Units to the database, so that it will make sense to your scientists."

"So what we know, you know as well?"

"Yes. But there are still some details that might not match up to what you know. You will have to reprogram the data yourself."

The mercs looked blankly at one another for several seconds before Frank took charge and sent them checking up on various aspects of the base using the consoles, which were now usable and had comprehensible English words on them. They looked at the history, technology, enemy specifications, inventory of the base etc.

The displays they worked on were marvels of technology. They could be activated by touching the screen, or where a hologram was projected, the user could even point to a spot on the hologram to access a particular section of data or to zoom in on a picture.

Deserk found himself checking up on the star map of the surrounding space. He took one look at the overall map, presented to him in holographic form, cluttered in 3D with literally thousands of stars, without any reference as to the relative positions of the alien worlds and the present worlds of humanity, and quickly shut off the hologram. The AI had not managed to glean the information from the psi transmission, probably because all the volunteers were techs, not warriors who have to learn every detail of the Inner Sphere map for their exams.

*So how to reconcile the two together?* Deserk tried to rummage through his brain for ideas.

As he did so, he could not help but remember what his sibko instructor had told him during warrior training, after he had blown up the laboratory during a basic chemistry class.

"You better become a warrior, or a technician. If you ever become a scientist, ahhh..." That sound alone was more eloquent than words could ever be.

Well, he had to think like a scientist now, and it was not as hopeless as he had thought it would be. Deserk punched up an query on whether the aliens had anything in space able to act as detectors, of any sort, since the AI had mentioned sensors. He was gratified to find out that indeed they had hyperspace trackers set up on Einstein itself, which was able to detect hyperspace movement up to a quarter of length of the galaxy! Now there was a snag. Did their hyperspace trackers detect K-F jumps as well? Were the two FTL processes even *similar*?

"Lorik, some help here!" The elemental walked over.

Deserk quickly explained the situation, and Lorik gave him a surprising answer.

"FTL travel is accomplished by transition to different planes, which are often higher in energy." Lorik started, "The transition from normal space, or from lower plane to higher plane, takes a lot of energy, and energy is also required to keep matter moving through the dimension as well. Imagine the planes as a series of concentric rings with different diameters."

"Different dimensional levels afford different FTL speeds. Now take the analogy of the concentric rings, and imagine going over each of the rings in exactly the same amount of time. Now which ring would give you the fastest speed?"

Deserk answered, "The ring with the widest diameter."

“Correct. The first few bands consists of FTL speeds from 1 to 2 times the speed of light. In stark contrast, the KF drive jump, which shoots the jumpship right across multiple plane boundaries in one shot to the plane where the speed is 63 million times the speed of light, is much more powerful! However, our storage systems are not up to the task of storing the energy required for traveling more than 15 seconds, but that is enough to traverse 30 LY. Experimental vessels like the Manassas were adapted for greater and more efficient energy production and storage systems, which allowed them to travel up to 40 LY. Oh, one drawback I have found mentioned in the alien database mentions that using the higher bands is the physical and mental stress that is inflicted on living beings, yet another manifestation of psi energy. I think, and Frank concurs, that this is the root cause for TDS. Most people have no problem with short terms of exposure, but extended effects are severe. Here’s one more detail. Gravity creates mass shadows in the other planes, and these can be dangerous. Only matter is affected, however, and not energy waves. This is why HPG transmissions can be sent from heavy masses like planets.”

“So in answer to my question?” Deserk was getting tired of the lengthy lecture.

“K-F jump drives are almost the same as the ones the aliens use, and the process is identical! I have no doubt that the detectors would be able to pick up K-F track signatures.”

Lorik added just before he went back to his own work, “Actually, I only just found out about this myself. So don’t be too dismayed.”

Deserk glanced at his screen, and asked for all the hyperspace tracks detected by the machines, interposed with the alien worlds. The map appeared again, but this time he could see a definite large mass of lines spinward of Einstein. The alien homeworlds were about a thousand LY rimward and anti-spinward of Einstein, approximately at the 8 o’clock position when taking Einstein as the center.

The large mass of lines was almost certainly made by the numerous KF jumps of humanity, and the huge central blot could only be the Inner Sphere. Deserk could not help but notice that there were quite a few lines, lone tracks leading out from the central blot and from another smaller mass of lines about where the clan worlds are, leading out to beyond the detector’s range.

In order to narrow down the stars connected by the lines to inhabited ones, Deserk limited the search down to stars that have had at least two hundred 30 or less light year jumps either to or from another system, as non-inhabited stars might have been the used as non-standard jump points for pirates and other military actions. The mass of lines was reduced greatly, and Deserk could already start to make out certain key worlds.

He started out from the fringe, using the bases captured by the clans in the Periphery during the first wave of the initial invasion as his first markers. Slowly he worked his way down, identifying the worlds in the Draconis Combine first. As the target state of the Nova Cats during the invasion, he had to learn and memorize the positions of all possible strike targets, which includes all the worlds under the Dragon banner. It was the same in the Dragoons, as House Kurita had been perceived as high probability opponents on Outreach before Jaime Wolf made his peace with Theodore Kurita.

The Draconis Rift served as a helpful landmark, and Deserk soon had Pesht and Luthien pegged down. He worked downwards along the Dieron Military District to Dieron itself.

From Dieron, Deserk identified Terra, and used that as the central coordinate origin zero-zero for the vertical and horizontal axis. Having memorized the location coordinates of Luthien and Outreach relative to Terra, he soon got the entire grid up according to standard Star League and Comstar cartographic standards.

From the grid, it wasn’t difficult to see that the alien worlds were quite far away from humanity. They were grouped into a loose cluster of about forty worlds, the furthest of which was a whooping 3000 LY from Einstein.

Deserk decided to look around some more. He had basically accomplished his task of integrating the alien star map with their own, because Frank had suggested the idea of exploring the alien worlds and looking for survivors after this was over. Now to look around for interesting details.

He zoomed out from the close view of the alien worlds to a view of the entire area, and there were two blots of lines that immediately aroused his interest. One was situated two hundred LY spinward of the Kerensky Cluster, while another was situated a thousand LY spinward and rimward from the Taurian Concordat. These were supposed to be non-colonized areas.

*More alien worlds?* Deserk pondered the possibilities. He decided to remove the restriction of at least a hundred jumps.

The resulting map showed that the two new areas *were* linked to other human worlds, which quite precludes the chances of being alien worlds. Deserk frowned, because not even Wolfnet knew of these worlds.

He decided to zoom in and run through the jumps year by year, starting from the present time. He begun with the upper cluster of four worlds.

The upper mass of four worlds joined by the lines showed a steady link to the clan worlds, stopping only when Deserk went before 2805. As he went forward in time again, going by months, the first track leading to the new clump of worlds originated from Strana Mechty in May 2805.

More interesting was a jump track from the worlds every five years since 2805 to just outside the Outworlds Alliance.

A split away faction, Deserk guessed. Maybe even the long rumored Dark Caste homeworlds. In any case, he put that aside, and decided to check up on the other group of worlds.

Using the same method, he traced the jump movements from the stars there. He watched, perplexed as the mass of lines seemed to progress from a clump to two pincers, and then back to a smaller clump. No jump contact was made with any other worlds, not even the small Fiefdom of Randis that was its closest neighbor.

The pincers didn't make any sense, because colonization techniques often favored slow and steady expansion by pushing a front, rather than two pincers that seemed more and more to Deserk like flanking movements of an army. *An army then, but attacking what? And by who?* He traced back in time, trying to find a year with a link to the Inner Sphere.

He found one link in March 2870, leading to and from a world somewhere near the border between the Capellan Confederation and the old Federated Suns. *That* sparked some alarm bells in his head.

*Wasn't there a unit called Clinton's Cutthroats who disappeared from Fed Suns employ during that time?* It was a frequent tale mentioned on holovids, documentaries, and merc circles. Wolfnet had even kept a file on it because of suspected links to the Not-Named Clan.

*The Not-Named Clan!* The very thought and the implications of it struck him like a thunderbolt. He felt a chill go through his entire body.

*No, it can't be. By the Great Father, I can't believe it.* Deserk feverishly ran the dates backwards, tracing the lines from the lower clump of worlds. One long trail led to the Free Worlds League, where he assumed was where the Cutthroats had started their mercenary service.

Another track was traced from the Draconis Combine in 2825, on the worlds of Trondheim, Svelvik, Jarret, and Richmond. When Clan Nova Cat had been attacking the Draconis Combine, they had heard stories of the Minnesota Tribe, which Clan, Comstar, and Wolfnet analysts had pegged as possible Clan Wolverine survivors.

No doubt about it in Deserk's mind now. He traced the jumps from the Combine worlds to the clan homeworlds, to Circe in 2823, a year infamous in the memories of clansmen for the betrayal of Kerensky by the Not-Named Clan.

He sat down in his seat, shocked by his find. He sat there for a full minute, ingesting the results.

*We came here to discover new technology left behind by the Star League, but so much has happened. The black mechs, the alien technology, evidence of alien life, and now, even the location of the Not-Named Clan. How much more is hidden on this world of secrets?*

Deserk got up from his seat, trying to control his shaking legs as he looked for Descartin Winters and Frank Meronac.

"Is there anything you need?" Des looked up as Deserk approached him.

"Aff. You should look at this. Frank, you come along as well. I want your perspective on this."

It did not take long for Deserk to show them his findings. He watched Descartin closely, afraid of the fanaticism common to most clansmen. Des stood calmly as he reviewed the data though, and Deserk could even see a slight smile on his face when the location of the Wolverines were revealed. Frank, not being a clansman, could not comprehend the magnitude of their discovery.

"So what's the big deal?" Frank asked.

Des answered, "The big deal is that once the clans get a whiff of this, they will be on the Wolverines in no time. The Kentares Massacre would be nothing compared to the bloodshed sparked if the clans ever found out about the Wolverines."

Deserk was puzzled by Des' answer. "Uh, but I was expecting a somewhat more..."

"Violent reaction from me?" Des finished the sentence for him. "Neg, but I am not the brainwashed warrior typical of our kind. Like you, I have seen too much, felt too much, to accept things at face value."

He continued nonchalantly, "Did you know that one of the Cloud Cobra Cloisters possessed hidden records of the Wolverine affair, as well as the events which led to their Annihilation? The Dharma cloister, to be exact. I have gone through the records concerning this, and the ecKhan has even told me of the tyranny of Nicholas Kerensky during that time."

Deserk was flabbergasted to hear of Des speak so dismissively of the founder of the clans. Even after his time in the Dragoons, he still held a certain reverence for the Founder.

"I can't believe I'm hearing these from you." Deserk muttered.

"Nicholas was a tyrant. No doubt about it. No point in denying the past, quiaff? Anyway, I do not believe in seeking the destruction of the Wolverines either. Should they pay for the crimes of their ancestors? If so, then everyone of us, every lord of the Inner Sphere, every soldier who has an ancestor who has done an inglorious deed should be killed. But obviously, I do not see anyone, not even the Falcons, calling for the head of the Kuritas just because Jinjiro decided to slaughter millions on Kentares on a whim. So why are we being selective here?"

"You might be magnanimous enough to let this slide, but the others..."

"Oh shit!" Frank exclaimed. "We were so caught up in this that we've forgotten about the others!" He prepared to go through the portal that led back to the room they had come from, now marked out by a paper sign plastered by Kily over the alien symbols etched beside the portal. Kily had the unenviable task of mapping out the room and its many portals in English, assigned to him as light punishment.

Frank was stopped by a firm hand on his shoulder. He turned around to see Des gripping him.

"Not so fast," the clanner said. "We have to remove the evidence of the Wolverines first. Imagine what would happen if the Falcons caught wind of this."

Frank nodded his understanding, and they quickly set about installing protocols to prevent the jump tracks or the Wolverine worlds from being shown on the screen unless a certain pass-phrase was given, which only Frank, Descartin, and Deserk knew. Frank chose one phrase, which he was sure nobody would ever think of, "Colorless red ideas snore lazily".

The other group of worlds near the Kerensky cluster was also given the same treatment. Des was of the opinion that cooler heads should check it out first before making a decision whether to reveal the data to the clans. Deserk and Frank agreed easily.

Ten minutes later, they gathered to bring in the others. Frank got a short synopsis from each member of the party first, to vet the info and prevent any sensitive data like the Wolverine issue from being revealed. Thankfully, there were none that needed to be held secret.

But there was plenty to get excited about. The base contained manufacturing facilities, as well as a large stockpile of weapons and machines. More importantly for them right now, was a transit system in the planetary crust which could enable them to shift their forces rapidly to almost any point in the planet. Exit/entry points were located all over the world, and Frank was already forming a plan in his mind to retrieve the other merc commands.

"So who goes back first?" an excited Kily asked.

"Certainly not you." Lorik grunted. "And not me. I would be easily hit if some fool decides to start shooting. We need someone who doesn't look too threatening."

"So..." Frank trailed off as he realized what Lorik meant. "Not me again!"

Lorik grabbed Frank, and gave him a very strong push towards the portal. "Aff, you again."

"I'll get you for this..." Frank yelped as he stumbled into the portal.

It took a bit of fast talking, and some hard convincing before they got everybody into the central hub area. The other room where Daniela and the others were waiting in was actually supposed to be the military command center. The central hub area could only be accessed by the teleporters located throughout the base. The teleporters themselves could be set to particular destinations, but the central hub area was physically inaccessible. In other words, there weren't any corridors or passageways to it.

The reason for that was more incredible than the mercs could ever imagine. The central hub area was located in what Lorik called a 'tesseract', a volume of artificial space. Frank's mind boggled at the level of technology required to achieve this.

There was even machines that could allow them to do what Lorik termed 'matter edition'. Frank had a simpler name for it, "The Philosopher's Stone".

There was so much data and information that Frank almost felt like drowning. There were advanced anti-tumor agents, automatic soil nitrogen fixers that would increase the yield of agricultural products by at least a hundred percent, energy storage methods that are far more efficient than their present ones, and even artificial gravity generators that could affect the gravity of an entire planet!

But none of that was helpful to them, *right now*.

The leaders scheduled a strategy session in two hours time, while the warriors tried to grab some rest as the technicians tried to fix up their mechs as best as they could. The collection and processing of data from the alien base was left in the hands of the dropship crews, under the watchful supervision of Lorik.

Frank, acting on his authority as overall commander, gave orders for the techs to concentrate on repairing Bryan's recon lance first, as well as the lighter and faster clan omnimechs, most importantly a *Koshi* and a *Dragonfly*. The recon lance of the Arch Lancers were also given priority.

He then plopped down and slept on a makeshift cushion some considerate soul had laid out in the reception area near where the Star League party had been betrayed, which was serving as a de facto lounge and rest area. There simply wasn't any more personnel available to locate and set up proper barracks. Even the infantry had been roped in to help with the repairs, or with mapping out the entire base and plastering directional signs so that people won't get lost. The reception area was packed with sleeping warriors, who all knew that they would be going back into the breach very soon.

"One thing bothers me, Des," Deserk said as he prepared to take a quick nap beside a bunch of already snoring mercs from the Arch Lancers.

"What?" Descartin was also preparing to go to sleep, using his backpack as a makeshift pillow.

"Remember the, uh, strange thing we saw on the starmap?" Deserk was careful not to mention the Not-Named clan, lest a Falcon overheard him.

"Aff."

"Well, there was a pincer movement by, uh, the colonists, right? Don't you think that seemed like the movements of an invading army?"

"You have a point. But what were they attacking?"

They stared at each other for a few long seconds as they chewed on the information.

"Let's hope we live through this long enough to find out." Deserk concluded.

## Part 30

### Einstein, Deep Periphery Tartar Reaches

The night image enhancement of the *Zeus* HUD display gave the landscape an eerie greenish tinge, an unreal quality that almost made Fanny Goddard feel as if she was fighting in hell.

Not that it made any difference. She *was* fighting in hell, such was the terror in her heart as she tried to extricate her lance out of the clutches of the unknown enemy.

The black mechs had attacked without warning. Oh sure, they have had advance warning from the Arch Lancers, but it was still a shock to see the whole mass of more than fifty black mechs descending upon them in the evening.

Fanny triggered her large pulse laser, sending a long stream of energy darts seeking through the air and lighting up her target area, punching small deep holes into the black mech. Having used the large pulse laser as a makeshift tracer, she followed up a ER PPC blast and a spread of LRMs. The particle beam cored the enemy mech, as the missiles plunged into the torso moments later, guided by her Artemis IV fire control system. The black mech exploded as its engine went critical, knocking down its compatriots on all sides, earning her a reprieve from the constant barrage of enemy fire.

Not for the first time, Fanny was glad she had spent the money from their last contract upgrading the mechs of her lance with the latest in technology instead of expanding her unit. Quality, not quantity, as one of her former commanding officers was fond of saying.

Her old *Zeus-6S* had undergone a major overhaul on Outreach, modified according to her own specifications. The techs had outfitted the mech with the new light engines, changed out the large laser for a pulse version, swapped out the heat sinks for double strength freezers, and basically made a new machine out of the old walking wreck. The deep roar of a rotary autocannon brought her attention back to the battle, as Phil's *Centurion* tore apart another black mech that had tried to jump to their rear. At exactly the same instant, a series of laser blasts rocked her mech, gouging furrows in the arms of her *Zeus*.

She chided herself for not paying attention to their retreat. Mistakes like that are often what cost mechwarriors their lives. The battle had been going for almost an hour now, and the black mechs showed no sign of halting their pursuit.

The first few minutes of the battle had been marked by a desperate rearguard action as they tried to evacuate the support personnel and crew of the *Leopard* dropship on any and all moving vehicles they could scrape up. The *Leopard* had been destroyed several minutes ago, but not before taking a heavy toll on the enemy forces. The price in lives had been the four brave dropship gunners who had volunteered to hold the line for the others to pull the distance between them and the enemy mechs.

As she pulled her mech further back, she fervently hoped for a miracle that would save her unit.

### Einstein, Deep Periphery Copernicus Caldera Planck's Quantum Hole

A miracle was in the works, but its chief architect was still unsure whether he could convince the others and pull it off. Frank Meronac had no illusions about his qualifications, or lack thereof, in the face of vastly more experienced mechwarriors.

The group leaders had all gathered in the command center, where techs had quickly set up communication interfaces and managed to get the consoles working. Holographic images of the entire planetary surface were projected, along with the positions of all the units currently on planet. Another holographic projection showed the relative positions of the jumpship and warship fleets with respect to the enemy warship and the planet Einstein itself.

Ian Dorlacen and Daniela Mattlov were staring hard at the system map, making small comments to each other as they tried to figure out the odds of one scheme after another by comparing the capabilities of the vessels involved on a sidebar, while Descartin Winters watched a couple of techs tag the units on the planetary map, his keen eyes catching every detail. Silver triangles for merc, bright emerald triangles for Falcon, black triangles for enemy ground forces, and black circles for the motherships.

From the looks of things, nobody was being spared from the massive assaults of the black mechs. The total count of black mechs on the planet came out to about 6000, the equivalent of fifty regiments, a figure equivalent to the amount of mechs the Com Guards put into the Battle of Tukayyid alone.

*And us with less than a Galaxy of clanners and about 6 regiments of mercs left. It took the clans 25 Galaxies to even come close to matching the Guards in combat strength!* Frank was not at all optimistic about their odds.

There was a potential force equalizer though. The two Falcon *Black Lion* class warships could conceivably bombard the black mechs from orbit with their naval guns. Only problem with that idea was the presence of the enemy warship, which had given the Falcons a good drubbing earlier on.

*So we have to take out the enemy warship, so that the Falcon warships can do their stuff. Easier said than done.* But Frank was sure he had something in the base which could even the odds.

Even better was the revelation of surface-to-orbit guns on the surface, but their major drawback was that the opening up of the huge anti-ship weapons would also enable the enemy mechs to infiltrate into the base.

So in order to keep the enemy mechs away from the gun openings, they would have to deploy ground forces to defend the areas. Which in turn would allow the planetary batteries to blast the enemy warship out of orbit, and hence enable the *White* and *Blue Aerie* to unleash their tremendous firepower at the enemy ground troops.

Frank massaged his temples, trying hard to think of an easier plan, but none was forthcoming.

"Here, take this. You look as if you could use a drink." Frank looked up to see Deserk holding two mugs of what seemed like coffee in his hands. One mug was being proffered to him.

Frank took the mug gratefully, as Deserk continued, "The strategy session's starting soon, everybody's here."

Frank nodded. "Okay, let's go."

Everybody was seated in a circle, with a single holographic projection in the middle. The current projection was of the location of forces on the planet.

Ian spoke first, breaking the silence. "What are our objectives here?"

Daniela answered, "To defeat every single one of these black mechs?"

Descartin shook his head, "Neg. Our objective is to get off this planet alive, with the data we have managed to get here. Possession of this base would be nice, but I doubt you Falcons might be so willing to let the Spheroids have full control of it."

"One thing that is out of the question is to hole up in here." Lorik said. "According to the base records, the enemy warship type possesses a certain warhead that can initiate what the archives called a "Planetary Nova" reaction. Suffice to say, we do not want that to happen."

"But then why hasn't the enemy used it yet?" Benny Greaves asked.

"Because it wants this place intact for its masters, wherever they might be." Frank answered. "But I would hazard a guess that if the enemy AI feels that it's chances have gone down the drain, it won't hesitate to blow everything up." They had gotten enough information from the base's AI to realize that they were also up against an artificial intelligence controlling the enemy forces.

"That is correct." The base AI, which some of the techs have dubbed Ally due to the acronym AI, suddenly interrupted. "Since this is a planning session, and as my existence is at stake, I have a right to involvement."

*Well, well, who told the AI about sentient rights anyway?* Frank thought.

"So that means we have to destroy the enemy warship no matter what, correct?" Kety stated.

"Yup. It also presents us with a very difficult plan of action." Frank went on to outline his plan.

After his presentation, Ian spoke first, "I had pretty much the same idea, but the biggest problem is getting enough combat strength to hold the ground batteries. We don't have enough right now."

"We'll have to get the other mercs and Falcons into here. That'll also leave us with a very small window of opportunity. We have to make the enemy think that as long it has a chance of getting the base away from us, it would not deploy the planet killer missile."

"So how do we do that as well as getting everybody in here?"

"We send out five or six teams composed of the fastest mechs and vehicles we have. These teams would be in charge of informing the various commands of the locations of the entrances. They will have to either inform in person or by sending a laser pulse transmission, because the enemy will be able to intercept our messages."

"Ally, where are all the entrances?" Ian asked.

"Updating map." It replied. Red squares appeared on the map, scattered all over the landscape.

"These entrances have never been used, have they?" Frank asked.

"That is correct." The AI answered.

"So what we have to do is to get the other mercs into these holes. And the very first step is to get them the coordinates in the first place. That'll be up to Bryan and his fast movers."

"And after that?" Ian asked.

"At a certain predetermined time, which I have not decided yet, the units will wheel away from the enemy and proceed at max speed to the nearest entrance. Not simultaneously, but in waves, so that the black mechs might be fooled into chasing units that are about to reach safety."

"But once everybody's in here, the enemy might just want to forgo all this grief and blast us into vapor."

"That's why we need to maintain a presence outside, to act as bait. The message teams will have to stay alive while we try to fix up the mechs and tanks we have. Once we're ready, we'll go on the offensive."

"What if they just decide to start blasting away with their warship?" Des pointed out.

"Then we're sunk. It hasn't done that so far, and let's hope that'll continue."

Kily Gonzalez stared up at his *Wolfhound*, currently patched up by a veritable army of techs. They had worked wonders in the last few hours, the *Wolfhound* almost restored to full combat efficiency.

He wished he could say the same for himself. He had almost lost his nerve again during the last wild battle to rescue the Falcons. This time, it wasn't the fear of facing superior warriors in superior mechs, but the fear of being overwhelmed by never-ending swarms of enemies.

*They just kept on coming.*

He remembered being panic stricken when both the arms of his mech had been blown off, leaving him with only two medium lasers to defend himself. Even without Frank's order to sprint for safety, he would have done so on his own.

He had gotten a good chewing out from Lorik, and then Bryan, his lance commander for what he did in the command center. Frank had understood, and had even taken him aside for a quick talk to reassure his fears, but that had no effect this time.

He just felt bad, and he could figure out why, which made it worse.

He was afraid of dying, afraid of failing, afraid of letting his lancemates down. He couldn't stop shivering whenever he thought of leaving the safe sanctuary of the base. From all accounts, it was hell outside, a hell made by the black mechs.

And they were going back to that hell.

"Kily!" He heard a shout from Bryan. "Stop dithering and prep your mech! We don't have much time!"

"Roger!" Kily shouted back, though his heart was not in it.

He climbed up a ladder to his mech cockpit. His cockpit had already been cleaned by the techs, all traces of his fear, especially the vomit after the battle, already removed from the small compartment. Somebody had even sprayed the cockpit with air freshener, leaving a cloyingly citric smell that was almost sickening.

Kily started up his mech, and his *Wolfhound* was soon sprinting down a corridor, following the other members of his lance. The dread he felt refused to go away, not even after he saw the other mechs of his lance stride with confidence out of the repair bay.

*I can't run from this either. Frank said it best, everybody has to fight. But I don't want to die...*

"Hey, Kily, how are you feeling?" A voice suddenly came over his comms Kily recognized it as Deserk. "Are you afraid of battle?". He did not reply.

"I could sense your fear from a mile away, and I know that even now, you are wrestling with your fear, thinking of abandoning the battle that is soon to be fought. Frank came to me with your problem, but by the time I was free to talk to you, you were already deployed."

His mech continued to move down the corridor to a transit point where a massive internal rail would move their lance to the designated exit point.

"Now let me tell you something. Within every warrior, there also exists a shard of fear. Nobody is immune from it, nobody can avoid feeling it. But fear is a good thing. It tells us when not to take unnecessary risks, when to be more cautious. What you feel is perfectly natural."

"What you should not do is to suppress that fear. By recognizing that fear and embracing it, your courage will be augmented by the knowledge of why you're being courageous. Your senses will be sharper, because all the time you will be alert to the dangers that may surround you."

Kily could already feel himself feeling better as he listened to the older and wiser mechwarriors. He allowed the fear to permeate throughout his body, instead of trying to pool and press it within his stomach. He felt a bit stronger as he did so.

"Feel better already? Godspeed and kick some ass for us!" Kily grinned as he heard Deserk cut off the transmission.

The Dragoon was right. Fear was something to be accepted, because it was useful to a warrior.

When they finally reached the transit point where an automated carriage was waiting for them, to transport them to near their exit point, Kily was actually eager for the coming battle. He checked the status of his *Wolfhound's* lasers, ready to tear some black mechs into scrap.

As he watched the various small icons representing their message teams move around on the holographic map, Ian Dorlacen clenched and unclenched his fists methodically. He wished he was out there, even in one of those light mechs. He wished he was doing something, anything, rather than being stuck in the base doing nothing.

In the end, eight teams of three or four mechs and vehicles each had been deployed, two to each continent. Some of the Falcons had protested about their assignments, but Star Captain Daniela Mattlov had managed to force the issue through.

First out was the recon lance of the Raiders. Brevet Lieutenant Bryan was leading a lance consisting of his *Fenris*, a *Wolfhound*, a *Talon* and a *Spider*.

Next was the Lancers' contribution. One *Raven*, a *Puma* and a *Fire Falcon* salvaged from the Falcons earlier on, led by Hong Guan De. A *Garm* that was normally part of the lance had been dropped due to its slower top speed, which was less than that of an *Ant*.

The Falcons had provided two units. One consisted of an *Uller*, a *Koshi* and a *Dasher*. The second unit had a *Fenris*, one *Dragonfly*, and a *Puma*.

The fifth unit was a mixed force. One *Dragonfly*, one *Puma* from the Falcons, and a *Wasp* from Rasouf's Rangers, courtesy of Benny Greaves. The commander of this unit was Star Commander Helen, formerly of Trinary Gamma.

The sixth unit consisted of the three remaining *Regulators* from Ian's battered tank company. They had been assigned to the flat areas, where their speed would not be hindered by terrain.

Likewise, the two lances of *Harassers* from Harry's Harassers were also assigned to cover the plains, forming two units. The two remaining tank crews were left unhappily in the base to help with the repair of the other machines.

Ian sympathized with them, just as he wanted to be at the forefront of the battle. He felt a light touch on his shoulder, and saw the beautiful face of Daniela Mattlov as he swiveled his chair around.

“It is not easy, quiaff? To wait here instead of fighting.” She said softly as she took a nearby seat.

“Yeah. I think no commander will ever want to stand and just watch while his men are fighting, and possibly dying.”

“I know. I have the same feelings every time my Star Colonel bids away my star and uses some other part of his command instead. Then I would do nothing but sit near the holotank, awaiting the latest updates on the battle.” She shrugged. “I have become used to this. It is part of being clan.”

“How then, do you endure this waiting?”

“You handpicked your people, quiaff? Trained them, and fought beside them?” She waited for his nod. “Then you should know their strengths and their abilities. Be confident in them, and be confident that you did the best you could to prepare them. Leave the rest in the hands of your warriors. Trust that they will fulfill their mission. I have no doubt we will win.”

“We as in everybody, or just your Falcons?” He noted her shocked look, and quickly apologized.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to come off that strongly. I just want to know if you are happy to be on the same side as us filthy mercs.”

“Not exactly happy, but not as disgusted as you might think either.” She scoffed. “You have proven your courage and skill in our previous battles, and honorable warriors are never unwelcome. And we will need every warrior in the battle ahead.”

“Well, I hope to survive long enough for our duel, or have you forgotten it already?”

“Neg. I remember, and I wish that you will uphold your end of our agreement as well.” A smile returned to her face.

They sat there for a while in amicable silence, before Ian noticed a change on the map, as some of the red squares started blinking, indicating that they were about to open.

“Look,” He pointed out to Daniela, “the teams are deploying to the exterior.”

## **Einstein, Deep Periphery Tartar Reaches**

After an incredible ride on the transit system, which had taken them just five minutes to traverse 600 kilometers, Bryan’s lance marched out of the transport and into another short corridor. The tunnel was not as large as the one at the Door, but still wide enough to accommodate their mechs.

After a short distance, they came to a small door. Bryan’s voice entered their cockpits.

“Alright guys, this is it. Once we’re out there, we’re in it all the way until Frank tells us otherwise. Our job, as you already know, is to get to as many units as possible and point them in the direction of safety using the plan. Each of you has a copy of the plan in your computer systems. You are to pass on the plan in a tightbeam transmission or by hand in a disk, if possible.”

“I have no idea how long we’ll be out there, but don’t give up no matter the odds. Our mechs are faster than the enemy’s, and we pack more guns. Stay calm, and rely on your speed to keep yourself safe.” He paused.

“So everybody ready? Kily?”

“Check, ready to go.” Kily had gained a wary confidence after the advice from Deserk.

“Lee?”

“Happy to go hunting.” The former Capellan soldier growled.

“Patrice?”

“Just running with the pack, sir.” It was an inside comment that only the Dragoons knew and understood. Kily could almost feel Bryan grinning, as he contacted the techs inside the main base to open the door at their location. The door slid open smoothly, and they quickly stepped out into the moonlit night. The door closed behind them, as though the techs controlling it had no intention of leaving it open any longer than required.

Kily looked at his map, which was receiving a steady stream of data concerning the positions of the units they were looking for. The data came by way of a new communications set installed by the techs, which offered a much more powerful broad/narrow band signal reception and transmission than even the old *Ostscout*’s communications suite. From what Kily knew, the set actually came from a stockpile of alien devices in the base. Lorik had a bunch of techs modify them to make them compatible to human interface systems. Kily was very grateful for the extra edge it gave him.

They had not bothered to hide the scanning info from the base, because the enemy AI would also have such data available from its own scanners. What *should* be kept hidden from it were the locations of the entrances.

“Move out.” The order finally came, as Bryan started his *Fenris* sprinting into the distance towards the nearest friendly unit. Kily’s *Wolfhound* was next, followed by Lee’s *Spider*, with Patrice’s *Talon* covering their rear.

After an hour of hard marching, they came across their first target unit, which was under strong pressure from the enemy as they sought to disengage. As Bryan and his lance approached, black mechs were already racing into position to intercept them, a strong force of more than ten mechs of assorted weight classes.

Bryan had no intention playing the game by their rules, however. He pushed the lance to the top of a nearby hill rise, and they proceeded to rain long range fire down onto the enemy machines, using their speed to maintain their distance. Lee, as the only member of the lance to lack long range weapons on his *Spider*, kept an eye out for flanking movements by enemy *Ants*.

Kily did not hesitate as the enemy mechs came within range, firing off his ER large laser at a *Lemming* that was quickly followed by a rapid follow up shot by Bryan with his ER PPC, both shots slamming into the middle of the mech one after the other. The *Lemming* exploded almost instantly, as the undiminished energy of the particle blast devoured its fragile internal structure with ease.

Patrice's *Talon* targeted an advancing *Smasher*, firing off her own ER PPC. The shot carved into the mech's left arm, hardly a fatal wound, but enough to open up the limb for a much more damaging attack. The intrusion of the Raiders had drawn off some of the forces pressing the unit they were trying to reach, an unit called Goddard's Goliaths. As more enemy mechs veered off to deal with the fast moving Raiders, it gave Lee a chance to outflank the black mechs.

Meanwhile, Kily continued using his speed and range to inflict punishment on the black mechs without taking any return fire. Bryan pulled the others back, opening a gap between the black mechs chasing him and the black mechs pressing the Goliaths.

They were doing quite well so far, having destroyed five mechs. Lee's *Spider* jumped its prodigious way towards the Goliaths, as he tried to get a clear shot at transmitting the retreat plan to a *Zeus* that they had identified as the commander.

"Lieutenant Goddard! This is Lee from the Raiders! I'm going to transmit a tightbeam data package to you! It's very important, so *don't* put it out on broadband! You *don't* know who might be listening! Transmitting now!"

"This is Fanny Goddard! What are you doing? Come back here and help us!"

"Sorry! Orders are for us to help you break off the pursuit only. You'll have to make your own way to the safe area!" There was a short pause.

"Okay, package received! I understand now." Goddard replied as Lee's *Spider* jumped back up towards the rest of his lancemates. A determined application of firepower by the Goliaths had managed to shatter most of the heavy mechs pressing them, allowing them to start a headlong retreat away from the main enemy force.

Kily waited for Bryan's signal to start their own retreat, as he blasted another *Ant* apart by triggering an ammunition explosion within the light drone.

"Start pulling back! We've finished our first assignment!" Bryan held his ground for a moment as he took the opportunity to finish off the *Smasher* that Patrice had hurt earlier, before turning his *Fenris* around to follow Kily's *Wolfhound* that was already dashing away.

*One unit down, seven more to go.*

The machine intelligence made one calculation after another, but there were too many variables for it to determine whether the battle being fought was now a lost cause.

That the flesh beings had gained possession of the base was not in doubt, but neither were its chances of wresting it away from them completely gone.

Its forces on planet were all attacking the flesh beings, as it tried to lure those inside to come out to rescue their comrades.

And it was succeeding. Eight small detachments had been detected leaving various points on the planet, heading towards their fellow flesh beings. The machine intelligence had already sent several drones to those locations to try to find a way past the doors, though it was sure that there would not be any.

It concluded it would be better off pursuing a few units with the bulk of its forces. The units chased should not be so small that they would be crushed completely, but not so large that it would take too long to destroy them either. The drone programs did not leave much leeway for restraint.

It made a logical guess that the flesh beings would be seeking to bring those outside into the safety of the underground facility. To do so, they would have to open up the entrances.

And the machine intelligence intended to take full advantage of that.

## **Einstein, Deep Periphery**

### **Copernicus Caldera**

### **Planck's Quantum Hole**

"What are the forces available to us now?" Frank asked a hectic Pascal Thome, with Des Winters and Deserk and some other mechwarriors behind him. The master tech was shouting loudly at a bunch of techs working on Daniela Mattlov's *Masakari* when Frank had arrived on the scene with them in tow.

They had located a bay near the command center suitable for repairing all their mechs. It had taken quite a while, but repairs were now proceeding at a brisk pace.

So far, about twenty units have converged into four larger groups of about a battalion each in size, composed of both merc and Falcon forces. Frank was adamant that they recover these units, which comprised a full twenty percent of all human forces on the world.

There was nowhere else for them to go. Some dropships had managed to elude the blockade by pushing their engines to the limit, joining Valten Folkner's scratch force in space. Unfortunately, they had also left their cargoes behind, the mercs or Falcons being transported having to fight for their lives on the ground. The rest of the dropships were destroyed on the ground.

Daniela Mattlov had managed to get into contact with Star Commodore Valten Folkner, and explained Frank's plan to him. Folkner had refused to consider it, however, and he wanted at least a Star Colonel to vet the plan before he would agree to it. Nevertheless, he had given them an update on the status of his own fleet, as well the one still stationed at the nadir jump point.

The battalion sized groups, one of which contained Lizabet Danforth's *Mad Cat*, were about to reach their designated entrances in thirty minutes time. Two of the groups were being chased by a huge number of enemy mechs. Frank wanted at least a company of mechs with some vehicles at two of the gates to provide some support as the units entered the tunnels.

"Forces available, eh?" Pascal wiped off some sweat from his brow. "Captain Winters, your personal tech says that your three mechs are up and ready to go. However, he also says that supplies are running short, what with your stuff being used to fix up the Falcons. Frank, we've only four mechs from the Raiders ready for action. Your *Night Gyr*'s still a mess. Add one more lance from the Lancers, and that's the most I can give you in mechs. None of the Falcons are ready for action yet."

"Just one company of mechs?" Frank had half-expected such an answer, but it was still disappointing to hear it.

"Add in the Sticklers, and you should have enough." Descartin Winters noted. The Sorrowful Sticklers were two companies of heavy and assault tanks that had sat out the rescue, with only their aerospace contingent taking part in the fight. They had finally thrown in with Frank's plan, after he had carefully explained the stakes.

Frank admitted that their *Alacorn Mk VI* and *Manticore* tanks would be very useful. The three gauss rifles on each *Alacorn* made them very intimidating opponents, even for mechs.

Frank turned to the warriors behind him, "Okay, send the order out to Major Soros to deploy his tanks, the *Alacorn* company to alpha entrance, and the *Manticore* one to beta. Des, you accompany the *Alacorn* unit, while Kety, you'll take the two lances from the Lancers and the Raiders to support the *Manticore* company."

When he had finished, the warriors assigned quickly moved to obey his orders.

"You seem to have settled quite well into your role." Commented Deserk.

Frank snorted, "Huh, it's all I can do to keep my head above water." He started moving to the nearest teleporter. He punched in the option for going to the command center, and the two warriors quickly stepped through. They emerged amidst an almost quiet command center, where a few communications specialists were passing on information about enemy and friendly movements to the message teams. It was a stark contrast with the hustle and bustle of the repair bay.

Other than the comms personnel, only Ian and Daniela were in the room. They were talking softly to each other. Frank could see a grin on Deserk's face as they walked to another holotank. It took Frank a while before he figured it out.

He nearly kicked himself for not noticing it earlier. There was a definite spark between Ian and Daniela, and it was so obvious that even bystanders could have noticed it. Frank wondered if they knew it themselves.

*A mercenary commander and a Falcon bloodnamed warrior. Who would've thought?* Frank didn't give their relationship much chance of a future, considering the problems involved. Anyway, there were more important issues to worry about.

*Like between you and Clarice?* A voice spoke in his head. Frank ignored it, as he looked at the holotank.

He punched in several commands, and the map of the planet disappeared, to be replaced by a picture of a massive warship.

"What are you looking at?" Deserk asked.

"The enemy warship. What it can do, what it can't, and what we can do to destroy it."

"There's one thing I don't quite understand." Frank could hear concern in Deserk's voice.

"And what's that?" Frank looked up from the specifications of the enemy ship.

"If the Qlictorio aliens were so advanced, why did they get wiped out? Were this Dark Army so powerful, so implacable that they had no chance?"

Frank pursed his lips, thinking. Deserk was right. They had been so caught up in the campaign and with trying to understand the alien data that they had neglected this part.

The historical records Des Winters had uncovered had only shown the *how*, but not the *whys*. The records had stated that a massive fleet had appeared out of nowhere and started laying waste to their cities. Hordes of machines and terrifying warriors had descended on their worlds, capturing whole populations and uprooting entire industries. Nobody knew what happened to those captured, and nobody ever found out.

The Qlictorio Alliance fought back, but they were simply outmatched. Almost every battle fought was a defeat, every counterstrike an abysmal failure. Their technological standards were on par with the enemy forces, but they lost battles even when the forces were supposed to be equal. Heck, they even lost battles against the drones, when *the drones were the ones outnumbered!*

*Then why?* Frank asked himself. *What are the other factors that determines the quality of an army?* It did not take him long to realize the answer.

*Experience. Training. Command.* Acting on a hunch, Frank and Deserk checked the history of the Qlictorio Alliance. He was not surprised at all to find out that the last war fought by *any* of the Alliance races was before they had even developed space travel. Or more accurately, in their equivalent of the Stone Age. And that was almost fifty thousand years before they were attacked by the Dark Army.

The few training manuals he managed to access from the databanks were almost laughable in intent and objective. There was little mention of a hierarchy of command, or standard battle tactics. Instead, the focus was placed on democratic command, individual decision making, and they even advocated diplomacy before starting an attack! Deserk was bawling madly with laughter and contempt as he read the articles.

*A liberal's wet dream.* Frank groaned. With such information, they had no problem pinpointing the problems that led to the demise of the Qlictorio Alliance. In a way, he was astounded that any civilization could have survived fifty thousand years without some manner of conflict.

In comparison, humanity has never had even a century of total peace. Even during the era of the Star League, there were hidden wars and other innuendo that could hardly be construed as peaceful activities.

But it was humanity's history of war that had given the mercenaries and the Falcons both the structures and mindset necessary to oppose the drones. Five thousand years of unending struggle had made humanity a hardy race in terms of psyche and organization.

Were the clans right then, to claim that war makes people strong? That conflict leads to progress? Frank refused to believe that war was a better state of affairs than peace.

"You really think that war was, and could be, our edge?" He asked Deserk.

"That seemed to be the only, and easiest explanation, right?"

Frank sighed. "Occam's Razor." He rolled his eyes. "I can't believe I'm advocating war as being good for humanity."

"But without the wars we have fought, without the stakes for us to fight over, would we have developed the spine to endure? From their records, whole populations just gave up as soon as they lost their defenders, or what passes for defenders in those times. Imagine the very same thing occurring on an Inner Sphere or even a clan world. What do you think would have happened?"

"Let me guess. Riots, guerilla attacks, frenzied civilians trying to maintain their freedom at all costs?"

"Bingo." The use of the slang by a clanner emphasized its meaning. "The Nova Cats suffered from such during the invasion. People like their freedoms, their way of life. Even in the Draconis Combine. Give me liberty or give me death, and all that."

"With the ISF? I find that hard to believe, actually, but the facts don't lie." The ISF, short for Internal Security Force, was the most feared intelligence and spying agency in the Inner Sphere, even going as far as to spy or carry out hit missions on their own citizens.

"That's your Fed-Com prejudice talking."

"In any case, it's still early to say of our chances. These are only the drones, the lackeys. According to the records, the drones were the lowest of the low, the lousiest they had. Their good stuff, and some of it is really very good, are easily better than even clantech."

"Furthermore," Frank added, "We haven't even got past this hurdle yet. So I wouldn't be too confident."

"Hey Frank!" Denilson shouted from the entrance to the command center.

"Yeah?"

"I've found what you sent me to find. Star Commander Parrot and the aerjocks are also all waiting outside, per your instructions." Denilson flicked a thumb casually over his shoulder.

"My name is not Parrot!" A furious voice yelled out. Sounds of a short scuffle were heard.

Galietra Binneti was not the only Falcon pilot to be rescued from the ill-fated aerial battle. Four other Falcon pilots had been rescued as well. It had taken quite a lot of med-patches before they calmed down enough to listen to reason.

Frank grinned. "Alright, lead the way. Dee," he had gotten tired of calling the Dragoon by his full name, "Stay here and keep an eye on things. Tell Ian if anything happens." Deserk gave a wave as acknowledgement.

Frank and the pilots followed Denilson to another of the innumerable cargo bays located in the base. Denilson opened the cargo door, and they walked into a pitch-black room.

"Hey, who turned off the lights?" A merc shouted.

"Wait a minute, I'm finding the switch," Denilson shouted back. "Got it!"

As the lights came on, the pilots found themselves staring at a breathtaking scene.

Thirty gleaming fighters, obviously not of human origin, stared back at them.

Somebody whistled softly, "Oh baby, that's has gotta be one hot ride."

Galietra Binneti looked over at Frank. "You knew they were here, quiaff?"

Frank frowned, "The records indicated that they *might* be here. The inventory records were not very well kept, which was why I had to send Denilson to confirm. Even Ally wasn't sure, because this cargo bay was of the few that were 'locked' to it."

The whole group had walked over to the fighters, all white in color. Each was vaguely the shape of a flying wing, but there were various weapons nacelles and protrusions from the fuselage. The armor material was made up of a close cousin to that of the base doors, an extremely hard material that they weren't able to get an equivalent name translation yet.

“Alright guys, listen up!” Frank slapped the surface of a nearby fighter to get their attention. The pilots were all drooling over the alien fighters, but they quickly gave him their undivided attention.

“These are alien aerospace fighters, as you have all undoubtedly guessed by now! What you don’t know are their capabilities. Yup, they’re faster and more maneuverable than your old flying crates, but that’s not all! They pack advanced weaponry, and they have shields!” *Damn, I sound like a salesman.*

Murmurs arose at his words.

“Shields? As in energy shields to deflect hits?” Gal asked. Everybody had already heard of the enemy warship which had thrashed the Falcon *Black Lions*.

Frank nodded. “The very same. According to the database, these are also equipped with very specially developed missiles capable of defeating the shield defenses of warships. The aliens developed them near the end of the war, but only got the chance to use them once before they were finally all wiped out. You guys can probably guess what I mean now.”

Galietra proved again that he was no slouch by answering first. “You want us to pilot these fighters and take out the enemy warship with the missiles. But what about the interface? If these are for aliens, how are we humans going to fly them”

Frank had anticipated the question. “I’m getting the aerospace techs here, they will be working to change the internal configurations to suit human ergonomics. What you should do in the meantime, however, is to familiarize yourself with your new fighter systems. The data can be accessed in the command center, or any console in the base, for that matter.”

Frank turned to walk away, then stopped, as he remembered something. “And oh, you guys have to choose a wing leader.” He hurriedly walked out of the cargo bay before he could be involved in the inevitable fracas. Denilson took one look at the pilots, sensed the tension, and quickly dashed out the cargo bay as well.

“Okay, who’s the boss?” Peggy Yeager, otherwise known as Bird Lead in the rescue mission, stared around challengingly, especially at Galietra Binneti.

Predictably, the filthy freebirths all pointed to her, “You’re the boss,” the spheroids said, while his own warriors stood behind him

Gal growled menacingly. “Why should you be the leader? I am better than you.”

“Prove it.”

“Fine. Would you be so gracious as to form a Circle of Equals? Let this be a Trial of Position!”

“Uh, pardon me for saying this,” A pilot named Hank Cashew spoke up, “But we can’t afford to have anyone incapacitated at this point.”

“Then you do you suggest?” Gal turned furiously on Hank.

Hank quickly held up his hands in defense. “Uh, wouldn’t a simple test of speed, reflexes, and endurance be sufficient?”

“Pray tell, what sort of test do you have in mind?” Peggy asked sweetly, but it was obvious she was not amused.

Hank thought hard for a moment, then it struck him.

“Aha!”

Twenty minutes later, Wing Commander Galietra Binneti was nursing his badly reddened palms as his warriors cheered his victory. Peggy Yeager yelped loudly as she plunged her bruised hands into a bucket of cold water a concerned pilot had brought for them. Another pilot ran off to get some ointment. Hank’s idea had been a game of ‘slap the hands’...