

# New World Order

## Parts 31-36 plus Epilogue

By: *The Nice Guy*

*Einstein, Deep Periphery*  
*Door Alpha*

“Close up, close up!” Descartin Winters yelled at the lance of *Alacorn MK VI* tanks behind him.

“Star Captain, ETA of retreating forces is five minutes! Door is opening in two!” A commtech from the command center told him through the strategic frequency in his neurohelmet.

“Aff.” Des replied. He switched back to his tactical frequency. “Listen closely people, door is opening in about one minute. Remember the plan for you tankers is to sit tight and fire at any black mech. Do not fire if there’s a chance of hitting a friendly. My mechs will act as mobile support, so do not worry about the enemy getting too close.”

The door slid open, and Des moved his *Nova Cat* out the door. Punching up his magnification, he could see a dust cloud in the distance, probably caused by the massed movement of mechs and vehicles.

Yoshino and Jean followed quickly in their omnimechs, while the tanks divided into their respective lances. One lance stayed in the tunnel in line formation, which still offered enough space for two vehicles or mechs to pass through on either side of the line. The other two lances of tanks moved to just outside the door, each lance covering a flank.

Des pushed his throttle forward, as he started tracking for enemies with his targeting computer. Two *Maultiers* appeared first as he dragged his crosshairs over them. He continued tracking as the *Nova Cat* surged forward, eating up the ground in giant strides. He did not need to check his displays to see that Yoshino’s *Nobori-Nin* and Jean’s *Ryoken* were right beside him, pacing his mech.

Des finally found an enemy mech, a *Lemming*, in his sights. He did not hesitate, his ER PPCs reaching out to the black mech’s torso. The *Lemming* rocked back as its forward armor was vaporized in an instant. The unabated energy of the particle beams continued to carve into the mech, as it sheared away the *Lemming*’s entire engine shielding. Deprived of the electrical signals to its limbs, the mech tumbled to the ground in an almost resigned manner. The other black mechs did not falter in the chase, their weapons flashing as they fired upon the fleeing humans. Des saw a battered *Mad Cat* torso twist and give a pursuing *Bruiser* a good dose of energy from its PPC. The remnants of green paint on the clan omni, as well as the big Rho letter on the left leg, leave no doubts in Des’ mind as to the pilot of the *Mad Cat*.

Galaxy Commander Lizabet Danforth’s voice came over the open channel. “Lieutenant Longley, put your mechs in overwatch and start firing those LRMs you have been hoarding! Captain Jacqueline, have your *Maxims* ready at the entrance to start using your Thunder LRMs once all units are clear of the fire zone!”

Almost immediately, a terrifying roar erupted from a group of four mechs nearest to the entrance, as the other mechs and vehicles streamed past them. Massive amounts of smoke begun to bellow from the area, as huge swarms of LRMs burst out of the smoke clouds, angling towards the black mechs.

Wreaths of explosions could be seen from the massed ranks of the enemy, and Des thought he saw LRMs that had missed the first line of mechs continue on to strike other mech in the rear.

*Swarm LRMs, very clever.* Des admitted to himself. Meanwhile, the four mechs started to backtrack slowly, enabling Des to see what they are. He guessed they were probably all LRM boats.

He was correct. An ubiquitous *Archer*, an *Apollo*, a *Yeoman*, and a *Viking*. A total of at least 150 LRM launchers. The missile boats continued to pour on the fire, as they covered the retreat with sustained volleys of LRMs. Des was strongly reminded of ancient 20<sup>th</sup> century videos he had seen in the Goliath Scorpion archives of missile carriers called MLRS lobbing waves of missiles at their enemies.

“Galaxy Commander!” He called out. “The entrance is open, now get your people into it ASAP!” It did not take a genius to figure out that she had assumed command of the scratch force. Elite and intelligent warriors always rose to command, whatever the circumstances.

“Who are you?” She challenged.

“Star Captain Descartin Winters of Clan Goliath Scorpion, at your service.” He answered, while firing his long range weapons at a menacing *Smasher*. The heavy mech died as his deadly accuracy sent all his shots into the middle of the mech, into the exact same location. The excess energy burst out the back of the hapless *Smasher* as it exploded.

“So, you have betrayed the clans and thrown in with the Inner Sphere, quiaff?” The *Mad Cat* turned towards the enemy mechs, and much to Des’ surprise, unleashed a salvo of missiles that hit at more than 800 meters. Further than normal LRMs, and that only meant one thing.

ATMs.

Not the ‘automated teller machines’ that Yoshino Ihara was so fond of quoting whenever ATMs were mentioned, but rather the latest in missile technology developed by the Coyotes. Called “Advanced Tactical Missiles”, they could use a variety of special ammunition types with different ranges and firepower.

Naturally, the Coyotes tried to keep the ATMs to themselves as much as possible, but the fierce fighting for the former territory of the Smoke Jaguars, the Ghost Bears and the abjured Nova Cats in the past few years had enabled most other clans to obtain the technology for themselves.

Only the Scorpions, with their intense dislike for non-energy weapons, refrained from using ATMs, with the exception of some individual warriors. Des, who was once a member of the Nova Cats' sharp-shooting Alpha Galaxy, fitted in well with the Scorpions with their reliance on direct fire weapons.

Despite that, ATMs could actually outmatch the ultra-heavy autocannon for sheer damage, especially when using the High Explosive warhead ammunition. Having been on the receiving end of ATMs before, Des was fully apprised of their effectiveness.

"Neg." He answered Danforth. "It is an arrangement of convenience, nothing more. Besides, are you not working with Inner Sphere mercenaries yourself? You know if we do not cooperate, we will die separately. Now get your people into the entrance!"

"Aff. We are complying."

A group of *Maxim* hovercraft zoomed past his advancing mech on gusts of air, taking up fire support positions near the *Alacorns*. Meanwhile, the obsidian horde had recovered from the shock of the LRM salvo, and were advancing quickly to press the frontline. Des tried to ease the pressure by sending his unit forward at the strongest section of the enemy drive, where three *Bruisers* were advancing in step with five *Smashers*, one of them a twin gauss rifle equipped monstrosity.

It fired at Des as he approached within range, one gauss slug crushing armor plates on his left leg, the other just missing his left arm by inches. Des replied with a withering burst of laser and PPC fire, going internal on the *Bruiser* and inflicting some engine damage, but failed to put it down.

Yoshino was able to disable one *Smasher* with a lucky shot to its head, removing its sensors and rendering it blind. The mech stumbled around haphazardly, unable to determine the positions of the units around it.

Jean Posavatz closed in daringly in her *Ryoken*, drawing fire away from the retreating forces as the black mechs tried to hit her in vain. With her mech kept at its full running speed, she unleashed a burst of heavy autocannon and laser fire that cut down another of the advancing *Bruisers*.

The LRM lance tracked back slowly, hampered by the slow *Viking*. Des estimated another twenty seconds before they were able to break away under the protective umbrella of the *Alacorns* and *Maxims*.

He fired again at the gauss-equipped *Bruiser*, just as it fired its own magnetic accelerators at the same time. Des managed to puncture completely through the soft internal structure of the mech, but not before it had put its nickel iron slugs into the *Nova Cat's* torso, shattering almost two tons worth of valuable armor.

Two stars of Falcons limped into the entrance, as a steady stream of human vehicles and mechs continued to form up outside the door. To Des' experienced eye, unless something disastrous occurs, the mission was almost accomplished, due in no small part to Lizabet Danforth's superb reorganization on the fly.

The next exchange of weapons fire left three more *Smashers* in broken ruins, as Des concentrated on blunting the main thrust of the enemy advance. The other black mechs were being handled ably by the sporadic long range fire of some clan mechs that had wandered to the limits of their effective ranges, eager to claim some measure of glory in this debacle of a campaign.

It was a few more moments before the missile boats could break off and run for the entrance. The *Alacorns* begun to cut loose with their gauss rifles; the air was suddenly filled with the 'whoosh' sound of the ferromagnetic slugs as they were flung at the black mechs. The *Maxims* started to pour out LRM fire, littering the area with Thunder munitions.

The black mechs seemed to realize that their enemies were slipping away from them. They quickly picked up their pace, and before Des knew it, they were all charging hard at the entrance.

Unfazed, he waited for the Thunder mines to do their job on the mechs before firing at the legs of the black mechs. He was more than a bit surprised when some of the enemy mechs were suddenly bathed in hot plasma gel. Evidently, the Thunder rounds used were not just the plain vanilla flavor.

The increased heat levels proved fatal to many of the black mechs, as their ammunition stores cooked off under the intense temperatures caused by their own attacks and the Thunder inferno rounds.

The area around the entrance was now shrouded in deep black smoke from the fires caused by the inferno rounds, while the burning carcasses of more black mechs were scattered on the ground. Most of the retreating battalion had already entered the tunnel, leaving only Des' unit, the two lances of *Alacorns*, and nine *Maxims*.

Des ordered the *Maxims* to start pulling back into the tunnel, while the *Alacorns* kept up their gauss barrage. He could see the enemy units trying to break through the heavy minefield cordon around the entrance, but the heavy firepower of the defending units was making that highly unlikely.

"This is Captain Jacqueline! My company is through!"

"Aff! Major Soros, get your *Alacorns* into the tunnel." Des pushed his throttle all the way to the back, as he began a retrograde movement back into the doors. "Captain Jacqueline, continue your LRM barrage. All units, brace yourselves in case the enemy rushes the entrance!"

He needn't have worried. The next twenty seconds passed by in relative ease as the *Alacorns* moved into the tunnel, as more LRMs streaked over their heads to plunge into the ground right in front of Des' unit, which were only one hundred meters away from the entrance.

“Okay, let’s go!” He informed Yoshino and Jean. The three mechs quickly turned and charged into the tunnel, as Des called out an order on the strategic frequency.

“This is Star Captain Winters, close the door!” He shouted just as his *Nova Cat* ran into the tunnel.

“Got it, sir,” The reply came quickly as the heavily armored door closed easily, leaving the frustrated black mechs just short of their objective.

*Einstein, Deep Periphery*

*Copernicus Caldera*

*Planck’s Quantum Hole*

Frank stared hard at the holographic screen, as it showed the progress of the various message teams on the four continents.

It had been four hours since the first team went out, and more than half of the people outside had already been informed of their escape routes. The plan was proceeding much as they had hoped, and the alien AI was being habitually fooled by the movements and purposeful lures set up by the message teams.

There had been six scares so far, when a message team had almost been trapped by enveloping black mechs. They had managed to fight their way out in every instance, but only just. Frank was worried that their luck was going to run out sooner than later.

Des Winters and Kety had just succeeded in covering the retreats of the groups entering the doors. Added to the other two groups whose retreats had not been contested, the human beings in the base had more than doubled their strength.

Two more cargo bays had been opened up as repair bays. Supplies for repairs were going to be a problem though, and Frank hoped there would be sufficient mobile field bases and supply trucks amongst the incoming groups to reequip the mechs and vehicles.

He had asked Lorik about bringing the base’s own manufacturing facilities online to produce the desperately needed supplies, but the scientist had told him that they did not have the time nor personnel to prepare the production lines. Even the matter edition machines needed a template to follow, and Lorik was wary of using technology they barely understood.

That left only what they already had with them to repair the newcomers. And it wasn’t much. Their only source of clan weapons and clan quality ferro-fibrous armor, for example, was the *Bleeding Past*.

“They’re coming in, sir!” A commtech informed the command center. The ‘they’ were the four battalions of Falcons and mercenaries rescued.

“Come on, let’s go,” Frank said to Deserk, Ian and Daniela as they got up and went into a nearby teleporter.

They emerged into one of the many corridors in the huge base, where a few techs were fixing up hasty directional signs on makeshift placards. The faint shaking of the ground indicated the imminent arrival of the arriving forces.

Descartin Winters’ *Nova Cat* led them in, a bedraggled line of damaged mechs and smoking vehicles. There were a few bright points for Frank to take note of, however, not least of which was the presence of four MFBs that had survived the retreat. Two belonged to the clans, while the other two belonged to the mercs. He hoped that this would alleviate their supply situation.

Frank waited patiently as the mechs were directed to their parking lots in the repair bay. He could see that casualties were not as bad as feared, and that much of the technical support staff of the mercs and Falcons had survived. From some of the techs’ comments, many of the mercenaries taken as bondsmen by the Falcons had survived as well.

Descartin Winters was the first to get down from his mech, slipping down a ladder a tech had placed beside the *Nova Cat*. He quickly joined Frank, who was waiting by the side of a *Mad Cat*, which Daniela had identified as belonging to Galaxy Commander Lizabet Danforth.

It did not take long for a middle-aged woman to step out of the bullet-nosed cockpit and jump lightly to the ground. Her strong build and powerful aura of presence left Frank with no doubt that this was the Jade Falcon commander.

“Welcome, Galaxy Commander.” Frank knew better than to offer his hand in greeting. He just plastered a smile on his face, hoping that he didn’t look too stupid to the Jade Falcon officer. “I am Frank Meronac, temporarily in command of this base here. We have much to discuss.”

The woman didn’t speak. She looked around their group before recognizing Daniela Mattlov.

“Star Captain Mattlov, what is going on?”

Frank knew he should feel insulted, but he understood the need to see a friendly face. He stepped aside to let Daniela talk to her superior.

She explained the situation in short order, and as more mercenary commanders left their vehicles and mechs to gather around them, the newcomers got a piece of the story so far.

“So I was forced to ally with these freebirths for sheer survival. We made a plan to get as many warriors as possible into the safety of this base in preparation for our eventual counterattack. I am willing to serve surkai if you feel I have dishonored our clan in any way by my actions.” Daniela ended with a resolute grimace on her face, as though preparing to be punished.

Lizabet Danforth sighed, "Surkai? For what reason? You did what you thought was best, not just for your warriors but your clan as well. There is no shame, or dishonor in accepting aid in such circumstances. The only shame there is, is my willful negligence that has led us all to this state."

"Excuse me, Galaxy Commander, but there was nothing you could have done." Frank interjected. "Nobody had any idea what to expect, least of all you. Let's forget about what could have, should have, and concentrate on getting out of this alive, huh?"

"You are vulgar, but your words contain truth. What do you suggest?"

"Priority is to get our machines fixed up, and rearmed. Once we have enough strength to guard the naval guns, we'll start our attack. But we need you to convince the Star Commodore to commit his warships, because we must have your warships in position to threaten the enemy ground troops, or else the enemy ship might just drift out of range and laugh at our naval cannons."

"Very well then. I shall speak to Valten Folkner on this."

A loud sound, followed by a vehement curse, suddenly drew their attention.

"You skugg!" Frank turned around to see a mechwarrior in a dirty cooling vest kicking a tech to the floor. The man had an unkempt look about him, and Frank swore he could see a bunch of flies around the man's head. He noticed some of the other warriors were smiling, though he did not see the humor in the scene before them.

"What do you skugging mean?" He roared. "When you skugging said my skugging mech would be repaired skugging last?" The mechwarrior produced a small holdout in his right hand from his vest.

To Frank, the situation was no longer amusing, and had turned deadly. He stepped forward to stop the man, but he realized Ian Dorlacen had already grasped the man's arm in a firm grip.

*How did he move so fast?*

"Stop now," Ian said in a tone that was tinged with anger, "let him go."

"Skugg you!" The man replied as he drew out a knife with his left hand and slashed viciously at Ian with the blade.

Ian stepped in closer, and his other hand snaked out to block the hand with the knife. He brought his right knee up in the same instant, slamming it into the man's gut. The man bent doubled over by the force of the blow. Ian did not hesitate as he disarmed the man of his weapons by twisting his wrists and exerting force on them. The man dropped the gun and the knife to the floor, and Ian finished up by shoving the man towards the main group of warriors. The man crumpled to the ground in front of them.

Ian spun around slowly, staring into the eyes of every mercenary and Falcon warrior in the room, who had stopped whatever they were doing to watch the fight. "I hope that everyone understands the importance of the situation. I don't want any prima donnas thinking with their gonads instead of their heads."

Ian stabbed a finger at his downed opponent, "I know many of you are out of work, down and out warriors just trying to seek a fortune, but this is no way to treat people who are only trying to help." He pointed back at the tech, who was now standing unsteadily, supported by two of his co-workers.

"Frank," Frank saw Ian speaking to him now, "one thing you have to know is that not all the mercs on this journey are as honorable as Wolf Dragoons. They hang out in Temptown, or Galatea, taking up contracts that often amount to little more than piracy. I don't blame them, but their attitudes will need a great deal of adjustment here. We all hang together, or we hang separately." That last statement was directed to everyone.

Frank thought he understood, and nodded his head. Now that Ian had mentioned it, he did indeed see that many of the warriors in the merc units had no pride in their bearing. Their clothes were tattered, and many of the men had not shaved, while a lot of the women looked like cheap hookers in their uniforms, or more accurately, lack of such. They stood in stark contrast to the Falcons, whose uniforms still looked clean despite the battle.

He clapped his hands once. "People, we're wasting time here! Get to work!"

The bay became a thronging mess of people rushing around as they got back to their tasks. Frank heard Des Winters calling it organized chaos.

The group of leaders Frank had already denoted in his mind as the 'command team' followed him to the command center.

"I think you have made a mistake." Lizabet Danforth said as she reviewed the data.

"Huh?"

"Your estimates of the forces required to hold and defend the surface-to-orbit cannons. You have made a mistake there. We can actually carry out our plan before bringing in all the available forces."

"How so?" Frank asked.

"Your estimates of the forces required are in turn based on the enemy force strength. You failed to take into account enemy losses in the past few hours, as well as the enemy forces that might still be tied up chasing the other units around the planet. When all these are taken into account, we will only need about three more battalions or their equivalents to start our counteroffensive."

Frank slapped his forehead. "Argh, you're right! We've completely forgotten about possible enemy losses."

"But having more units is always a good idea." Ian countered.

"Not really." Des said. "We are also working against time here. If we can destroy the enemy warship sooner, that also means that this conflict will also be over faster, and remove the threat of the planet killer over our heads."

"We still need time to fix up our units." Daniela reminded everyone.

Frank provided the timetable for the repairs. "Pascal tells me that with the extra manpower from the dropship crews, he will have a full regiment ready to go in two hours, and another in three. Many of the mechs won't be fully fixed, but he assures me that they'll be able to do the job. The revised estimates call for 10 battalions, one for each orbital cannon site, or at least the ones we're using, instead of the 20 battalions we originally estimated. Factor in clan tech and the alien fighters Star Commander Galietra Binneti and the flyboys are working on, and we should have a good chance of victory in about six hours."

Galietra Binneti had managed to dig up several flight simulators from a dropship, and had a tech download the specs for the new fighters in order for his pilots to get used to the new capabilities. In addition, several dropship pilots had also signed up for the aerospace mission, with even more Falcon pilots coming in after they had been shot out of their fighters during the space battle and rescued by forces on planet. Most surprising of all were the few former mercenary aerospace Falcon bondsmen allowed to participate in the battle. Gal had informed Daniela Mattlov that he was confident of getting all thirty fighters into the air by the time they were ready to start their offensive.

"But we still need to bring in one more wave to get enough units." Ian pointed out.

"Not really as big a problem as you might think. Some of the units that just came in were barely touched, and I think we can convince them to take over the welcoming committees for a while, along with Major Soros' unit. Once the next wave comes in, in about two hours time, we let their warriors grab as much rest as they can while we fix up their machines. Then we have one final briefing to make sure everybody knows what to do before we move out."

"I will need to speak to Valten Folkner." Danforth reminded them.

They got her to a communications console, and Lizabet Danforth soon squared matters with the belligerent naval officer. Since she technically outranked him in strategic matters, he was forced to acquiesce to her orders.

But Valten Folkner was not above a few tricks of his own. He had asked for the location of the remaining jumpships belonging to Forsen Mandela. Forsen had protested, but was quickly overridden by the others. Valten intended to have every single possible advantage for his duel with the alien ship, and he had explained his willingness to use any possible means to achieve victory.

Too much time had passed for the machine intelligence. It had managed to get its sole warship almost fully operational, and it was prepared to start blasting with the ship's orbital weapons at enemy troop concentrations whenever the opportunity presented itself.

However, that would have hurt its own forces as well in the collateral damage, and the flesh beings also moved too quickly for proper targeting if they were not being pressed by its own forces. In other words, the only way to destroy the enemy forces through orbital bombardment was to sacrifice its own forces, and it was not prepared to do that yet.

It had intercepted a series of transmission by the flesh beings to one another, but could only make sense out of the planetary maps which showed the positions of all the units on world, information it was able to obtain from its own sensors. The other set of transmissions were undecipherable to the still developing AI.

A fortunate circumstance for Humanity.

Kily Gonzalez blinked his weary eyes for the umpteenth time as he tried to focus on pushing the *Wolfhound* beyond the reach of the enemy mechs. Bryan, as usual, was bravely holding the rear, giving the rest of his lance time to disengage.

Without the Dragoon's indefatigable will, Kily was sure they would never have managed to survive this long. They had traveled more than 400 kilometers for the seven hours since the mission started, and Kily felt bone tired.

*They had better be moving out soon. I can't keep this up much longer.*

"Sir, wake up." Frank felt something shaking him by the shoulder, as he frolicked in the blue waters of the beach. "Rise and shine, sir."

He tried to brush off the intruding jellyfish on his shoulder, lost in his sweet dreams of swimming naked in the beaches of his homeworld Lackland together with Clarice, his fiancée.

The tech lost patience. "Sir!" *That* got him awake, as Frank sat up with a start. "The next wave has been in for a while now, and Major Ian and Galaxy Commander Danforth are calling for the final briefing for all personnel."

Frank stared up blearily at the tech, before realizing belatedly that he had fallen asleep at his console in the command center, while trying to predict the possible moves of the enemy AI. "Okay. Tell them I'll be along in a while."

He tried to center himself, while looking around for a mug of coffee to perk himself up. He had a strong feeling that whatever happened today would determine humanity's fate forever. He hoped he was up to whatever might be demanded of him.

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

Lorik had assigned several techs to get the plumbing system of the base back into order. Naturally, the rooms where the waste were disposed became the toilets, where warriors would relieve themselves of their 'organic waste

products'. Due to certain design features, apparently suited to alien physiques, they had to make do with some buckets that would be emptied into the proper receptacles when full. A few unlucky troopers were assigned such latrine duty. Bathing facilities were yet another problem. The base lacked water showers, and even sonic showers were not known. However, the aliens did have certain cleaning devices in which the cleaning process took almost instantaneous. The person bathing would step into the machine, stay there for ten seconds while the whole compartment was flooded with some strange vapor that contained nanomachines that would quickly scrub and clean away dirt particles and other pollutants on the body.

The major complaint everybody had after using it was that while they *were* clean after the 'bath', and smelled and looked like it, they did not *feel* clean. Frank Meronac had chalked that one down to psychological factors.

Therefore, the 'cleaning rooms' became de facto changing rooms as well. The Inner Sphere people had hurriedly pasted up notices to inform all personnel, whether clan or inner sphere born, to stick to using the assigned gender specific rooms, after an embarrassing incident where Daniela Mattlov had wandered into the men's room and proceeded to change her clothes right in front of the male members of the Arch Lancers without batting an eyelid. The sight of her nude body had almost incited a riot in the room.

It had taken Ian Dorlacen quite a while before he could inform her of the differences in Inner Sphere and Clan social mores. His men were not pleased when the scenery left, however.

Ian was still musing over Daniela Mattlov in his mind as he donned his cooling vest in the changing room. Most of the other warriors of his unit had already left to check up on their mechs before the final combined briefing session. Everybody had agreed that having a briefing en masse was better than having only an officers-only briefing, because of the stakes involved and Ian's reluctance to trust some of the less able merc commanders to interpret orders correctly.

He zipped up his cooling vest, and checked again for any leakages in the coolant tubes, which had not been flushed since the last battle. He closed his bag, and prepared to leave the room when Benny Greaves entered.

"Major Ian." The mechwarrior greeted him.

"Hey, Lieutenant Greaves, or is it Captain now?" Ian answered back with a smile, "Anything you want?"

"Yes sir. I want you to stay here and not fight in the battle later." Benny's tone of voice was extremely serious, and the grim look on his face quickly killed Ian's hopes of this being a joke.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Benny repeated his words, "You heard me. I would like you to stay away from the fight."

"You and what army?" Ian scoffed as he started to walk towards the door.

"I and the fact that you have to stay alive for the sake of the Taurian Concordat." Benny moved to block the door.

Ian stopped in his tracks. He had an inkling of what Benny was hinting at, but he did not want his thoughts to follow up that line of thought.

"I have no idea of what you mean." Ian feigned ignorance, trying to act as nonchalant as possible.

"Don't tell me you have given up completely on your lineage, Major Ian." The very words Ian feared slid out of Benny's mouth.

"Who are you?" Ian demanded, his voice low and threatening.

"Captain Benny Greaves, Taurian Defense Forces, currently on special assignment. You can probably guess what my special mission is now, sir."

Ian leaned back wearily on a wall. The moment he had dreaded for years had finally arrived. In a way, he was glad, because he would not have to run away any longer. By the same token, he also knew he would have to face up to his past once and for all.

"Why are you here? To kill me? No, wait, that's not it. If so, you would have let us die outside when we were trying to extract the Falcons. So you want me alive, for some reason, right?"

"Yes sir. In fact, it was your sister who gave me my mission orders."

*Janice.* Ian had fond memories of his elder sister, and she was one of the few people he truly cared for. He recalled memories of her reading to him from a storybook, of pushing her wheelchair around after she was stricken by that terrible disease which not only ruined a life but threw the entire question of succession into doubt.

Most vividly of all, he remembered the look of disappointment on her face when he ran away from their estate home for the last time to join up with the Green Mountain Boys.

"And what does she want? Last I heard the Concordat was doing fine." Ian asked.

"She wants you to go back, sir. The Taurian Concordat may seem fine from the outside, but everybody knows better. Grover Shraplen is no more than a power hungry dictator willing to pay Taurian lives to maintain the so-called Trinity Alliance. He let our troops die for the goals of a Liao! Who has given us nothing but peanuts in return!" Benny spat. "Yeah, yeah, we are now a Star League member state, but it doesn't mean anything. Not with the blood of our citizens dying in some war that was supposed to be other people's business. As if the SLDF will defend us if war comes. Like what happened to the St Ives Compact and the Federated Commonwealth? Hah!" Benny paused for a while, trying to regain his breath.

Benny continued in a much calmer tone. "Lady Janice wants you to go back to Taurus. She says there are a lot of important matters to discuss, not least of which is the possible removal of Grover Shraplen as Protector." Ian's mind was racing as he replied, "You're talking treason."

Benny laughed. "Treason? Not really, provided we can get the people behind us. Your sister wasn't the only one plotting in the background. There're a few others, I think, though I don't know who they are. Everybody's getting tired of Grover and his fear of the Davion bogeyman, plus his refusal to name your nephew Erik as regent ticked off a lot of people. Your sister sent me to find you, before any of Grover's goons could get to you."

"You think he might be sending out assassins to remove threats to his power?"

"Who knows? The death of Felix's son Richard was already suspicious enough. Lady Janice didn't want to take any risks, so she sent me to look for you. It wasn't easy, as you no doubt know. You threw up one heck of a twisted trail for me to follow."

Ian grinned ruefully. "Sorry, but I was trying to get as far away from my past as possible."

"It has caught up with you now. Listen, Major, you might be more important than you know. You don't have to fight."

"My men will be out there, Captain Greaves. As their commander, I must be with them. It is a matter of leadership, of honor. Furthermore, we need every jock we can scrape up for the coming battle. The odds aren't very good, and there might not be a second chance if we mess this one up."

"You could lead them equally well from the command center."

"It's not the same. How can I ask my men to take risks that I'm not willing to take myself? I've always believed in leadership by example. That's not going to change. Especially now."

Benny sighed. "I can't convince you, can I?"

"No, you can't. But I can promise you that I'll live through this, and then we'll go to Taurus. If my sister really needs my help, then I had better go back. I'm tired of running away, and besides, I haven't been home for a long time." Ian straightened himself, and pushed himself off the wall. "Let's go, Benny. Time's a-wasting."

"Yes sir."

Securing a laser pistol to a holster on her hip, Daniela Mattlov looked at her troops in the area just outside the changing rooms, all of them standing ready at attention to move out to the briefing area together.

She smiled inwardly at the commotion caused when she had wandered into the Lancer's changing room. She truly did not realize that her stripping naked would have so distressed the mercenaries. Even after living for years in the Jade Falcon Occupation Zones, her limited contact with the lower castes of the civilian population had not prepared her for their strange rules and customs.

She savored the look on Ian Dorlacen's face as his hungry eyes ate up every inch of her body before he snapped himself back to awareness. He made her put her clothes back on and ushered her to the female dressing rooms, much to the dismay of his men.

As she thought about it, she was also mystified by her own feelings whenever she was around the mercenary commander. She knew she was attracted to him, but for some strange reason she did not dare to just walk up to him and ask for a coupling session.

She angrily shifted the focus of her thoughts as she realized that her troops were fully prepared, and waiting for her to lead them out.

*There will be time for this later, she hoped.*

Deserk and Descartin were securing their own cooling vests, while Yoshino Ihara polished his samurai blade almost lovingly with a fine cloth. Yoshino had already changed into his cooling combat suit, obtained from the DCMS when he had graduated from Sun Zhang, and held on stubbornly during his time in the clans.

"I vaguely remember our brawl so many years ago with that old pig sticker. You're not really thinking of bring it into your cockpit, are you?" Deserk asked the former Kurita.

"I am. Is there a problem?"

"Uh, wouldn't a pistol of something that could do some real damage be better? Besides, what could it do to a mech, or even a *Spidercrab*?"

"I won't be too sure of that, Deserk. I have seen that old 'pig sticker' slice through mech grade armor." Descartin said.

"You have to be kidding me."

"He is not. Star Captain Des has seen the capabilities of this katana firsthand. And it has even saved your life once, has it not, Star Captain?" Yoshino added.

"Aff. I will never forget the surprise on my elemental opponent's face when he found that it took only one swipe from your ancient sword to break his." Des laughed lightly. "It was in my Trial of Bloodright. I won, of course."

"Ancient? How old is it, Yoshino?"

"This blade is my family heirloom. It is seven centuries old." Yoshino said proudly.

"Incredible." Deserk breathed. "I am sorry for disrespecting such a sacred weapon. I hope it will continue to serve you well in the future." He bowed to Yoshino in respect.

Yoshino returned the bow, holding it just as long as Deserk had. As he straightened up, Descartin clapped them both on the shoulders.

"And I am glad that both of you are here. I had not expected to see you here, Deserk, and I am thankful to the fates for bringing us together to fight alongside each other once more just like when we were in the sibko. Yoshino, you

are the best companion any warrior can ever ask for. Although I have said before that you are free to leave whenever you want, I would be lying if I said I would not miss your skill.” Descartin grinned. “Together, we will not fail.”

He noticed Deserk kissing a piece of paper. “What are you doing?”

Deserk flashed them a look at the piece of paper, which turned out to be a photograph of a woman. “My wife. For good luck.” He tucked it into a side pocket of his vest.

“You must love her very dearly.” Yoshino commented.

“Aff. She was the one who helped me get used to life in the Dragoons. I don’t know where I would have been without her.”

“I envy you.”

“Why?” Deserk was puzzled.

“Because you got to choose your own doom.”

“Choose my own doom? You think marriage to be worse than death?” Deserk asked skeptically as his eyes seemed to bore deeply into Yoshino.

The warrior shifted uneasily under his gaze. “Okay, okay, I’ll say it out now. Des, I never told you this, because it didn’t seem to matter, but one reason for my not going back to the Draconis Combine was uh, because there’s an arranged marriage waiting for me.”

The other two trueborn warriors stared at him for a moment, before breaking up into laughter.

“Hey, that’s not funny. This is my future I’m talking about!” Yoshino protested.

“By the Kerenskys, I thought you followed me solely out of loyalty. Turns out you have personal reasons for not going back after all!” Des was clutching his sides, in a bit of pain from his laughing because of his prior injuries.

Deserk shook his head in mock disappointment, chiding Yoshino gently. “My friend, what is there to be afraid of? After all, you can always break off the arrangement...”

“I can’t! That’s the problem! Her family has blood ties to the Kuritas, so they outrank mine. If I go back, her parents call the shots. And I do not even know what she looks like! And I still have return one day to fulfill my vendetta!”

“Well, it is certainly one problem for the future.” Des said. “How about this? We’ll probably be going to Outreach after this campaign. We can settle it there. I hope.” There was a mischievous grin on Des’ face, which made Yoshino groan.

Deserk checked his watch. “Time’s getting late.” Deserk swept one arm out to the door theatrically. “Shall we? The enemy awaits.”

Frank had changed into his mechwarrior attire, and was walking along a corridor to the repair bays, which would also serve as the briefing area. The corridor was packed with warriors making their way to the bays, many in their combat wear. His arms and legs felt cold, as the mechwarrior vest covered only his torso, unlike the Kurita mechwarrior cooling suit which afforded the entire coverage of the body. Only the bandages on his arm gave him some degree of warmth in the corridor.

For a moment, Frank was envious of Yoshino Ihara and the few other former DCMS soldiers for having such a valuable piece of technology. Not even the clans had such equipment.

*Maybe I should ask Lorik about installing a heating system in here,* he mused.

Pushing down that thought, Frank emerged from the corridor into the vast repair bay, where a good number of warriors had already gathered. He made his way to the front, where a makeshift podium had been set up.

He spotted Ian Dorlacen and Benny Greaves, as well as a number of other commanders already standing there. Lizabet Danforth was conferring with a few of her officers, while Descartin Winters and Deserk were approaching from another tunnel. Some Elementals were already suited up in their battlearmor, lacking only the head armor section, and lounging near the Falcons.

“Attention, all personnel!” Ian picked up a loudspeaker placed on the podium. “This is your final briefing before the battle.”

The low level noise within the bay suddenly ceased, as everybody turned to face the podium.

“Many of you already know that there’re too many enemy mechs for us to destroy without taking significant losses. Some of you might even know that there is an enemy warship parked in orbit that can wipe us and this planet off the face of the universe. We can’t get off, and we can’t hide for too long. So we strike back.”

“And there are plenty of ways for us to strike back.”

“First phase of the plan will be for the two Jade Falcon warships, commanded by Star Commodore Valten Folkner, to engage the enemy warship. The battle will be quickly joined by Star Commander Galietra Binneti and his aerojocks in their new fighters.”

“However, even with the new fighters, it is unlikely that we will be able to destroy the enemy aerospace forces. Therefore, we will next deploy ten naval batteries situated all over the planet. Their positions are chosen such that at least one cannon can target the enemy warship in orbit at all times.”

“This brings us to another problem. With the deployment of the cannons, the black mechs will be able to infiltrate into the base. Therefore, the cannons must be defended by ground troops.”

“Each cannon will be defended by approximately a battalion of troops. Hopefully, the enemy warship will be destroyed before our ground forces are overwhelmed. Each of you will report to your commanders, who have already

been informed of who to report to. Individual warriors without units will be held as a reserve pool to be assigned to hot spots after our initial deployment. They will report to the command center.”

Ian paused. “I will now pass the speaker to Frank Meronac, who will be the overall commander for this battle.”

As he passed the loudspeaker to Frank, Frank was shocked. “Ian, are you kidding? I only agreed to the post when we opened the doors. Wouldn’t Lizabet Danforth or even yourself be better?”

“I’m not kidding. The majority of folks here are merc, and they’ll not listen to a clanner. As for me, I think you can adapt more easily to new situations than me, which is exactly what we need for this battle. Who knows what the bad guys might come up with next?”

“I’m not sure about that...”

“You know I’m right, so just accept this honor.” Ian smiled confidently.

Frank took a deep breath. “All right. Thanks for the vote of confidence.” He took the loudspeaker, and climbed nervously to the podium stage.

He stood there for a while, trying to think of what to say. A pep talk? Or some grim statement of intent? And for what purpose?

He regretted not taking up that public speech course that was so popular at the NAIS for young nobles. Not being of noble birth himself, he had never thought of the usefulness of being able to speak in public. *How would I have known?*

He started tentatively. “Uh, hello. I’m Frank Meronac, uh, the overall commander, temporary of course, for this battle. I’m new at this, I mean the speech part, so please don’t get offended.” He sneaked a quick glance at Deserk, who shook his head and grimaced at Frank’s opening. Frank winced visibly at Deserk’s action.

*Damn, what am I going to say?* Frank found himself sweating profusely. *Okay, here goes nothing.*

He cleared his throat, and said, “All of you came here to seek a fortune and your future from the ruins of the Star League. Mercenary or Jade Falcon, you thought of a boring search of an abandoned world, and at worst returning with empty hands. Even after the Falcons arrived, we thought only of fighting each other in battles where we still knew, more or less, what to expect from each other.”

“No more of that now. We are facing enemies which have wiped out an entire civilization, who do not take prisoners, with weapons and numbers beyond our worst nightmares. They want nothing more than our total extinction.”

Frank waited a moment for the severity of his last sentence to sink in. “The stakes have never been higher. They have more forces waiting amongst the cosmos, looking for more worlds to conquer, more people to destroy. And they might already be on their way to the Inner Sphere. They will destroy and enslave all the nations of humanity, no matter what they are. The only people who know this are all here, on this world, in this base. We must get the word out, spread the technology and science we have found here. We need to warn humanity, all of humanity, not just a few factions, of the coming threat, and the very first step to accomplishing it would be to win this battle.”

His voice grew in strength and passion, as he tried to reach out to the hearts and minds of the warriors listening. “No longer should we see ourselves as Fedcom, Jade Falcon, Capellan, merc, or some other division that splinters our unity. We will need to put aside our differences, for it is our very existence as a people, as a species, that is threatened. No more should you think of yourself as just a Lyran or a Feddie. God knows how much grief that had brought us for the past five years.” Frank rolled his eyes.

“It is time for a *new world order*, one in which people can accept one another for what they are, without trying to impose their views on each other!”

“When you go out there and fight, don’t think of the freebirth surat or the vat-born clansman who is covering your flank to be only a temporary ally. Think of him or her as a fellow human being, with their own hopes, their own dreams, their own fears. Deep down, no matter where we are born, or how we came to be here, we are the same. We all want the freedoms to do with our lives as we wish. We all want food, shelter, and a comforting hand when we are down. These are what make us human, so let them be our source of strength!”

“When historians look back on this historic battle, let them marvel at our resilience, our willingness to adapt, and our courage. So go out there, and fight like you’ve always wanted to, because humanity deserves, and *needs*, nothing less than your very best!” Frank lowered the loudspeaker, drained from his speech. There was no reaction for a while, as silence reigned in the repair bay. He saw more than a few warriors looking stunned.

*Maybe I laid it on a bit too thickly.* Frank was about to jump down the stage when he heard the strong sound of clapping. Descartin Winters and his troop, the Lancers, the merc units who had entered the base first, and even some of the Falcons were putting their hands together in enthusiasm, their faces strong and proud.

Before he knew it, the bay erupted into cheers, as the warriors roared their support. Their support washed over him like a physical force, uplifting his mind, body and soul.

Frank raised the speaker to his lips solemnly. “Warriors of Humanity, move out.”

Almost immediately, the crowd began to disperse, the warriors running for their machines, their morale high after Frank’s speech. He leapt down from the podium, and prepared to head for his own *Night Gyr*, when he noticed a familiar face in elemental battlearmor.

“Lorik, what the heck are you doing in *that*?” Frank exclaimed.

The scientist turned around at Frank’s voice, looking like an oversized knight in armor. “Ah, Frank, good speech there. The best I have ever heard, though the value of my opinion is dubious since that *is* the only before-battle speech I have ever heard in my life.”

“No, no, what I mean is, what are you doing in battlearmor?”

“One of Drenner’s men got injured during the rescue of the Falcons. The suit was fixed up, but since there was no spare trained operator around, I asked Major Ian if I could use it. Naturally, he agreed. Before you protest, may I add that I am fully versed in all aspects of battlearmor combat. I chose to forgo my Trial of Position because I was too interested in science. That did not mean I was not good enough to be a warrior.”

“But, but...”

“We need every warrior for the battle. And since there is a spare suit, and there is me, I decided to give you real warriors a hand. What’s the problem?”

Frank acquiesced. “All right, you win. Just make sure you preserve your butt, because we still need you to make sense of the data and the science. Not that we can’t get someone else, well, you get the idea.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be back.” Lorik grinned, then hurried to catch up with the band of elementals moving to a rack to don the bulky head armor, his heavy armor making loud ‘clump, clump’ sounds on the floor as he walked off.

“I certainly hope so.” Frank whispered to himself.

“Frank Meronac.” He turned at the calling of his name, only to see Hamirah Rasouf in a cooling vest.

“No matter what you might have done in the past for the civil war, I now know it is all over. We have all done things we regretted in that conflict, and I am sorry I did not take my defeat well. I have finally come to an understanding. I may not support what you did, but as long as you treat my unit fairly, I am willing to accept you as commander.”

Frank was elated. “So that means your *Stalker* will be taking part in the fight?”

“Yes. These are my troops after all, and my place is at their head, and nowhere else.”

“Get going then, and thanks for the support.” Frank saluted formally, which was returned in kind by Captain Rasouf.

*Things are looking up.* The change of heart by Captain Rasouf was an encouraging sign. Frank figured they need all the breaks they could get.

Frank finally climbed into his *Night Gyr* and began the start up sequence. He then contacted the command center by pressing a button on his right.

“Command Center, this is Raider Lead.” The nomenclature for the various units had already been assigned beforehand. His assumption of command did not change that.

“Send the message to Star Commodore Valten Folkner to start his attack in five minutes. Send up our aerojocks as per the plan, fifteen minutes after the Falcons start accelerating for the enemy. Also, inform Captain Helene Rice to start their jump in twenty minutes.”

“Roger,” the reply came.

As he was talking to the commtech, Frank was busy flipping switches, sticking on medical monitor patches, and attaching the coolant cable from his vest to a jack on the left of his command couch. He savored the chill caused by the coolant as it started to circulate within the vest. He knew that would not last.

Frank drew out his neurohelmet from a compartment behind his head, settling it down snugly around his head, on the padded collars of his cooling vest. He adjusted it to get the best fit for the receptors on the helmet interior, then secured the helmet by using the Velcro fasteners. He stuck more medical patches to a plate near his throat, and closed the chinstrap.

Pressing another button on the console started the identification sequence. A computer generated voice barked out, “The Flaming Gyr 007 is online. Please identify yourself, or I’ll shoot you out of my anus.”

Frank grinned. It had been the custom by the Raider techs to insert some levity into every machine they have. All the original identification initial startup sequences had been modified in a similar manner, with anal and crass jokes the most popular.

He answered, “Frank Meronac.”

“Your voice matches my records. Please wait impatiently...”

After ten seconds, the voice of the computer came back on, “You have to complete this initiation sequence, or I will self implode in despair and pity.”

“It’s quiet now, but not for long.”

“Phrase confirmed. You have full control. Damn shame about it too, coz I could have enjoyed a few more moments of vaginal penetration.” *God, I hope the techs don’t ever decided to cook up an AI for this mech, or it’ll be the rudest in existence.*

Frank waited for the software to confirm the hardware configuration of the omnimechs before the power was fed to the weapons. After that was done, he began to work the foot pedals, as well as pushing his throttle forward, bringing the *Night Gyr* out of its bay, the long coolant tube detaching from the mech’s rear as it walked out and into the corridor, joining the line of Raider mechs and other vehicles marching in line to the respective rail shuttles that would transport them to their assigned locations, following the routes markings on his map.

*System Einstein, Deep Periphery*

*System Transit*

*Warship Blue Aerie*

“Star Commodore, we have just received the signal to commence our attack.” A commtech reported to Valten Folkner, strapped in snugly in his command seat.

He asked, "Is it verified?"

"Aff, it is in authenticated code."

"Very well." Valten swiveled his chair around to face his helmsman. "Helm, 80% thrust. All gunners, standby. Fighter control, launch fighters in ten minutes. All ships in wedge formation."

"Aff, Star Commodore." His men hastened to their tasks, as a steady pull was quickly felt by the entire bridge. The massive warship was accelerating, with its sister ship *White Aerie* beside it, and a horde of lesser dropships swarming behind. It was an impressive sight for any observer.

Valten knew it would not be enough to defeat the enemy ship. The two warships were still carrying wounds from the last fight, and many of the dropships had yet to be repaired. They needed the additional ground to orbit support, as well as a surprise Lizabet Danforth had promised him. He only wished he knew what she meant by that. He cursed under his breath. He had half a mind to order one of the jumpships holding position at the nadir jump point to go back to the occupation zone in case they lost the battle. However, the information he had received on the enemy warship had suggested that it would be useless to do so, because if they failed, then the enemy warship would be able to chase the jumpship down anyway.

The full story as related to him by Daniela Mattlov and Lizabet Danforth had him shocked at first. Aliens, civilization destroyers, advanced jump capability, etc. He remembered feeling a bit lost as they threw a whole load of information at him all of a sudden, and then poring over the data for hours trying to make sense out of them. In the end, he had managed to glean enough information about the enemy warship to know exactly what was needed to defeat it.

It had defensive shields, everybody knew that now. An energy shield capable of blocking projectile and energy weapons of all categories. Backing up the shields further was something called a shield hardening device, which would boost the shield regeneration rate and reduce the damage from shield piercing direct fire weapons, or whatever they are. Even so, Valten wished he had some of those shield piercing weapons, which would even up the odds greatly, considering the weak armor plating of the ship. He had lost his temper when he had realized that he had the alien warship almost crippled in the last fight.

*If only I had pressed the attack for two more minutes!* The thought ran constantly in his head for the last few hours. If he had done so, they would not be in such a predicament, and the aliens would have been no more than a side note in the eventual Falcon victory.

Things had not turned out that way though, and all he had to show for the previous battle were two badly damaged warships, dozens of dead pilots, and several destroyed dropships.

The enemy warship, in stark contrast, was back to peak efficiency, if reports from the base concerning its self-repairing abilities were correct.

Nevertheless, Valten Folkner was a Jade Falcon, and he would never admit total defeat while he could still fight. His men were much of the same mind, and even some of the Inner Sphere dropships which had joined them were eager to rescue their comrades.

"Star Commodore, enemy warship will be within firing range in ten minutes!"

He acknowledged the report. "Aff. Continue on course."

*Einstein, Deep Periphery*

*Copernicus Caldera*

*Planck's Quantum Hole*

Squeezed into the cockpit of his *Seraph*, Galietra Binneti was feeling rather apprehensive as he taxied the fighter to the launch bay.

True to his word, Frank Meronac had gotten the techs to fix up the fighters for human use. Gal and his men had spent a lot of time trying to get themselves familiarized with the weapons systems, which were quite different from human ones, using the flight simulators.

Problem was, they had no way of approximating the effects of the exotic alien technology with human combat scales. In the end, he had to concede that they would have better off sleeping through the last few hours.

There was a 'slicer' cannon which fired a continuous plasma beam, and another called a phaser, which was akin to a laser except for its vastly superior energy output. His craft carried a pair of both weapons in the wings, while the nose packed more weaponry in the form of quad mass drivers, which were described to him as smaller and more efficient gauss rifles.

There were also two score of missile racks placed above the fuselage, capable of firing a deadly swarm of high velocity missiles with the range of LRMs and the damage profile of SRMs, coupled to an integrated image recognition targeting system. Unfortunately for their ground troops, the missiles could only work in space. The specifications for the fighter had indicated that the launchers could fire 15 salvos before running out.

Last of all, there was the single heavy missile capable of puncturing through the enemy shield, though it required the launching unit to maintain a straight line to the target ship for a certain amount of time for the missile systems to figure out the shield frequency pattern in order for the penetration device to kick in. The 'torpedo', as the techs had dubbed the special missile, was slung under the belly of the fighter.

*Seraph*, the Inner Sphere pilots had named the fighter, after they had tired of just calling it 'the alien fighter'. In the end, everybody had accepted the name, and some techs had even painted out angels on the fighters, wings and all, decked out with swords and shotguns, in a show of artistry.

Gal had thought their efforts a waste of time, but he did appreciate their dedication at getting the fighters to work with human interface systems. Even so, they had warned him and his pilots that the connections were not fully reliable, and could fail at any moment, due to inadequate testing. They said they needed more time to work out the bugs in the system, but circumstance had forced them to deploy the fighters regardless of any problems that still existed. What that meant was something Gal did not want his mind to dwell on.

As the engine beneath his cockpit throbbed with life, he was reminded of the sheer technological advantage the aliens had conferred on them. The quantum engine was capable of pushing 30Gs, an incomprehensible level of acceleration which could instantly crush a human body.

Except that they had another nifty piece of tech called inertial compensators, which could counteract the G-forces. Evidently, the aliens were as vulnerable to physical forces as human beings.

There was a dial set up near the pilot seat to control the amount of compensation. Some pilots had advised setting it to about 98 or 99%, which would still leave the pilot with a 'feel' of the *Seraph* in movement, instead of blocking out the G-forces completely. Gal had agreed, though he knew some idiots who had turned their compensators to the max.

Due to the special properties of the quantum engine, the principles of which Lorik was still trying to understand, the *Seraph* could also remain indefinitely in combat without any fuel dependence, making it the ultimate endurance fighter.

*Not just that, but the ultimate combat fighter*, Gal admitted to himself. There was nothing in humanity's arsenals that could have matched up to the *Seraph* in terms of speed, firepower, or defensive strength. Which brought him to thinking about the defensive items on the *Seraph*.

The fighter was covered with an extremely dense material they called 'neutronium', which Lorik had described as "basically like the surface of a neutron star, but thankfully not as dense, and gravitic effects are counteracted by anti-gravity devices embedded in the hull". Which still left Gal with no idea of what exactly the material was.

And before the armor could even be touched, attacks would have to go through the much lauded shield defense system, which enclosed the entire fighter in an energy shell which could absorb what seemed to Gal to be obscene amounts of damage before going down.

Another feature for Gal to be happy about was the lack of overheating in the fighter. Instead of heat problems, Gal had to contend with energy generation ones. The massive amounts of energy demanded by the weapons, thrust engine, and shields meant that he had to carry out a precarious juggling act between the energy allocation to the various systems for maximum effectiveness.

Each *Seraph* was 75 tons, a remarkable weight for the sheer amount of firepower and armor it packed. The ejection mechanism consisted of a detachable escape pod from the entire fighter, complete with its own small propulsion and life support systems capable of lasting for up to 48 hours.

As he taxied the fighter to the launch pad, which would tilt the fighter towards the skies, Galietra reviewed his assignment of the pilots for the coming battle.

He had tried as much as possible to pair up a strong pilot with a weak one, forming fifteen pairs of fighters. Seven pairs were assigned to one squadron, with one pair selected as the command pair for the squadron, and one member of the command pair being the officer in charge of the squadron. The last pair was his own, with him in overall command.

His wingman Trisha Sawyer was a rookie Inner Sphere pilot who was shot down early in the battles between the Falcons and the mercenaries and captured as a bondswoman. Gal had to push the young pilot hard during the simulator exercises to drill her in the proper dogfighting techniques, which she was sorely deficient in. Overall, teamwork drills and formation flying were largely neglected, due to the lack of sufficient simulators to work with.

Galietra could only hope that their lack of coordination would not hurt them later.

As the *Seraph* reached the area marked out by paint on the floor, Galietra halted his fighter. A low whirring sound preceded the raising of a patch of the floor behind the fighter, for it to brace against when tilted.

"Five minutes to launch." A tech called out over the communications set.

Gal nodded to himself, as he felt the fighter tilting upwards. Leaning back into his seat, Gal looked around the launch bay, and saw the same thing happening to all the other *Seraphs*.

The plan called for them to carry out a standard Combat Air Patrol, with the elimination of enemy fighters being their main task. With an estimated 400 enemy fighters still remaining, it would not be an easy task even with the *Seraphs* backing up the fighters from the Falcon warships.

A torpedo run was up to their own discretion, but Gal had the feeling that the longer lock times required practically mandated the removal of more enemy fighters before they could start any such run.

Gal was shaken out of his ruminations by the commtech. "Launch in two minutes!"

Taking the opportunity to recheck all his systems one more time, Gal also uttered a quick prayer to the Kerenskys for luck. Although Jade Falcons were rarely superstitious, and never did put their faith into the notions of chance and fortune, Gal was worried sufficiently by the imminent battle that he felt asking for a bit of divine intervention would not hurt.

"All units," the tech called out again. "Launching in twenty seconds!"

“Fifteen, fourteen, thirteen...”

Gal gripped his Hands-On-Stick-And-Throttle tightly with both hands.

“Twelve, eleven, ten, nine...”

He tried to blank his mind of all feeling, of all emotion, focusing only on the huge wall in front of him.

“Eight, seven, six, five...”

The walls before the Seraphs suddenly parted, giving them a good look at the bright sky beyond. There were few clouds, and Gal thought he could glimpse a look of the fusion flares from the arriving warships.

The tech was shouting out the countdown. “FOUR, THREE, TWO, ONE...”

*Here we go.*

“LAUNCH!”

Gal shoved his HOTAS forward. The *Seraph* shot forward into the sky instantaneously, sounding like an avenging banshee as it screamed into the skies. Gal had thought himself prepared for the acceleration of the *Seraph*, but it still amazed him to realize the sheer speed of his flight.

He did not need to check his screens to know that 29 other identical fighters were right alongside him as they dashed into space, gradually forming up into an attack pattern with Gal in the lead.

As they left the planetary atmosphere, Gal could see the enemy warship moving towards two *Black-Lion* warships, while a whole wave of black fighters headed towards him. He brushed his triggers lightly with his fingertips, eager to do some hunting.

The machine intelligence was not at all prepared for the sudden appearance of the new fighters, packing advanced technology that could only be the work of the Qlictorio. It quickly accessed the situation, and it came to a distressing conclusion.

The flesh beings had managed to recover and utilize some of the technology left behind in the base.

Its drones had enough trouble fighting against the flesh beings with their present tech levels. With the advanced weaponry now available to them, the machine intelligence’s task would be even more difficult.

Thankfully, it had two more sets of reserved special drones, one of fighters and one of mechs. It had wanted to hold them in reserve until absolutely required, and the present situation certainly looked like it needed something to tilt the balance back towards its drones.

It commanded its command vessel to depart the sea in which it had hidden for eons. As the craft broke through the surface, fighter bay doors opened in the hull.

Fifty night-black fighters, sleek and deadly, blazed out of the doors, angling up towards the raging space battle.

“Tell the *Bayer* to scatter its explosives now! Helm, hold steady! All gunners, continue to fire at will!” Valten clasped the edge of his seat tightly as the conflict unfolded before him.

His fleet had bored in straight at the enemy warship, with the *White Aerie* taking point in front of the *Blue Aerie* as they closed in. The *White Aerie* had turned quickly to present its undamaged starboard flank to the enemy, while the *Blue Aerie*, still lacking armor on both sides, engaged at long range, using the *White Aerie* as a shield to block incoming blows. Valten had the *Blue Aerie* delivering one broadside after another at the alien ship, hammering away at its shields.

They were concentrating fire as much as possible on the enemy warship, but it kept shifting about, causing them to fire on the stronger shield sections instead of the weaker ones.

Valten had countered by sending his dropships in an enveloping movement, while using them to seed the areas around the warship with lifeboats packed with remote controlled explosives. He intended to direct the lifeboats towards certain weakened shield sections once there were enough of them scattered in any one area.

The entry of Galietra Binneti’s aerospace squadron was the most surprising, and the most welcome. They had torn into the enemy fighters with a vengeance, swiping away the drones harassing his dropships with considerable ease. Valten almost wished he was a simple pilot again, flying one of those awesome *Seraph* fighters.

The bridge trembled as an enemy fighter claimed a piece of armor near their position before a *Seraph* swung in and blasted it out of existence.

Valten was furious. “Tell Star Commander Pendiv to keep those stragglers away from our bridge!” Warship fighter cover was supposed to be the responsibility of Pendiv’s aerospace star, while Galietra Binneti’s squadron already had its hands full trimming down the enemy fighter population.

He added, “I do not want a Radstadt to happen to us!”

Everybody picked up on that. Free Rasalhague Republic pilot Tyra Miraborg had slain ilKhan Leo Showers by ramming her fighter into the *Dire Wolf*’s bridge during the Battle of Radstadt, and earned eternal fame and even several lines in the Remembrance for her courage. Nobody wanted that to happen here.

“Sir,” The radar operator yelled, “picking up more contacts approaching from the planet!”

Galietra Binneti pushed his throttle forward as he picked off the fighter that had been attempting to shoot at the bridge of the *Blue Aerie*.

Swinging away from the massive *Black Lion*, he veered back into the thick of the action, firing his plasma slicers and phasers all the while, claiming two more black fighters. His wingman Trisha kept her fighter close, ready to support him if he ran into trouble.

Their initial strike had been an unqualified success. The enemy fighters had been sent reeling by the firepower of the *Seraphs*, and together the human fighters had destroyed almost a third of the enemy fighter strength.

But there had been losses as well. Three *Seraphs* had been destroyed by enemy fire due to interface problems, as the pilots suddenly lost control of their craft in the midst of combat, while another two had been downed by overwhelming firepower from the enemy fighters.

His communications set suddenly crackled. "Seraph Lead, this is Command! We are picking up enemy fighter contacts from an enemy atmospheric cruiser. Ally thinks they are probably advanced enemy fighters, with shields and heavy weaponry!"

*Freebirth! Still, we have been warned of such a possible move by the enemy.*

"Aff." He replied. "All *Seraphs*, regroup and form up on me!"

He pushed his HOTAS to the upper right hand corner, sending the *Seraph* into a corkscrew towards the incoming enemy fighters. The other surviving members of his squadron followed him out of the swirling melee.

Gal hoped the other human fighters would be able to handle the black fighters on their own, while his own unit dueled with the newcomers.

He spoke to his squadron. "Watch out, people! These are advanced fighters, and probably on par with our own. Cover each other as much as possible, and focus on staying alive. And no matter what, stick to your wingman!"

"Here they come!" Peggy called out unnecessarily as the black dots came into view.

The two fighter groups fired at extreme ranges simultaneously. Gal decided not to hold back any more, and unleashed the missiles he had been hoarding since the start of the battle.

It was the right decision. His direct fire weapons slammed uselessly into the forward shields of the enemy fighter he had targeted, but his missiles managed to crash through the weakened shields, killing the fighter as they destroyed the front section of the craft.

Before it died, the fighter replied with its own weaponry, a combination of phasers and missiles which reduced his own shield protection by more than 80%.

Gal twisted his *Seraph* away as a second wave of black fighters appeared, trying to protect his forward section from being denuded by further attacks, as the charge dissolved into a wild dogfight.

He found himself covering Trisha as she went after a black fighter, hammering away at its aft shields with her mass drivers firing one after another, using the sheer volume of fire to compensate for her poor accuracy. Flashes of blue energy around the black fighter greeted every one of her attacks that connected, while his own sensors indicated that she was close to punching through the shields soon.

"Trisha, break hard left!" He yelled as he spied two black fighters approaching from 9 o'clock position. She reacted immediately, her *Seraph* turning away into the enemy position and taking them by surprise as Gal opened up with his own guns on the flank of one of the enemy fighters.

He failed to punch through the shields this time, but he managed to swing around on the black fighter's rear, with Trisha covering him his back and returning the favor.

As they fought, Gal realized that the presence of the shields had changed the complexion of the battle completely. The regenerative nature of shields meant that ships could recover effectiveness after a period of time, and this led to longer dogfights.

The cooperation between the human pilots was proving to be crucial, as they were able to ask one another for cover once their own shields were down. Gal could count fifteen enemy fighters down, while he had lost only five more *Seraphs*, to both equipment failures and enemy fighters. It was very tough going, and he doubted they would be able to make any more contribution to the ongoing warship battle until they had eliminated the advanced fighters first.

As he broke off his pursuit of the black fighter on another warning from Trisha, he spied a series of flashes off to his port side.

Forsen Mandela's jumpships had arrived.

Captain Helene Rice wiped the sweat off her face as the crew of the *Sevoto* struggled to bring the jumpship around to bring its thrusters to bear on the enemy warship. She looked around the view screen to see the other two jumpships that had followed them trying to do the same. The *Tayo* had remained behind as its jump drive had been damaged in the earlier jump into the asteroid field.

Conventional spacecraft piloting rules dictated that the operators keep the vessel's drive venturis well clear of any other ship or facility, as the hydrogen ion exhaust from the primary thrusters could inflict quite a bit of damage. The rules were all thrown out of the airlock now. That crazy clanner Valten Folkner wanted to use her jumpships as the biggest goddamned PPCs in the galaxy!

*Star Commodore indeed*, she thought. Weren't clanners, especially Jade Falcons, sticklers for rules? The order from Forsen Mandela for her to jump in with her jumpships to act as 'fire support' for the Jade Falcons had been last and greatest surprise in a journey fraught with unpleasant surprises.

*Wait for my order*, the Falcon had commanded. Until then, they were to hang back and simply watch the battle in progress.

She prayed for the enemy to continue ignoring her small fleet, which they were doing thus far in favor of the more dangerous dropships and warships. Of course, that was only because her ships did not pose any threat. *Yet*.

Then a series of jump flashes signaled the arrival of the other jumpships, which had been captured by the Falcons when they had just arrived in the system. Helene could only sympathize with the other jumpship operators, who had been forced by the Valten Folkner into his harebrained scheme.

“Star Commodore, the *White Aerie* reports that they have lost all starboard armor!”

“*White Aerie* to pull back! Helm, 20% thrust! Tell all damage control crews to prepare for weapons damage!”

The drive thrusters of the *Blue Aerie* flared, as the ship started to move forward again, closing in with the enemy warship while the *White Aerie* backed away. Valten could see the terrible scars the enemy warship had wrought on the *White Aerie*, gaping holes where armor plate once existed, the melted and reformed twisted alloy forming crazed patterns along the hull. A huge piece of half solidified Harjel floated past his bridge, testament to the ferocity of the battle.

All three ships were flinging tremendous amounts of firepower at each other, a virtual light show in space as bright volleys of light erupted from the enemy warship, replied by multi-ton missile swarms and autocannon slugs, only for them to impact futilely on the shields, causing ripples of blue energy as the kinetic energy of the human weapons was dissipated and reflected back into space. Meanwhile the space around them swirled with masses of fightercraft, seeking a way to tip the balance once and for all.

All to no avail, as the alien ship now hung with the crippled *Black Lion*, pouring laser fire into the exposed superstructure of the ship. Ominous buds of orange were seen blossoming within the interior of the *White Aerie*, and Valten began to fear the worst.

“Sir, *White Aerie* is suffering internal damage! Her captain estimates another ten minutes before she blows!”

Valten swore bitterly. The arrival of the new enemy fighters that had drawn away Galietra Binneti’s squadron had been the crucial factor. He really needed the ground fire support now, as the movement of the enemy warship had the merchant jumpships scrambling to readjust their own positions. He also did not want to use the explosive lifeboats so soon, but he could see little choice if the present situation continued.

He had lost three more dropships already, while the human fighter forces had been pared down to just three and a half stars remaining, against just slightly more than a hundred left for the enemy fighters, not counting the advanced fighters still slugging it out. If the *White Aerie* was destroyed, it would become nearly impossible for them to destroy the enemy warship.

But there were some good news. From all indications, the ground units had already been formed up and were holding off the enemy drones, but the surface-to-orbit cannons still needed some time to deploy and power up their energy reactors.

“Helm, port turn 60 degrees, and then 50% thrust!” He ordered. “Move between the *White Aerie* and the enemy warship! Cut the engines once we are in position! All gunners, fire as you bear!”

His choice of maneuver could only prolong the *White Aerie*’s agony, but he would do his best to keep both *Black Lions* in the game for as long as possible.

*Come on, his mind urged the ground batteries, hurry up.*

### *Einstein, Deep Periphery Orbital Cannon Site A*

Frank checked his radar screen nervously as his combined forces battalion, designated Battlegroup A, took up defensive positions around the orbital cannon.

The Raiders were short one lance due to Bryan’s lance having been assigned to message duty. Descartin Winters and his small unit had taken up the slack, giving them a force of eleven mechs to work with.

Also present were the Death Dancers, a mixed *Partisan*, *Patton*, and *Vedette* tank company. Having lost a few units during the rescue of the Falcons, the company had been restored back to full strength by the surviving *Brutus* tanks and SRM missile carriers off the *Nile*, and were now more accurately a reinforced tank company. The tankers covered one flank of the facility, while his mechs guarded the other.

Last but not least was an infantry company, the 5<sup>th</sup> Firemouths. While Frank didn’t think they would be very useful in the battle ahead, they served an important purpose in holding the weapon facility in case of *Spidercrab* drone attacks. Even better was the fact that one platoon was anti-mech trained, though Frank privately hoped that their skills would not come into use. They held positions in and around the facility itself.

The cannon took the shape of a massive nondescript artillery barrel 15 meters wide and 40 meters long, sticking out into the sky and supported by several huge pylons. Below it was a building that housed a quantum reactor, which would provide the energy required to power the phaser weapon, as well as the machinery for producing the phaser beam itself.

Not only that, but the facility also possessed a directional shield that protected the cannon itself from orbital strikes. However, the protection of the shield did not extend to ground level. Which made ground defense of paramount importance.

Not for the first time, Frank wondered at the intelligence of the alien creators when he found out that they could only start up the power source *after* the facility had deployed to the ground from its hole, and that it would take about ten minutes for them to spool up the engine and get the weapon ready to fire.

*That's so stupid! The whole point of orbital cannons are for them to be ready for firing once they deploy! Not to sit on the ground waiting for enemies to take them out!* Frank remembered thinking that when he found out about the setup procedure. His opinion had not changed.

"Contact! Bearing two-forty, in a large group of at least ten mechs!" Yoshino called from his *Nobori-Nin*. Frank was not going to let such a good opportunity to thin the enemy ranks pass him by. "Ten mechs aren't going to get past us. Let's get them!"

The entire company moved into line position, their extended range weapons already seeking targets eagerly. Frank had swapped out the ultra heavy autocannon in the *Night Gyr's* right arm for a gauss rifle, exchanging weapons with a Falcon warrior who wanted more short range punch for his *Masakari*. This gave him incredible long range punch when combined with his extended range large lasers.

Settling his sights over an advancing *Smasher*, he waited till he was absolutely sure of his shot before firing at the black mech, which was the SRM version. The large lasers boiled off armor all over the mech's upper body before he followed up with his gauss rifle. The energy capacitors of the weapon went to work, flinging a nickel iron ball the size of a melon into the air. The weakened torso armor did little to stop the gauss slug from penetrating to the interior and setting off the volatile ammunition stored there.

The massive explosion of the *Smasher's* death seemed to be the signal for the rest of the company to open up. ER PPCs and long range lasers dominated the field, as the human warriors made their range advantage count, hammering at the heavier enemy elements or those variants equipped with LRMs.

It did not take too long. It was a scant thirty seconds before Kety reported the last enemy mech destroyed, a lightweight *Ant*. Frank found himself strangely eager for more enemies to appear over the landscape, a taste for more combat on his tongue.

It was unsettling to him, to say the least.

He quickly checked his map feed, which was constantly updated with information from the main base's sensors. He already knew that there were two enemy groups of at least a fifty mechs each relatively near their position, but they were both in pursuit of other human forces which were trying to flee into the underground tunnels.

That had changed now. Both enemy groups were en route to the orbital cannon, judging by their movements of the last minute. One would be arriving in just two minutes time, while the other had an ETA of thirty minutes. *Shouldn't be a problem*, Frank thought. *Nine more minutes would have the orbital cannon up and shooting at the enemy warship up there.* They had gunners from the dropship crews assigned to the naval weapons, on the basis that there was not anybody else truly qualified for such work.

The other battlegroups were also doing quite well. Their sudden appearance had instilled a certain amount of panic in the enemy forces, as they struggled to cope with the wide dispersal of many of their units, spread out over the lands in the course of their fruitless chase of the human soldiers.

Ian Dorlacen and Daniela Mattlov had been assigned to Battlegroup B, another of the ad hoc groups formed when Descartin Winters and him had argued for mixed forces instead of the 'pure' compositions that Lizabet Danforth favored. Having warriors from both sides fight alongside each other would allow a much more homogenous mix of technology and manpower, with the advantage from clan tech and clan expertise being spread out evenly among all the battlegroups.

They were doing all right so far, but the battle upstairs was taking a decided turn for the worst. Frank feared the surface to orbit cannon might be deployed too late.

He was shaken out of his thoughts by the insistent beeping of a small red light to his left, indicating an urgent transmission from the main base. Pressing a button to his console, Frank prepared himself for what he was sure would be bad news, about the only time anyone would bother to send urgent messages.

He was not disappointed.

It was Pascal Thome. "Raider Lead, this is Command! I've got bad news!"

"I sorta figured that one out already." Frank replied sarcastically.

"No! Listen! This is really big trouble! Switch your sensor feed to check for atmospheric aerospace deployment on the planetary map."

Frank did so, and was surprised to see a fast moving blot heading towards them. It stuck out like a sore thumb from the other slow moving blots on the map. "What the heck is that? That's moving too fast for a saucer!"

He suddenly recalled a piece of data from the archives. "No wait, I remember now! That's probably a enemy fast deployment craft, normally used as command ships for the rest of the saucers."

"Right. And it's going to be right on top of you in about 4 minutes. Ally thinks, and we agree, that the fact that it lacks guns and armor could only mean that it's going to be dropping more mechs into your laps, because that's all it's good for."

Frank came to a rather ominous conclusion. *It's also not going to drop them anywhere else because its warship is also hanging right above us! It forces us to deploy the orbital gun, but by doing so, we have also allowed it to dictate the place of battle!*

"What's the expected loadout?" Frank hoped Pascal or Ally would know what mechs the enemy craft was carrying.

"No idea. Just be careful."

"Roger that. Keep an eye on the ship. When it gets near us, inform me ASAP."

"Wilco. Command out."

He switched to the tactical frequency, where he had plugged in his conversation with Pascal. "Everybody heard that?" A series of ayes answered him.

"Now let us concentrate on matters at hand! Mechs incoming!" Descartin yelled as the next group of ninety black mechs appeared on their scopes.

Frank did not take the time to settle into his shot, firing his gauss rifle and lasers simultaneously once the enemy machines came into range. He missed with the gauss, but managed to score with two laser shots on a *Lemming*, melting armor off the left arm and leg.

All around him, there was the dull roar of weapons fire as they flung everything they had at the enemy. PPCs, lasers, missiles and autocannons flashed out, as the first rank of the black mechs reeled from the destructive salvo. Even the tanks had entered the battle, taking up a good spot on the right flank of the enemy advance. They used their ranged weapons to good effect, and managed to draw off part of the enemy mech force, which Frank was extremely grateful for.

The *Partisans* and *Vedettes* engaged with their autocannons, the cluster rounds from the *Partisans* bursting among the black mechs, and the *Vedettes* chipping away with their ultra AC/5s. The *Patton* and *Brutus* tanks launched swarms of specialized Thunder LRMs into the ground to weaken the enemy advance, sowing a line of explosives and shrapnel along the path of attack.

It did little to halt the black mechs. An *Ant* sprayed its LRMs at him, the missiles blasting off a small fraction of the armor on the *Night Gyr*'s right arm. Frank ignored the hit, trying to identify and kill the heavier and more dangerous enemy mechs first.

There were too many mechs for them to keep at bay, and the black mechs, true to form, came on relentlessly, ignoring the damage they were taking as they closed in. The first ten black mechs went down, but there were more than enough left as they reached the limits of their own weapon ranges.

*The fact that we are defending a mole on the plains means that we can't use run and gun tactics!* Frank realized. *We have to hold a fixed defense line, and we can't budge because they're heading straight for the orbital cannon!*

Ally had already informed of the risks in using the cannons. Should the enemy manage to infiltrate their drones, namely the *Spidercrabs*, into the equipment, they would be able to override the commands from the base and even take over the base functions, most importantly the gate controls. And all would be lost if they ever managed to open the gates.

Both sides exchanged fire furiously, the black mechs making up for their lower accuracy with their greater volume. Napoleon, as usual, was as instructive as ever when he said that "quantity has a quality of its own". Another one of his understatements.

And that same 'quality' was working against the humans, as they gave up ground grudgingly to avoid the murderous short range firepower of the black mechs, which seemed to have mainly SRM and laser equipped mech variants in their midst.

Frank triggered another salvo of laser fire as he walked the *Night Gyr* backwards, this time savaging armor on a *Bruiser*, which absorbed the laser energy easily and was moving forward ominously.

He could spot the numerous missile racks all over the mech, and he knew that it was likely to be either the LRM or the SRM boat version. He did not want to be on the receiving end of either missile system, but he knew there was not much choice as it launched a total of 60 LRMs at him.

He braced himself, gripping his joysticks tightly as the swarm of missiles crashed into the *Night Gyr*, blanking out even his HUD as they came in hard. The impact of more than thirty missiles threatened to unbalance the mech, and Frank had to flail the arms of his mech around for a while before he got it under control.

He snarled in anger, and about to reply with his gauss rifle when a volley of particles whipped into the center torso of the assault class *Bruiser*, killing the controlling algorithmic system in there and neutralizing the mech.

"Frank, you all right?" Deserk asked as his *Black Hawk* continued pummeling the enemy mechs with laser blasts from the his extended range lasers.

"Yeah. Gave me a good shaking, but I'll live. We have to put more space between us and them!"

"No way. We are almost backing into the facility already."

Frank checked his screens, and found that Deserk was right. The orbital cannon was only three hundred meters behind them, and only a kilometer and his battleground separated the cannon and the black mechs.

They had destroyed about more than twenty drone mechs so far, but they had taken quite a lot of damage as well. And the approaching drone ship meant that he wouldn't have any reserves left if more enemy mechs appeared. *CLG is going to be a killer*, Frank thought.

His headset crackled again. "Raider Lead, this is Command. The enemy ship has reached your position and is deploying its units!"

The machine intelligence was elated at the success of its plan.

The imminent destruction of one of the opposing warships meant that the one remaining would have no chance of victory, while the super-assault mechs it had deployed meant that it would soon have possession of the Qlictorio base.

The defending flesh beings were fighting tenaciously, but they were having a difficult time with the drones already present, and were in no position to oppose the thirty mechs that were dropping right now from its bays on the other side of the facility.

A group of flesh beings were situated in the orbital cannon facility itself, but they were hardly a threat for the firepower of the mechs, nor the *Spidercrabs* they carried.

Victory was at hand!

Descartin Winters narrowed his eyes as he heard Pascal's report. His *Nova Cat* had already taken quite a lot of abuse, with his limb armor almost in tatters, and his torso not much better in protection. Some LRM fire had hit his cockpit, and blood was now streaming down one of his legs. It was not very painful, but Des knew that wounds tend to add up. This rule applied to both humans and mechs.

"Dancers, send the *Vedettes* over to slow those mechs down!" Frank was issuing orders, trying to wrest back the initiative lost. However, in Des' mind, they had lost the initiative ever since the enemy had first boiled out of the seas to attack the unsuspecting humans.

The lance of tracked vehicles sped off to their rear, where the new enemy force was landing on the other side of the facility. Des kept a cautious eye on them as he continued pounding away at the enemy mechs in front of him.

Another *Bruiser* stride forward, the fearful crack of its twin gauss rifles audible as it fired at Des. One slug hammered into his left leg, laying the internal structure bare to further attacks, while the other just missed his cockpit by inches.

His sure hand smoothly recovered the *Nova Cat* from the strike, and he repaid the damage with interest as he fired all his long range weapons into the middle of the *Bruiser*. The targeting computer was an invaluable tool as it gave him incredible firing solutions for his shots. Already considered one of the best gunners in clan space, Des' unerring accuracy coupled with the targeting computer gave him the ability to place a shot almost anywhere he wanted on the enemy.

The *Bruiser* staggered as its gyro was hit, then collapsed as Kety followed up with his *Gallowglas*' own PPC and large lasers, one of his shots entering the middle and finishing the job Des had started.

"Thanks for the help!" Des shouted gratefully, as Kety replied with a wave of his mech's left hand.

A shriek of despair suddenly overrode all other concerns. "This is Dancer Vee-One, we are pulling back! I have never seen the likes of those. I've already lost two tanks at extreme range, and they.. Oh God... Help!" The transmission was cut off.

Des quickly switched to his rear view, and he saw a swarm of LRMs descend on the two retreating *Vedettes*. That was not shocking, but the fact that every single missile landed on target did. *Streak missiles, but LRM versions*, his mind informed him dispassionately.

Des felt a sudden coldness grip his body, all the way to his bones. He instantly knew he was going to die this day, and that the purpose of his whole life might been to bring him to this one battle, one in which he had no chance of living through, one in which the fate of humanity was at stake. It was something that every clansman dreamed of, a glorious fight against impossible odds, a chance at immortality in legend and song.

Still, he wondered if he had somehow accrued a lot of bad karma in a past life which was now responsible for his present predicament.

He turned his *Nova Cat* around, and started moving towards the approaching black mechs, all of which are showing up on his tremor sensors as being a hundred tons.

Thirty hundred ton mechs, all with advanced technology.

As he moved, he noticed Deserk in his *Black Hawk* beside him. Apparently, Deserk had the exact same idea as him. Des considered asking the Wolf Dragoon to turn back, but he knew that it was Deserk's individual decision, and could only respect it as a fellow warrior.

Maybe he had already foreseen this scene in his visions.

"It is a good day to die, quiaff?" Des asked his sibmate.

"Aff." The reply came. "Truly a good day."

Frank tried to ignore the fear bubbling up from his guts to his heart, as well as the vomit that he could feel was on the way to his mouth in his esophagus.

Pascal was giving him some very bad news. "The specs say that each of these mechs pack two advanced particle cannons, a big fucking autocannon that we have no equivalent for, and something like streak LRMs!"

"In other words?" Frank asked.

"You guys are dead meat! Pull back now, we can try again later!"

"There is no later. The Falcons are dying in droves up there, and we are too heavily engaged to retreat! Damn it! Send me all the reserves ASAP!"

"Gotcha! They're already on the way, one company of mixed troops. ETA is ten minutes!"

*We'll be lucky if we can hold out for another two!* Frank cursed as he sent a gauss slug at an *Ant*, shattering its torso armor and dumping the drone on the ground.

Then he saw Deserk and Descartin Winters moving to their rear in their mechs

"Hey, what are you doing?" Frank didn't want to think that the two had lost their nerve and were abandoning their comrades. He did not realize the alternative.

“Take out the black mechs in front of you first. We’ll try to delay the new force behind you for as long as possible.” Deserk answered.

*Huh, only two of them against thirty?*

“But there’s only two of you!” Frank wailed.

“Don’t argue with us! Just do as he says!” Des yelled back.

“You won’t last long!” Kety entered the running argument as the battle raged around them.

Frank saw Deserk’s *Black Hawk* continuing to charge forward at the newcomers as the Dragoon replied. “We don’t have to! Just long enough for the cannon to work! And Kety...”

“Yeah?”

“When you get back to Outreach, tell Reena... Tell Reena I’m sorry.” There was pain and regret in Deserk’s voice.

That meant only one thing to everybody listening.

Deserk had no intention of surviving this fight. Frank figured the same went for Descartin Winters.

He decided to try one last time. “Don’t do this! There’s always another way!”

Winters answered this time. “There is no other way, no other choice. You know how this is going to turn out. Now concentrate on your own battle!”

Another salvo of enemy fire brought Frank’s attention back to the fight before him as a *Lemming* fired its medium autocannon at him, the shells tearing into his mech. He sent three laser beams at the drone, one of them hitting it squarely in the chest while the other two missed miserably. Large goblets of armor ran down the drone’s chest as it moved forward.

Frank chanced a quick look back at their rear, where the brilliant flashes of light indicated a fight in full swing. He hoped that they would be able to hold off the enemy force, but common sense and logic dictated that it was doomed to failure.

Frank turned his attention to the front in time to dodge another salvo of autocannon fire from the *Lemming* by jumping his mech into the air. Rising up on jets of fusion flame, Frank plugged away with his pulse lasers, this time connecting with both shots to the right torso of the mech. The *Lemming* seemed to ignore him, and moved closer to the facility.

As he landed, he realized that the black mechs were beginning to penetrate their lines, and the battle was fast becoming a melee, with the humans pitched desperately against almost three times their number in enemies, now approaching point blank ranges.

The headset crackled to life. “Raider Lead, this is Cannon One. I am now operative and angling for a shot!”

Frank wanted to cheer as he heard the report. The sooner they could destroy the enemy warship in space, the sooner they could retract the cannon facility and pull back.

The cannon erupted with a roar as it unleashed a bolt into the heavens, the immense disrupter blast shooting up into the sky in a purple flash. Frank waited anxiously for the result.

“Sorry, I missed! Another minute before the next shot!” The former dropship gunner reported.

Frank wanted to rail at the missed opportunity, but the damn *Lemming* was firing at him again, this time with its machine guns added to the mix. Frank ignored the damage to his mech, and fired his gauss and pulse lasers. The gauss punched through the middle of the *Lemming*, while one pulse laser did its part by hitting the same location, while the other missed. It was enough to destroy the drone, its legs telescoping into the empty torso.

“Frank, there’s something screwy with my systems!” Frank could sense the fear in Kety’s voice.

“What’s wrong?” Frank felt they already have enough trouble holding off the enemy mechs. If Kety’s *Gallowglas* was having problems, then it would make one of his best warriors much less effective on the field.

“I’m not picking up either Des or Deserk on my targeting scopes, and *they’re not dead yet!*”

“As long as you can still target the drones, it’s alright!” Frank tried to push the problem out of his mind.

Frank twisted his mech’s torso around to fire at a *Smasher* that had pushed past the line, and took the opportunity to check on Des and Deserk’s status.

He was amazed to see the two warriors among the massive black hulks, dancing away with unbelievable ease from the enemy attacks, consisting of particle beams, autocannon, and missile fire. Even so, there was no reason why out of more than fifty weapons firing on them, *not a single weapon hit!*

Frank tried to ignore the growing queasy feeling in his mind, because his targeting cursor had refused to acquire the *Nova Cat* and *Black Hawk* as targets as well. He knew his systems were fully functional, because he was having no trouble shooting at the black mechs, but nothing else could possibly explain what he was seeing.

Descartin’s *Nova Cat* savaged the mechs around it, particularly those nearest the facility. His PPCs and lasers flashed out as he consistently hit the rear of the black mechs, setting off their ammunition stores and removing their most deadly weapon, the super heavy autocannon.

Deserk’s *Black Hawk* was equally potent, using the same tactics as Descartin, as they not only managed to survive the attacks of the black mechs, but were actually defeating the enemy!

Frank easily recognized their strategy. By taking their mechs into the middle of the enemy formation, the enemy mechs could not afford to get to the facility without exposing their rear armor to Des and Deserk. And with his part of the battle now taking place around the cannon facility, the enemy mechs could not walk to the facility with their backs to the orbital cannon either. So they stuck to trying to remove the two nuisances in their midst before advancing on the facility, which nevertheless didn’t quite explain how Des and Deserk were still in the land of the living.

He decided not to communicate with the two warriors, afraid of breaking their concentration. As Frank looked around, all he saw was a tableau of hell as the battle regressed to a brutal knife fight.

At least five black mechs had reached the facility, and were under fire from the infantry troops. SRM and man-pack PPC fire could be seen streaking from the facility and impacting on the black mechs, as tiny figures darted through the structures.

The turret of a *Patton* tank locked up as it was hit by a storm of SRMs from a *Smasher*, the crew electing to stay in the tank as they tried to shift the tank around to shoot at the *Smasher*. Another burst of large laser fire from a *Bruiser* into the tank consigned it to a fiery death.

Kety's *Gallowglas* grappled with a *Lemming*, using the almost bare left arm and hand to punch viciously into the head of the drone, then wrenching the mech carcass around to shield his own mech from a deadly fusillade of missiles from a trio of *Ants*. A few SRMs still got through, tearing into the torso armor and rupturing precious heat sinks, as coolant fluid leaked down the sides of the *Gallowglas*.

A *Partisan* tank, seemingly out of ammunition, charged at a *Lemming* as the drone fired its own array of medium lasers. The laser blasts carved into the engine of the tank, and it exploded while still in movement. The momentum of the tank continued to carry the wreckage of the tank forward as it smashed into the *Lemming* in revenge for its death. The *Lemming* flopped over as its legs were hit, and crumpled to the ground.

A squad of anti-mech infantry launched their grapple rods onto a *Lemming*, and proceeded to carry out a dangerous crippling action. Another *Lemming* walked up and ran its machine guns over the frail bodies of the human attackers as they clung onto their target, even as they accomplished their job by planting their explosives among the vulnerable exhaust vents and joints of the mech. Their bodies fell to the ground as multiple explosions wracked the *Lemming*.

Frank saw Qing Hong Liu punch out of his crippled and burning *Thor*, as two *Bruisers* closed in, unleashing heavy salvos of gauss and SRM fire. Tracers pierced the air towards the ejection seat, as an *Ant* sought to kill Qing with its machine guns before Frank shattered it with several laser blasts.

*Spidercrabs* scuttled all over the ground, as they tried to connect into the facility systems, opposed by the men of the 5<sup>th</sup> Firemouths. The chatter of small arms fire could be heard as Frank moved his *Night Gyr* nearer the structure in pursuit of one of the *Bruisers* that had destroyed Qing's *Thor*. The assault mech was unloading its load of *Spidercrab* drones, dumping them out of its cockpit in a rain of black metal to the ground.

It turned around at Frank's approach, and the two mechs faced off and fired at the same time.

48 SRMs erupted from the many missile ports on the mech, almost half of them slamming into the *Night Gyr*. A spike of heat in his cockpit and the gout of smoke that appeared before his HUD rising from his center torso warned him of engine damage, while the sluggish movement of the mech told him of damage to his leg actuators. The indicators for two of the large lasers in his left torso flashed amber, then red as they warned of the weapons' destruction. The mech rocked from side to side as the missiles did their work, as Frank struggled to keep his mech upright even as he fired back with his full arsenal of weapons.

His remaining large laser blazed out a trail of photons to the right arm of the mech, while the gauss rifle spat out a metal ball towards right torso. His medium pulse lasers stammered a line of emerald darts into the right torso, penetrating into the ammo bins. The *Bruiser* convulsed as its armor began to warp from the tremendous force generated from within the mech as the SRM ammo blew. The pent up energy was released in a brilliant glare of yellow flame, as the *Bruiser* was totally consumed by the explosion.

Frank jumped the *Night Gyr* to his right as a volley of LRMs slammed into the ground he had just vacated. As he landed, he discharged another salvo of laser fire at the unit that had fired, a *Smasher* LRM variant. The lasers melted armor over the mech's right leg, but failed to hurt its internals.

*We can't carry on like this for much longer*, Frank thought as he tried to line up another shot for the last of his gauss slugs.

The machine intelligence was frustrated by the inability of its overwhelming forces to take control of the facility. Even the most advanced drones were unable to remove the two enemy machines that were amongst them wrecking havoc.

The machine intelligence could not understand why its drones were simply unable to target the two mechs, or why their weapons kept missing.

Even the force that had reached the cannon facility was having a difficult time wading through the dogged defenders. The unprotected flesh beings on foot were even able to destroy drone machines by climbing onto the drones and placing simple explosives at vulnerable locations, something which the Qlictorio, who insisted on using only high technology weapons and vehicles in combat, would never have done!

The machine intelligence knew that it needed something to end the fight soon. The surface-to-orbit cannon was simply too dangerous, and its previous shot had come perilously close to hitting the warship. One hit from the ground battery would knock the shields out of commission immediately, leaving it highly susceptible to the weapons of the enemy warships. The flesh beings had been very cunning, using remote controlled personnel boats filled with explosives to delay its warship's assault on the dying enemy warship for a few precious moments, by forcing it to devote more of its energy to shoring up its shields. Victory was still within reach, however, provided the ground cannon did not hit the cruiser, and the best way to ensure that was to capture it.

There was one way to assume full control of the ground facility, and that was to remove the two nuisances to allow the super assault drones to get to the facility, where they could overwhelm the flesh beings there.

The machine intelligence instantly came up with two possible options for destroying the two mechs. One was to employ its advanced fighters to strafe the area. The fighters were tied up solidly with the human advanced fighters, and could not disengage.

The other was to use its warship to bombard the area, which guaranteed the destruction of the flesh beings in the area. While its own drones would also be hit, the machine intelligence calculated that they would be able to withstand the barrage, leaving them able to press on to the facility and claim possession of it.

Getting the warship to move into position to bombard the area was not a problem, as the space forces of the flesh beings were in no shape to obstruct it. The only risk was in hitting the facility and possibly destroying it, but the shield directly above the facility itself rendered protection against orbital strikes, thereby removing the dangers of a miss.

Even if the warship was hit by the ground battery as it bombarded the area, the machine intelligence gauged that the imminent capture of the Qlictorio base would more than make up for the loss of the warship, which was by no means certain as the flesh beings still needed quite a few shots to destroy it even without its shields. The machine intelligence made its decision easily. The warship began moving nearer the planet.

“What is the stravag enemy doing?” Valten Folkner asked as he observed it abandoning its final attack on the crippled and burning *White Aerie* to move closer to the planet below.

The *White Aerie* had stopped firing its weapons, and its commanding officer had ordered all his personnel to their escape pods and lifeboats, which were woefully low in number after Valten had used them in a futile attempt to damage the drone warship.

Blooms of flame could be seen burning along the scarred and torn surface of the once powerful *Black Lion*. Pieces of twisted armor, chunks of shattered Harjel, charred structural members, and other flotsam were slowly breaking off from the stricken warship. White clouds of water crystals were spewing from gaps in the structure, originating from the personnel quarters. Electrical sparks crackled from severed power lines, their blue arcs wildly playing on the shattered hull.

The death throes of a warship, after more than three hundred years of existence. It had survived Kerensky’s war against the Periphery, his campaign in the Terran Hegemony, the liberation of Terra. Later, it had followed him on his long journey from the Inner Sphere, along the Exodus road, leading to civil war and the formation of the clans. It had survived Trial after Trial, but who have known that it would finally meet its end around a forgotten world in the Periphery?

The *Blue Aerie* was firing its long range weapons for all they were worth, but to little effect. The enemy warship was moving away too quickly for the gunners to get a proper targeting lock. Adding to their problems was the fact that the enemy shields were simply too strong for the naval autocannons to take down. Meanwhile, his XO answered his earlier question, “The enemy warship is heading for the planet. It seems to be going for a lower orbit. My best guess is that they are going for orbital bombardment.”

That had already occurred to Valten even before the officer had voiced the thought. “Can the engineers give me more thrust to intercept it?”

The XO paused for a while, turning away to speak into his headphone before replying. “Neg, our engines are not fast enough.”

“And the status of the *White Aerie*?”

“Star Commodore Creske Von Jankmon reports that his ship has lost all his weapons, but his engines are still capable of 30% thrust. He has ordered a ramming attack on the enemy warship once most of his crew has departed the ship.”

“Good.” Valten growled. At least the *White Aerie* was still useful for one last attack.

The previous miss from the only ground battery that was able to target the enemy warship had been a disappointment, but Valten had almost half-expected it. The gunners on the ground were only freebirth surats, after all, not the selectively bred and trained naval dropship crews of the clans. However, he had no choice but to rely on their dubious assistance.

Star Commander Galietra Binneti and his *Seraphs* were still exchanging blows with the enemy fighters, while the run-of-the-mill human fighters were down to only a star left against the thirty enemy fighters remaining.

Most of his dropships were dead in space from accumulated damage, while the jumpships were still angling for a clear shot, hindered by the constant motion of the enemy warship as they tried to rotate in space with their thrusters that were meant only for station-keeping.

There was no other choice, but to hope that the *White Aerie*’s final attack would open a window of opportunity for the remaining warriors in space, while he had little hope for the ground forces that were about to suffer one of the most horrendous attacks known to humankind in war, the orbital bombardment.

Galietra Binneti jerked his HOTAS hard to his left, sending the *Seraph* into a rapid counterclockwise roll, dodging the phaser blasts from the enemy fighter on his tail.

He bounced the *Seraph* down for a while before coming up and around in an Immelmann, challenging his pursuer to a full frontal assault. The two fighters faced each other in a head on pass for less than a second, and Gal fired his full load of guns and missiles as they passed within less than a kilometer from each other.

One of his phasers, two of his mass drivers, and about half his missiles missed, but they still managed to overcome the shields, the missiles shaving away all of the frontal armor before his plasma slicers cut deep into the innards of the fighter, the beams stabbing vulnerable components and control systems. The enemy fighter spun around crazily as it burned into the atmosphere, its interface and defense mechanisms shot away. It would fall apart as it fell to the ground.

He did not emerge unscathed either. His shields, except for one covering his rear, were all down after that exchange, the enemy phasers shoving them aside and even damaging the neutronium armor. A quick glance at his console displays confirmed that he had only fifty percent armor protection left for his nose and wing sections.

There were only twelve enemy fighters left, and ten *Seraphs* to oppose them. Trixie had punched out after her *Seraph* got involved in one too many scissors with the enemy, her escape pod last seen dropping onto the planet below.

That was fine by Galietra. He was good enough to fight without a wingman.

Two enemy ships flashed past his HUD, in pursuit of a *Seraph* that was jinking and swerving desperately to avoid the enemy fire. Gal turned his own *Seraph* to follow them, unleashing a swarm of missiles at one of the fighters as he did so.

The friendly *Seraph* slowed down, giving the enemy fighters the choice of staying on his tail and taking him down, but offering Gal the chance to open up on both enemies. Of course, they could always break away from their pursuit, but their target would survive.

They stayed on its tail.

*That is why it is considered a gamble*, Gal reminded himself as he tightened on his triggers, sending a salvo of missiles and azure beams towards his targets even as they pounded away at Hank Cashew's *Seraph*, Hank's rear shields flaring with energy discharges as they sought to dissipate the deadly energies from the enemy drones.

His missiles smashed into the rear thrusters of one drone, resulting in a brilliant explosion as its quantum engine unleashed its full potential in an instant. His beams lit up the shields of the other drone, but its shields held up under the assault. The drone did break away from its pursuit of Hank's *Seraph*, which had just a few ergs of shield power left.

"Thanks for the assist!" Hank grunted to him.

"Thanks for the kill." Gal replied grimly as he spied another drone slipping in behind him even as he continued chasing the surviving fighter. It fired at him with a steady stream of plasma bolts.

Galietra allowed his shields to do their job as he worked his way into his prey with plasma slicers and mass drivers. He stayed on his opponent for twenty painstaking seconds before it exploded under his fusillade of fire, topped off by his last rack of missiles to hasten its death.

He cut away down and left from his pursuer just as his rear shields gave way. It turned to continue its attack, but Peggy's fighter cut into its flank at the same time, destroying it with an alpha strike of plasma beams, mass drivers, phasers, and missiles.

Gal took advantage of the short respite to assess the overall situation.

The enemy warship was moving closer to the planet, while the *White Aerie* was moving ominously with literally fire in its belly towards the enemy warship, picking up speed that Gal was sure would send it hurtling into the planetary atmosphere.

Suddenly, he saw a series of brilliant flashes from side of the enemy warship, as massive energy blasts flew towards the unsuspecting planet below. An unimpressive display for the uninitiated, but Gal knew better.

His blood ran cold as he realized he was watching an orbital bombardment in progress.

Spreading the left arm of his *Night Gyr* all the way out to his left, Frank tried to balance and compensate for the loss of all the remaining armor on the arm, as a gauss *Bruiser* hammered at him with its weapons.

He struck back with his large and medium lasers, but all they did was to scratch the paint of the heavily armored shell of the drone. A series of energy blasts from the side unexpectedly hit its legs, unbalancing the mech and toppling it to the ground.

Kety's battered *Gallowglas* limped into view, maintaining the barrage with his medium pulse lasers, as he ripped at the *Bruiser*, the barrels stuttering out the energy darts as he tried to keep them on target on the legs, in an attempt to cripple the assault mech.

Frank added to the damage wrought with his laser weaponry, but the *Bruiser* still managed to lever one arm off the ground to fire a gauss slug at him.

The slug punched into the right arm of his mech, crushing all the armor left on that limb as it went further in.

Without warning, a sharp pain lanced through Frank's head as his gauss rifle was destroyed, and hot tears stung his eyes as he lost all sense of his surroundings. All he knew was the terrible pain in his head, his mind, his brain, as he struggled to maintain his grip on his sanity and consciousness.

He felt like smashing his head against something, anything, to clear it of the hot knives sticking in his head, and he did so against the handiest target, the control console and displays in front of him, his upper torso bending over with the neurohelmet as he tried to remove the agonizing sensation by head butting the console several times.

That did not help alleviate the pain, but it did help him claw back some of his mental faculties as the pain gradually receded. He blinked his eyes slowly to clear away the tears, trying to avoid the tiny stabs of pain whenever he made a sudden motion with any moving part of his body.

The first thing that came to him was the incessant roar of the battle raging around him. It took him a while before he realized that somebody was calling him over his headset.

“Raider Lead, please reply! You mech is not moving!” It was Kety.

“I... I’m okay, I’m okay,” Frank stammered out, hoping his voice did not sound too shaky as he slowly tried to organize his scattered thoughts. It was like trying to catch butterflies with his bare hands instead of using a net.

“What’s going on?” Frank asked.

“Quite a few enemies left, and that’s not counting the ones still engaging Deserk and Des. We should be able to hold those here off, but we’ll be ready for the scrap heap after that, provided a miracle happens and we don’t have to fight those damn advanced drones.”

“Reinforcements are on the way. We just have to hold out long enough!” Frank said as he took hold of his control joysticks with his hands.

“Roger that. Here they come again.”

Kety was right, as Frank checked his screens. They were finally finishing off the last few drones near the base, while Des and Deserk were still waging their own private war with the advanced drones. And they *still* did not show up on his stupid radar and mech sensors. It was only by using his own eyes that he was able to verify that their presence in the fight.

Feeling a blocked sensation in his nose, Frank blew out through his nose hard. He was surprised to see a large splatter of red blood fly out onto his chin plate and the displays. The metallic, salty taste of blood on his lips and tongue further gave evidence of his massive nosebleed caused by the enormous electrical discharge and damage feedback from the ruin of the gauss rifle capacitors. Even his ears felt wet, which indicated bleeding from his ears as well. He hoped it was not too serious.

Frank stomped hard on his foot pedals, sending the *Night Gyr* flying through the air and landing behind a *Smasher* that was tearing off the last few pieces of armor off Tim’s shattered *Cauldron-Born*.

Frank snarled through his pain, tears and blood, and fired all his remaining guns. His medium pulse lasers stammered into the rear armor of the drone, while the extended range lasers, one medium and one large, carved deep into the engine, shutting it down as the containment material was utterly melted away.

By now most of the attacking drones had been disabled or neutralized, but likewise, Frank could count only five mechs and three vehicles left on the field. Out of a hundred infantry troopers, he could see only about twenty left, deployed into one makeshift platoon.

He turned around to face the advanced drones, to employ his sole ER large laser against them, just in time to see the heavens open up with blinding light.

The bolt from the sky slammed onto the plains like the hand of an angry deity, pressing its terrible weight against the mechs battling there. An advanced drone simply fell apart under the ravaging hell of the naval grade weapon, vaporized into nothingness.

Frank fought down the bile in his throat, as he tried to watch out for the two warriors who were caught in the orbital bombardment. The radio was overrun with chatter, as this latest debacle threatened to break the troops’ already tenuous hold on their morale and spirits.

“Stay close to the facility!” Frank yelled as he remembered the shield over the ground battery. “Stick to within fifty meters of the ground gun, and the shield above will protect us!”

But that still left Deserk and Descartin Winters exposed to the warship above.

*Get out, dammit, get out!* Frank willed the two to take shelter under the shield, but he also knew, deep down, that they would never do so.

He glanced at his screen. *Reinforcements arriving in just one more minute. Hold on, we have to hold on!*

Kily Gonzalez sprinted his *Wolfhound* to the top of a hill, as he followed Bryan’s *Fenris*, who was leading the way.

They had finished their last assignment, and were heading towards the nearest battle site, without any black mechs chasing them, which Bryan had said was due to their focus on the fleeing groups and the ground battery sites.

The bright blast of light from the skies a moment ago had been a real shock, and they had pushed their mechs to their utmost to get to the ongoing battle. Kily feared the worst, but he kept silent. And so did everybody else.

As his *Wolfhound* crested the hilltop, Kily was struck by a scene literally from hell itself.

Fires burned everywhere, while battlemechs, torn and bleeding from busted heat sinks, milled around near the ground cannon facility, pausing now and then to get a shot off in the direction of one of the most awesome sights Kily had even seen.

Two human mechs were among the midst of more than ten hulking assault mechs, each enemy drone packed with missile racks and a honking big autocannon. And more than that, the two mechs were holding off their opponents.

For some strange reason, his sensors couldn’t tell him about the damage on the two mechs, a *Black Hawk* and a *Nova Cat*, but he could tell with his eyes alone that they were badly mangled, probably from the orbital strike. But the drone mechs were still missing at practically point blank ranges!

"Move forward! We're going to support them!" Bryan ordered.

"Are you nuts?" Patrice protested. "Did you see the combined enemy tonnage out there? And that's even before the blast God knows where from above our heads!"

"I know, I know, but we have to move forward just to draw away some of their attention. Lee, jump your *Spider* in among them, maybe we can get them to friendly fire on each other, since they don't seem to be able to target Des and Deserk either. As for the rest of you, SOP, engage at range."

Kily personally thought that was a rather hopeful plan, but Lee's *Spider* did start pumping its thin and spindly legs down to the brawl below, while the other members of the lance sniped away with PPCs and laser fire.

Switching over to the battlegroup frequency, Kily heard Frank's voice.

"Deserk, get out of there! Your mechs can't take another orbital strike! Reinforcements are on the way, we can take them as a group now!"

"Neg, neg!" Des replied, breathless with pain. "If we go now, they will still be able to hit you at long range with those missiles and PPCs. And the warship has to go to low orbit for bombardment, which gives the ground battery a better chance of hitting it. Make it count!"

"You're right, my old sibmate," Deserk cut in, "but you forgot one thing."

Deserk continued in a low tone. "Only *one* of us is needed here to hold their attention."

Kily watched in amazement as the *Black Hawk* suddenly turned its guns on the *Nova Cat*, eviscerating it with a well placed PPC blast into the center torso.

"What are you mean? No, dammit! Don't do this to me..." Winters' shout trailed off.

The *Nova Cat* died as its engine exploded in a release of plasma, but the cockpit did split open as a small ejection seat flew up and out in a release of fire from the doomed mech. The seat flew to its apex before deploying its parachute as it drifted slowly to the ground.

Bryan did not hesitate, "Lee, get that ejection seat!" And he spoke in a somber voice, "Deserk, your name will appear in the Remembrance. This I swear!"

The *Spider* leapt into the air, propelled on jets of fusion flame, snagging the ejection pod easily by grabbing the parafoils with its hands. It landed and started sprinting the moment it hit the ground, as Lee managed to avoid the rain of fire targeting him with some expert evasion moves.

For their part, the other warriors peppered the enemy with long range fire, disrupting the attacks of the enemy as Lee tried to get to the safety of the umbrella shield over the facility.

"Flash, flash!" The ground battery gunner warned as the skies surged open with light once again.

The blast landed squarely on Deserk's dying *Black Hawk*. Kily found himself screaming with rage as the mech blew apart in a ball of crimson fire, as it was joined by several black mechs around it, as they died in sympathetic detonations. There was no ejection, and it would have been useless anyway, with the strobing laser blasts playing over the field for several seconds, ensuring the death of anybody caught in its deadly embrace.

Kily realized he wasn't alone in his anger, as the entire human force had advanced to the limits of the shield and started firing everything they had left at the enemy drone force.

The ground battery finally replied to the fire from heaven, sending up its own disrupter bolt. But Kily paid it no heed, even as his radar signaled the entry of their reserves. All he wanted was to see the enemy stomped and dead under the feet of his *Wolfhound*.

Galietra Binneti had teamed up with Hank Cashew, taking apart the last advanced enemy drone fighter with tandem plasma slicers and phaser shots. The enemy aerospace fighter broke apart under their barrage, splintering into a thousand pieces of tiny wreckage divided by a series of explosions.

It was the hardest, most grueling battle he had ever fought in. Out of the thirty *Seraphs* they had started out with, there were only five left. The other three fighters had been sent to help mop up the remaining enemy drones that were less advanced, but nevertheless still causing problems for the clan flyers.

"Commencing torpedo run," Gal signaled Hank.

"Roger. Covering your ass." The Inner Sphere pilot took up the eight o'clock position with respect to Gal.

Pilot, not freebirth. Gal had seen their prowess and determination for himself, and they were every bit as deserving of the term of warrior and pilot as any clansman. He would never again talk of the warriors of the Inner Sphere in disparaging terms again.

Lining up his fighter with the enemy warship, Gal saw the *White Aerie* charging towards the enemy warship, intent on mutual destruction, even as it fired another salvo of beams towards the planet. Another few blasts whipped out to strike the *White Aerie*, smashing into the bridge section, but the warship stayed on its course towards the enemy drone warship.

The enemy warship seemed to realize the *Black Lion's* intentions only at the last moment, and it tried to move out of the way. It was too late, but just enough however, as the *White Aerie* dealt it a glancing blow amidships before it veered off into the planetary atmosphere, a burning hulk of metal and polymer.

The enemy warship's shields flared and flickered dangerously as it tried to absorb the massive amounts of kinetic energy from the impact. Gal could read from his sensors that the shields failing, and that another few naval grade shots would bring it down totally.

And one promptly arrived from the surface of the planet, from the ground battery. The disrupter bolt splayed all over the shields, bringing them down to less than 3% left.

The one-two punch was followed by Valten Folkner's order over the open frequency.

"All jumpships, fire!"

The thrust exhaust of the jumpships ignited with light, sending a long invisible stream of hydrogen ions towards the tottering drone warship, which was trying desperately to restore its shields. They flogged the warship relentlessly, squashing aside the last of the energy shield.

Gal saw his displays for the torpedo lock glow green, signifying that the torpedo could be fired. He promptly mashed the trigger with a vengeance, sending the long projectile on its way.

He had asked Lorik about the contents of the torpedo warhead, but all the scientist would say was that it was not nuclear, since to use a nuclear weapon runs counter to the beliefs of the clans. As the warhead punched into the enemy warship in a brilliant glare of energy, even brighter than any nuclear blast, Gal realized from his energy readings that Lorik had told him the complete truth. The warhead was not nuclear, fission, fusion, or otherwise.

It could only be antimatter. From the sheer surge of energy, several magnitudes greater than even the largest atomic device. Nothing was left of the enemy warship.

As he flew the fighter in triumph over the *Blue Aerie*, Valten Folkner contacted him.

"Star Commander, proceed to Orbital Cannon Site A to provide close air support. Their lines are about to collapse! I will take care of the enemy AI. Personally." It was a promise.

"Aff, Star Commodore!" Along with the last few fighters in space, he swooped into the planet's atmosphere. It was, he was sure, the very last chapter in their epic campaign.

The remaining thirteen advanced drones lumbered on, finally free of their tormentors. Many were damaged, but they were still more than sufficient to crush the defenders.

Frank tried to keep his body from shaking as he fired his remaining large laser in despair, trying just to slow, not halt their advance. Bryan's lance had placed themselves to the rear of the enemy, firing with little effect on their back armor.

He was afraid, but he could still feel the rage from their callous destruction of Deserk's *Black Hawk*. He knew they were drones, machines, incapable of emotion, but that did not lessen his fury any. In fact, that was the only thing still holding him on the field, fighting with his measly weaponry.

Deserk had been a good friend, a good man. It didn't matter that he was a clanner, or that he was once a Nova Cat. He had stuck by Frank when he had just been pushed into the role of commander, mentoring Frank in the real life practicalities of leadership. And if it wasn't for Deserk, Frank doubted they would have gotten Descartin Winters and his Scorpions over to their side as easily.

The roar of an autocannon announced the arrival of their reinforcements, as a *Musketeer* hovertank engaged with its RAC/5, followed by the thump-thump of a *Fafnir*'s dual heavy gauss rifles. The shells all crashed into a drone, shattering the armor on one side as it turned to oppose this new threat.

The added supporting units came in from their left, smashing into the flank of the drones. Frank was gratified to see that his plan of putting some of their best units in reserve had paid off. Many of the lone operators, for some reason or another, were equipped with cutting edge technology mechs and vehicles.

A huge *Sagittaire* lit up the battlefield with its jumpjets as it closed within range of its pulse lasers, braving the storm of autocannon fire from its enemy as it carved the advanced drone apart with its pulse lasers backed by a Federated Suns targeting computer.

A *Manteuffel* attack omnitank dueled with a drone, its super heavy ultra autocannon gouging gaping holes into the legs of a drone even as it weathered two ER PPC blasts to its front.

The drones counterattacked hard, but the new units managed to hold and even take down three more drones in their initial assault.

A scream from the sky heralded the return of their *Seraphs*, as they flew down like avenging angels, scouring the drones with plasma slicers, mass driver blasts, and phaser beams.

The drones hesitated, not knowing what to do. Frank checked his sensors, and realized that was because the drone command ship had just been wiped out by a volley of naval autocannon fire from the *Blue Aerie*.

Deprived of instruction, the drones had been thrown into confusion. All over his strategic board, Frank could see that drone forces had halted in their tracks. Most of the battlegroups were still in good shape, and many of them had been damaged badly, but still in command of the field.

"Come on people!" Frank ordered. "One last push!" He began to close in with the drones, despite the severe damage to his *Night Gyr*. Triggering his lasers, he played the shafts of energy over the nearest drone, penetrating an ammo bin and setting off an explosion.

*Payback's a bitch*. Frank continued spraying his pulse lasers over the target as Kety joined in with his large lasers and PPC. The drone staggered under the assault, before it was finished off by a strafing attack from a *Seraph*, the plasma slicers literally cutting the structure into three large pieces. Frank and Kety took no chances, reducing the pieces to slag as they laid on the smoking ground.

The last advanced drone finally fell, under a murderous barrage of fire from Bryan's recon lance. As the battle ended, Frank found himself panting heavily, from the sweltering heat in his cockpit and the sheer exertion of the fight. All over the field, broken machines lay scattered in heaps of burning metal. Unexploded warheads peppered the landscape, while the ground had been churned into mud from the movement of their machines.

Frank popped his cockpit hatch, and jumped out, as the survivors gathered into a circle near the facility. It was not for fresh air.

He retched out a long stream of vomit as he landed on the ground, unable to hold back the pain in his stomach nor the fear within him anymore. He wrenched off his neurohelmet and continued spewing the contents of his guts, even as Kety, Bryan, and the reinforcement detachment commander, a female mechwarrior named Cecilia Dawson approached. All of them, with the exception of Cecilia, looked horrible and haggard.

Frank stared up with bleary eyes and gave a weary smile. "We look like shit, eh?"

"All enemy units have been contained, Frank." Bryan spoke, ignoring his comment. "The *Blue Aerie* is pounding the shit out of them from orbit even as we speak. Most of the other battlegroups are pulling back into the holes. Maybe we should do the same."

Frank nodded. "Where's Winters? He's not here."

Everybody looked around for the clanner, before an infantryman found him staring at the remnants of Deserk's *Black Hawk*. He simply stood here for a long time before Yoshino walked up to him and started to drag him away. As Des turned around, Frank was struck by his eyes.

*They look dead. Correction. They are dead.* He didn't understand what was going on in Des' mind, but he knew he couldn't if he tried. He suspected there would be repercussions from what had happened here.

*It's over. It's all over.* Frank tried to feel happy, or even glad, but found he couldn't.

*Purple light  
In the army  
That is where  
I want to be  
Every day  
I am training  
With my rifle, my buddy, and me*

*SOC  
Is killing me  
Log PT  
Just breaks my back  
Sore feet  
With endless marching  
With my rifle, my buddy, and me*

*Booking out  
To see my girlfriend  
Saw her with  
Another man  
Beat the man  
Go to DB  
With my rifle, my buddy, and me*

*Purple light  
At the warfront  
That is where  
My buddy died  
If I die  
Would you bury me  
With my rifle, my buddy, and me...*

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

*I cannot believe Deserk is dead, and that I am still alive.* This recurring thought came to Descartin Winters again and again as he sat on his bed in his makeshift bunk in the base, his patched-up legs pulled up to his chest and his arms wrapped around his knees.

He was prepared to die in that last fight. He was even eager to embrace death, and it had given him a focus, a sense of power that terrified him.

During the battle, the fight with the advanced drones, he had felt invincible. *Stravag*, he *was* invincible. There was no target he did not take down once he started on it, no enemy could touch him.

Until the sky erupted in fire and light.

He remembered thinking that it was the end for him, when almost all the armor on his mech had been blasted away by the orbital strike.

And then the transmission from Frank came, urging them to pull back. He had refused, but Deserk had unexpectedly fired on his *Nova Cat*, blowing it apart. He had ejected to be snagged by Lee's *Spider* and taken to safety.

Deserk had died in the second orbital blast. All that was left of him was his codex bracelet, found in the wreckage of the *Black Hawk*.

It laid on Des' table as he stared at it. Beside it were some other items from Deserk's locker from the dropship *Nile*, a few letters and some personal souvenirs from past battles.

There was also a small black pouch containing Deserk's vineers. By clan law, they should be returned to the Bloodname House Leader, to be sacrificed during a private ceremony.

Des did not want to think about that might mean to him.

The one which grabbed his attention most was a letter addressed to him specifically, dated just before the battle. He had tried to ignore it, but it remained stuck in his mind, refusing to budge.

He did not want to touch any of Deserk's belongings, because he refused to accept the fact that his friend was dead. Years ago, after Luthien, it had not been so bad because there were still many comrades, friends still alive after the fight. But now he was the only warrior of his sibko left, and he had been delighted to find Deserk alive after so many years.

*I have lived for too long.* Descartin knew he should be dead. He had cheated death too many times for him to remember. He was almost forty years old now, and by winning a bloodname, his genes were already assured of immortality in the gene banks of Clan Nova Cat.

In truth, he had nothing left to live for. Even this last Seeker mission was simply a way for him to accomplish the one thing he had never done, a vision quest.

It was different for Deserk. He could recall the pride in Deserk's voice as he spoke of his reams and hopes for the future, of raising a family on Outreach. He had everything to live for.

*And now he is gone.* It was so bitterly unfair, that he, the clan warrior with nothing to live for, no real future to speak of, would be the one to survive, while Deserk, who had a child and a lifetime of happiness awaiting him on Outreach, would be the one to die.

There were too many painful memories for him now. He dreaded every time his mind went back to the past, where many demons lurked. As he got older, past events seemed to lose their luster of glory as friends and comrades were killed one by one.

What good were the glorious days of yesteryear when there was nobody to share them with? All that remained was the terror of combat, the frightened calls for support, the pain of loss after every battle.

Des wanted to cry, to let the tears flow, but strangely, he did not know how to cry. All he could do was to scream in rage at the universe, for the twists of fate that had led to this.

And he had done that so many times for the last few hours that he had no more strength even to get up from his bed.

There was a knock on his door.

"Come in." He said listlessly. His voice was hoarse and strangled.

Ian Dorlacen entered, wearing a clean jump suit under a brown and fading jacket, in stark contrast to Des, who had not even changed out of his cooling vest.

"It's morning mess time. That means food." The mercenary commander said. "Come on out."

Des stared at him for a while, before replying. "Neg. I am not hungry."

Ian suddenly shouted, "The heck you are! It's been more than eight hours since the battle ended, and you're still here in your vest!"

Des was startled by the outburst, and his eyes simmered with rage. "Leave me alone!"

Ian walked forward and grabbed Des by the front of his cooling vest. He pulled Des off the bed and flung him against a wall. "Wake up! Deserk is *dead*, and to sit here sulking will not bring him back!"

Des did not even notice the pain of being thrown against the wall as he lashed out at Ian with a punch. Ian drifted backwards as he avoided the blow. He was fresh and rested, whilst Des was not.

"He was my best friend. We grew up together!" Des yelled.

"And so? What would he think of you like this? Dammit, you are a mechwarrior. Act like one!"

Des leaned back against the wall. He was tired of fighting. "You don't understand what went on out there. I should be the one to die, not him. Not him." He repeated to himself softly.

"I understand all too well. You aren't the only one to have lost friends. I have lost too many as well. But that doesn't mean I get a death wish every time somebody dies!"

Des shook his head. "You did not know what happened out there. He could have retreated, and let me be the one to die. Instead he blasted me out of my mech, and I was the one to live."

"So you're angry at him for saving your sorry ass?"

"Maybe." Des sighed. "Maybe I am also angry at myself for not thinking of blowing him out of his mech first."

"He was a warrior, first and foremost. He knew the risks, same as you."

"Then why did he not tell me first? He knew he would die, and yet..."

"No greater love hath one man for another than to lay his life down for his fellow man." Ian quoted quietly. "Ancient words, but still no less true. He wanted you to live, *Star Captain* Descartin Winters, and he was prepared to do so at the price of his life."

"Are you that uncaring, that callous, that you would squander away the gift of life he has bequeathed to you?" Ian asked as he walked to the door.

"Neg." Des breathed in deeply once, then exhaled out all the air in his lungs, as though trying to expel all the anger, the hurt. He looked up again, feeling a bit better. "I will be joining you for breakfast in a while. Just let me wash up first."

He could detect a slight smile on Ian's face as the merc walked through the open doorway.

"Wait." Des said just as Ian was about to close the door. "Why are you the one to talk to me?"

"You might not have noticed it, but Yoshino is still technically your subordinate, and too many of the others are too busy with their own tasks to worry about one demoralized clanner. Except me, so that's why I'm here."

"Busy? Free?" Des blinked. "I think you have an upcoming duel to worry about, quiaff?"

"Aff. I'm not worried." Ian grinned easily.

Frank was musing over an article from the alien archives in their makeshift medical center when a doctor clad in traditional white coveralls came up to him.

"Sir," He winced when Frank glared up at him, "Captain Jadine Sheik has woken up from her coma."

"Don't call me sir. Right now, I'm just another doctor. Same as you."

Frank continued. "So how is she?"

"To tell the truth, she is raving mad at the moment, demanding to know where she is, what Falcon warriors are doing in the same ward, etc. I think it would be best if you explained everything to her yourself."

"Yeah, I'll do that. Thanks." Frank got up reluctantly, and started walking. The information inside that article was simply too interesting to ignore, as it dealt with the inhibition of metastasis in cancer, something which he had been involved in at the NAIS, while they had been trying to discover a cure for Joshua Marik's leukemia in 3056.

*How to explain the loss of almost her entire company of Dragoons?* Frank found himself agonizing over this problem as he walked towards her ward.

There had been many changes since the last of the humans on-world had transferred to the base.

For one, hot baths were finally available, as was fresh water for any number of purposes, where before they were only available in small quantities for drinking.

A few enterprising techs had managed to uncover the commands for the pumps working underground water sources throughout the planet, and managed to get the water routed to their toilets with some hasty plumbing. Some additional configuration of the pipes got the water to the repair bays, where the techs needed them to clean the machines.

Not that Frank, or anybody else, was going to inspect the mechs for parade readiness any time soon. *Except the Falcons, come to think of it.*

Lizabet Danforth had already begun screaming at her techs to get her mechs up and in peak condition barely four hours after the last enemy drone was destroyed. It had taken several arguments by Star Colonels Colbert Icaza, Fallon Hazen, Mikos Roshak, and Creed Mattlov before she relented.

Frank shook his head. He could never really understand the Falcons. A small number of them were still spoiling for a fight, which Daniela Mattlov explained by noting that these Falcons did not really face the drones in full force, nor taken part in the defense of the ground batteries.

The mercs, on the other hand, were more than happy to find the campaign over, and the alien base offered riches beyond their wildest dreams. A few commanders had privately approached Frank with an interesting proposal though, and he was sorely tempted to accept, after he had run it through Ian Dorlacen and Robert Feehan for their opinions, and they had agreed to it.

Losses had been heavy. The Falcons had suffered 70% equipment damage, and 40% personnel losses. Lizabet Danforth had told him that the entire Rho Galaxy would have to be rotated out of the Occupation Zone for at least two more years for them to recover.

The mercs were just as badly off. Even with the release of former merc bondmen from the Falcons, they had only half of their original strength in personnel, and even less than that in machines, about 30%.

As he approached the ward where Captain Sheik was, the sounds of people shouting became gradually louder. As he walked into the room, the reason became apparent.

Captain Sheik was in a shouting match with a male Falcon warrior who was in the bed beside hers. The cause of his infirmity was immediately obvious from the two leg casts propped up above the foot of his bed.

Two medtechs were trying to stop Sheik from throwing a nearby datapad at the Falcon, while the other occupants of the room looked on in glee and amusement, which puzzled Frank, until he realized from past experience that patients simply enjoyed a good scrap, which does that to anyone stuck in a hospital bed, especially warriors.

There was a smatter of applause from the appreciative audience as a particularly vehement exchange of insults took place. It was a cacophony of noise.

"Stop it!" He spoke loudly and firmly, but actually not expecting any result. "Come on, people, this is a hospital, not a fish market!"

To his chagrin and surprise, they did stop whatever they were doing, and all of them turned to look at him.

He cleared his throat self-consciously. "Okay, fun's over," he said as he pulled away the datapad from Sheik's hand with a strong jerk, took one look at it, and tossed it to a medtech, "now concentrate on getting yourselves healthy again."

He glanced pointedly at the clanner with broken legs, and the warrior simply turned to the other side to avoid looking at them. Frank sighed audibly.

Jadine looked cross as Frank sat down on a chair beside her bed. "What did you do in the time I was asleep?" She folded her arms.

*Here goes nothing.* Frank plunged into the whole sequence of events with a grimace.

"And that's it," he concluded.

She stared at him as though he was crazy.

"Look, it's the truth! You can ask everyone here in this room if you don't believe me!" Frank swept his arm around to indicate the ward.

"Ok, assuming you are telling me the truth, what's going to happen next?"

"Galaxy Commander Lizabet Danforth will take as much of the Star League and alien data as possible when she leaves, in return for an end to our war."

Jadine shook her head incredulously. "You are giving the Crusaders a technological advantage just like that?"

Frank winced. "It's not so simple. Many of the stuff has yet to be fully decoded and translated, and even if their scientists could understand the theories, it would years before anyone could start building advanced materials. From Lorik told me, even clan technology is mostly evolutionary, not revolutionary, which means that they wouldn't be too far ahead of the Inner Sphere in developing the technology."

"And?" She gestured with a hand, prompting him to continue.

"For the Warden clans, Des Winters will be taking the data back to Clan Goliath Scorpion, so that evens out matters on that side. As for the Successor States, we'll be selling them the tech, at a hefty price, of course."

"Of course. But what about the merc who wants to go into the open market for himself?"

Frank smiled. "Might not be a problem. Two days from now, we'll be forming a new merc brigade from all the mercs gathered here."

"Brigade? How do you think to convince all those mercs out there?"

"Simple. As of right now, we're the only ones with access to the lost Star League and alien technology. That makes us a monopoly. I'll prove that my single course credit in economics didn't go to waste by stating that as the sole source of this tech, we can sell the data at whatever price we want to the Houses, trickle by trickle. They will want to have it, since they all want to be at the forefront of technology."

"And once one House gets it, the others will want to catch up, so to speak. By jacking up the price as high as we dare to go, we'll be rich in no time. It'll be in every merc's interest to stay with us while we rake in the money, which will be distributed fairly and equally to everybody. They will want to be in."

She pursed her lips, considering. "There's one problem with your plan."

"And what's that?"

"Spies." She said plainly. "Did you ever consider the fact that the movement of eight regiments of mercenaries out of the Inner Sphere would go unnoticed?"

"Among these eight regiments, there will be agents of the Houses and god knows what else." At Frank's stricken look, she carried on speaking. "These spies will be able to procure the info and pass it back to their masters for *free*, which defeats your plan."

Frank looked stupefied for a moment, before he came to his sense again. "So we find those spies. It's that easy," he hesitated, "isn't it?"

She scoffed. "You're lucky Forsen Mandela cut a deal with the Dragoons. Now pull up the dividers. I don't want anyone overhearing me."

Frank did as she asked, and she went on. "I wasn't sent here just because I was a company commander, but also because I'm Wolfnet. I have files in a secure place that lists the name and allegiance of every agent and spy here, and some narco-interrogation tools in my quarters on the *Nile*."

"So in other words, you know who's a spy and who's not?"

"Yes. Well, 95 percent sure. I have a plan for ferreting out the rest, don't worry."

A thought struck Frank. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you seem to be someone the Dragoons can do business with. I won't be too wrong if I say that if this merc brigade idea of yours takes off, you'll be in a pretty high position, maybe even CO of this whole thing, right?"

"Nope, you won't be too wrong. But Commanding Officer will be a bit too much for me, *right now*."

"And there're other reasons for forming this merc brigade that you haven't told me yet. Be honest. The Dragoons want to know."

Frank shrugged his shoulders. "Sure. One is to protect this world as well, since it's gonna be our golden goose. The more important reason is to study up on the guys that beat the original aliens, and hopefully help defend humanity when the time comes."

"You don't think small, do you?" She laughed. "What you're proposing is exactly what the Dragoons were sent to the Inner Sphere to accomplish years ago!"

"The Dragoons will stand with your mercs in this endeavor, for a price, that is."

Frank understood instantly. “You also want a copy of the data. No problem, since that was in your original agreement with Forsen.”

“Good. We’ll go back to Outreach when the spy issue is settled. You will be holding your troops here, right?”

Frank nodded. “Only a few people will be going back to Outreach. Or at least, that’s what I’m planning. Most of the mercs will stay here to refit their machines and train. I’m thinking of trading for food supplies from nearby inhabited worlds.”

“Which are crawling with pirates.”

“I’ve a plan for that too.” He leaned in close, and whispered *sotto voce*. “Let’s just say the advanced fighters aren’t the only good stuff the aliens left us. I’ve got something that the Falcons don’t know we have. And that makes us one heck of a merc unit from the very start.”

Climbing up the side of his refitted *Awesome*, Ian felt relaxed in the warm afternoon sun as he entered his cockpit.

True to her word, Daniela had gotten some of her techs to fix up his *Awesome* with clan tech. Ian had accepted the 320-rated XL engine, salvaged from a *Dragonfly*, two clan tech PPCs, a clan ER small laser, and enough clan type double heat sinks to outfit the mech.

Plus one very special Inner Sphere weapon, placed in his right torso.

He started up the mech without any difficulty, and it was soon eating up the ground in huge strides, walking towards the Circle of Equals for the mech duel.

Two mechs from his Lancers accompanied him, while a whole lot of people were already waiting around the circle, all of them behind the invisible shield that Lorik had set up around the arena with a shield generator, after some judicious stripping of a ground battery to remove the generator.

Stalls of food could be seen behind the shields, heaped with cans of rations and even some plates of cooked meats, which could only be the result of some hungry mercs taking advantage of the natural fauna. Ian’s mouth watered as he ran his scanners over the tables.

Off to one side, Des’ Harbinger Tina was holding a rapt audience captive with her music, while a few crazy techs were carrying out acts more suited for a circus, performing to a mass of people which included even some Falcons hungrily munching on meat sticks.

It almost felt like a carnival.

Daniela’s *Masakari* was already waiting for him inside the shielded area, and as he walked up to the edge of the arena, the shield dropped temporarily for him to enter.

Their mechs faced off against each other, with more than a kilometer between them, within the two kilometer diameter arena. Ian quickly drove all thoughts of food out of his mind, as he got into his warrior mindset.

“This is Galaxy Commander Lizabet Danforth!” A loudspeaker blared out. “This is a Trial Of Grievance between Major Ian and Star Captain Daniela Mattlov!”

Not *exactly* a Trial of Grievance. Ian also noted sourly that she omitted his surname. Not that it was his *real* name, but still...

“Warriors, you are free to engage!”

Ian started his mech running forward, firing off his PPCs at extreme range as he did so. The two ER PPC poured out damage equivalent to three of his old Inner Sphere versions. One shot hit, slashing a gash in the *Masakari*’s right leg.

Surprisingly, Daniela did not open fire, instead sprinting towards him. Ian checked his computer quickly, trying to assess her mech’s configuration.

The computer came up with a pulse laser boat with a targeting computer, which Ian groaned at. She certainly wasn’t going to take any chances, sacrificing some range for the ability to confirm a strike, and even to target locations once the fighting got close.

He backpedaled the *Awesome*, trying to keep the range while lighting off with his PPCs constantly. He would only get one more free salvo off before she could use her large pulse lasers in reply. Another PPC hit the *Masakari* right in the middle, but it had more than enough armor there to spare.

She got into range, and fired off with all four of her large pulse lasers. Ian cursed as three of the shots hit, two of them punching into his right arm, and the other into his left arm.

His next salvo of PPCs missed completely, while Daniela continued carving into his mech, the right arm stripped bare of armor and exposing the PPC to damage. An idea occurred to Ian.

He lowered the right arm, hoping to lure her into thinking that his right arm PPC was destroyed, and continued to fire only his left torso PPC. It hit on the next discharge, reducing her center torso armor to tatters.

He ran forward as she started working on his left torso, using aimed shots to remove his left torso PPC from the fight. The armor on that location was completely stripped away, but the PPC was not hurt, and Ian managed to keep his mech up and moving, despite the loss of almost two tons of armor.

She stepped the *Masakari* forward as well, ready to end the fight with some well placed shots to his *Awesome*. Ian had other ideas.

He fired the heavy gauss rifle he had held in reserve so far, the heavy nickel iron shell streaking from the barrel in the right torso to smash into the *Masakari*, in one instant crushing the remaining center torso armor to nothing, and

digging deep into the internals. Several puffs of smoke poured out of the gaping middle of the tottering mech, while a grinding sound could be heard, indicating gyro damage.

Ian followed up by bringing up his right arm PPC and whipping both PPCs into her mech, the particle beams stabbing into her right leg, snapping it at the bone.

She fired back before her right leg gave way, the blue energy darts seeking out his exposed left torso, but Ian foiled her move by torso twisting to his left, letting her shots play over his center and right torso, reducing most of the armor there into ruin even as her mech collapsed onto the hot ground.

He twisted his torso back, and trudged over to her mech. He lowered his guns to her prone mech, and spoke through his speakers.

“Yield, quiaff?”

“Aff, I yield.” She replied breathlessly, the air knocked out of her lungs when the *Masakari* fell.

As Ian looked around, he noticed dozens of spectators tuning out of the fight and going back to having fun and food. He wanted to feel offended, but found he couldn’t work up the anger, nor even some irritation. He smiled ruefully.

*Sure is nice to be able to relax*, he thought. It had been a grueling campaign, and the impromptu carnival was an excellent way for them to rest and enjoy life after the taut tension of the past few days.

He started thinking about parking his mech in a spot nearby so he could participate in the fun as well, and hopefully drag Daniela along.

*Temptown, Harlech,  
Outreach  
Chaos March*

“What do you mean, Landar is dead?” Frank Meronac demanded of Lieutenant Mitchell.

“You heard me.” The police detective was unfazed, and continued reading the file in his hands. “A man matching his description was gunned down in a brawl in Temptown two weeks ago. The body was found, and his face was positively identified. His remains were cremated just yesterday, and his possessions were left to one,” he took a closer look at the file, “Forsen Mandela. That’s you.”

“Huh?” The merchant was puzzled. “Why does his stuff go to me?”

The Lieutenant flipped through a few pages on his file searching for the entry before replying, “Uh, because there was a letter in his apartment which stated that all his belongings go to you?”

“And that’s good enough?”

“Yes.” Mitchell answered curtly. He had better things to do than cater to these two mercenaries.

“And what about the killer?” Frank asked.

“Some deadbeat who ran away before he was caught. Murders like this are a dime a dozen in Temptown. We don’t have the resources, nor inclination, to pursue this matter further.” He closed the file with a slap, and threw it on his desk.

“A man got killed and that’s all you have to say?” Frank was incredulous, his eyes wide. “What sort of policeman are you?”

“The sort who doesn’t give a damn about those thugs on the street.” Mitchell snarled. “They can kill themselves off for all I care. Not my business, and none of yours too.”

Frank fought down the urge to strangle the man, but he knew that it was a lost cause.

He looked at Forsen, “Let’s get Landar’s stuff, and then outta this dump.” The merchant nodded his head in agreement.

Forsen didn’t look too unhappy though, because all the profits for the trip was his.

Or would have, if he and the other operators hadn’t agreed to Frank’s conscription of their ships for his brand new mercenary brigade.

Frank had offered generous terms, dangling a share of the profits from the sale of the advanced technology before him and his crew, which he had immediately accepted.

Even better was the potential, the *opportunity*, to change the transport business forever.

The police had already run through the Landar’s items once already, but when no discernable clues were found, they simply palmed everything off to Forsen. It was a quick process involving several forms, and a bored storeman passing over the stiff in a duffel bag, also belonging to Landar. Frank had the feeling that this sort of thing happened everyday, and that the police were glad to be rid of the stuff.

Frank ran over his choices over the past few weeks in his mind as they walked out of the Temptown police station, a drab and gray three floor affair that did little to inspire law and order in its grimy surroundings. Graffiti was scribbled over its walls, in bright colors that served as a sharp contrast to the building’s dullness. Slung over Forsen’s shoulders was the bag filled with Landar’s belongings.

To discourage muggers from thinking they were easy marks, Frank and Forsen wore their handguns openly, while Frank wore a bulletproof vest under his jacket.

Almost immediately after the drone warship was destroyed, another programmed archive in the files had appeared to the people in the command center. Pascal Thome had been smart and quick enough to hide the information from the clanners present, waiting until Frank and Ian returned before breaking the data to them.

After the Falcons had left Einstein, about the very first thing he and the others did was to board the nearest dropship to the alien space facility.

An alien spacecraft production facility! Right in the middle of the asteroid belt, it was basically a huge asteroid itself, the size of a small moon. And if that wasn't enough, there were two alien spacecraft within its voluminous hangars, each the size of a jumpship, but with far greater cargo and carrying capacities, and armed to the teeth with advanced weaponry.

The reason given for the late revelation was the fear the Qlictorio had of the drones taking control of the facility, much like the underground base. As usual, they had devised another elaborate program requirement before allowing the new owners of their legacy access to the space facility.

Frank had felt a bit betrayed as he tried to understand the justification for the Qlictorio's convoluted plots. The ships could have saved quite a few lives if they had been revealed at the very beginning, instead of after the battle, when so much had already been lost.

Daniela Mattlov, who had elected to remain behind as bondsman to Ian Dorlacen after she lost to him in the duel, had been furious at Frank's sleight of hand. It had taken Ian a few days to calm her down. And in the end, Frank said he never did recall any agreement that they were obligated to share spacecraft with the Falcons, sticking to the letter, but not the spirit, of the agreement.

All they had agreed was that the Falcons would leave with all the data from the Star League and alien archives, while the base would go to the mercs, who had after all, discovered it first. And strictly speaking, the alien space facility was part of the base.

It was a moot point. The Falcons were gone, back to the Clan Occupation Zone sans one *Black Lion* warship, many warriors, and many mechs.

Galaxy Commander Lizabet Danforth had been informed of the possible threat from beyond known space, but she had told them the chances of the clans taking the warning seriously was very slim. After all, who cared about the invasion of little green men when there were more than enough enemies already on your border?

And besides, the attitude of most clansmen regarding aliens was that "if they appeared, we would destroy them all too!"

A dangerous attitude, after what Frank had seen of their technology, of which the drones were the lowest rung.

He took comfort in a book Ian had lent him, "Wisdom of The Universe", by Homer Kellogi. There was one paragraph which Frank found very apt for their situation now.

*"What is a homeworld, you ask? I'll tell you: a homeworld is any chunk of rock in space where man can live, whether it is Terra or new Terra or some other Terra. And I can promise you, if there are any little green men who try to push us off, they are going to have a real fight on their hands."*

That had sounded nice, but also disturbing. Frank had no wish to have the entire galaxy embroiled in war in the future, for it had seemed to be humanity's one bane that they would never be rid of. Jean Posavatz had also gone back to Roche, after the Goliath Scorpion *Hunter* class jumpship *Far Traveler* reappeared in-system two weeks after their last battle. The *Bleeding Past* went with her, along with the same items and information the Falcons had taken.

Des Winters, and the majority of his retinue, stayed on Einstein. The Seeker had not explained his reasons, but Frank guessed it had something to do with Deserk's death. He had accompanied them to Outreach, where Captain Sheik and Bryan brought him to the Inland South area of the city.

Deserk's death was only one of many losses they had endured, even if it was one that had struck closest to Frank. He was saddened by the warrior's sacrifice, but the hardest hit was still Descartin Winters, who still seemed like a zombie even after Ian had counseled him.

Throughout the journey here, and in the one month before they left, Des had not touched the controls of a mech or anything similar even once. Not for simulator battles, not for live fire practices, not for mech drills.

He spent all the time in his room, where screams of anger and hurt could be occasionally heard. Sometimes, they could hear sounds of things crashing onto the floor, or of fists hitting the wall with tremendous force. Des came out only for food and to relieve himself, but it always took either Yoshino, Tina, or Wolkul, his personal technician, to remind him.

His Sage, Lorik, was too busy having fun with all the new science he had discovered. The elemental had survived the battle unscathed, and with a great deal of respect earned after he had killed a *Lemming* singlehandedly. Frank had planned to sell the tech off to the Houses, with the mercs all getting a cut of the profits. He, Ian, Jadine Sheik and several other leaders had planned for some long hours before they came up with a workable deal.

All of the merc present had agreed to Frank's scheme, and in true mercenary fashion, the commanders of the strongest groups got the main command positions.

Frank, as de facto commander of the Raiders, got posted as second in command, answering only to Ian Dorlacen, whose Lancers were the single largest command.

Next in line were the others, Hamirah Rasouf and Robert Feehan, who were tentatively assigned as regimental colonels, even if there weren't any real regiments set up yet.

They needed to make a trip back to Outreach, both to settle loose ends and to get into contact with the houses to sell their technology. Ian and Frank led a small contingent of mercs, leaving Robert Feehan in charge of Einstein, where his prior experience as a regimental commander could be put to good use training the new formations. But they needed to get the spacecraft ready first, since nobody wanted to go back on the oh-so-vulnerable jumpships.

It took the jumpship crews a month to get used to the new alien spacecraft and the advanced navigational systems, which also needed refitting to make them suitable for human operators. Some science fiction buff had dubbed them *Nautilus*, after Captain Nemo's famous and fictional ship of the seas, and the name stuck, for these ships were far more advanced than anything humanity had, much like the make-believe *Nautilus* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

It was a lot of testing and experimentation before Lorik and Forsen were convinced that the ships were fully dependable. The first *Nautilus*, which they named *Nemo*, after the fictitious captain, had been the one to carry them all the way from Einstein to Outreach in just a month, at a FTL speed of about 15 LY per day.

They had modified the hull at great effort to support four dropships, of which only two were used for the journey to Outreach. The other *Nautilus*, christened *Ahab* after a popular vote, was still undergoing refitting at the space yard, which the spacers had given the unflattering name of "Galactic Pit Stop for Hitchhikers", inspired by the title of an old book. Frank had a sneaking suspicion that any future *Nautilus* would be named after Horatio Hornblower and other famous ship captains from novels.

Well, provided they could get even the minimal manpower to operate the yard. Even the refitting of the *Nemo* had required practically their entire tech force. For once, Frank didn't have a plan to produce ships, or even mechs on world, for that matter, despite the functional factories and facilities on Einstein. Heck, there were even massive borehole mines that could extract huge amounts of material for use, provided there was enough manpower.

The *Ahab* was slated to make runs to outlying systems in the Periphery, particularly in the Rim Collective, to trade for food and supplies. Each dropship would be armed with battle armor troops and mechs to discourage piracy. The *Ahab* itself would be a final deterrent, but Frank hoped it would not come to that.

Frank recalled the month spent in hyperspace on the *Nemo*. The trip was quite comfortable, actually, and even the few personnel with known TDS were unaffected, which gave credence to the hypothesis that it was the highly disruptive energies in the zone accessed by the KF drive that caused the debilitating effects.

Hyperspace had been a orange place, filled with small black shapes. Lorik had explained the black spheres as gravity field echoes in hyperspace of stars and planets. To Frank, the black shapes often passed by quickly, which also gave him a rough gauge of their speed in real space.

They could have gone faster, but they decided to err on the side of caution. Nobody wanted to end up 'lost' in space if the hyperspace drive failed.

They had exited about two days worth of dropship travel away from Outreach's zenith jump point, and proceeded to the planet with their dropships burning in at a standard 1G acceleration.

Jadine Sheik got them through the tangle of security checks caused by their unorthodox entry into the system, which Frank had insisted on because he did not want anyone to know of the *Nautilus*.

Both dropships carried a mix of mercenary commanders, and spies exposed by Jadine Sheik's Wolfnet list and some judicious testing of all personnel by her and Benny Greaves, who Ian vouchsafed for, and was assigned to help Jadine root out the remaining spies, due to his spec ops training.

Hamirah Rasouf had been mortified to learn that Benny was actually a spy from the Taurian Concordat, as was Frank. And as he thought about it, Frank realized that Ian never really told him about his own connections to the Taurian Concordat, or why Benny could be fully trusted. *Even* if Benny had agreed to work for them and not reveal any secrets from Einstein.

Most of the spies, however, were die-hard loyalists to their governments, and almost all of them refused to swear allegiance to the new merc unit they were forming on Einstein. There were five from MIIO, three from LIC, eight utterly inept operatives from SAFE, two from the Maskirovka, two from the ISF, four from Comstar ROM, three from the Periphery not counting Benny, and most ominously, two from Word of Blake ROM.

Frank hated the Wobblies, primarily for their beliefs. He had been raised on a poor world without much in the way of technology, and he had no desire to see humanity plunged into a dark age before rising again. To Frank, technology was neither inherently good, nor evil.

But the alien tech did have some ominous implications, especially the sentient/machine interface, which Lorik had renamed Man/Machine Interface, and nicknamed MMI for short. It promised incredible advances for mech control technology, but Frank was worried about the abuses that are possible with such direct intrusions into the brain.

Still, the few scientifically trained people they had with them were not enough to fully decode and understand the new technology, and Frank had already decided that they would sell off the Star League information before thinking of selling the alien tech next. He wanted to let their own scientific staff and their own mechs have a crack at the new tech first.

Failing that, he had a plan to get some of the best and brightest minds in the Inner Sphere to Einstein, playing on the many contacts he had made at his alma mater, the NAIS. He had wanted to go to New Avalon anyway, but it wasn't for business at first.

Interestingly, the one Star League Defense Force intelligence officer they identified, a lone *Sagittaire* pilot named Annette Fourier, agreed to work with them, on the grounds that they would reveal the information to the Houses in time, which Ian had easily agreed to. Ian had thought of assigning her as a liaison officer to the Star League.

So they had landed at the Harlech Interstellar DropPort after a system transit of nine days from the time they detached from the *Nemo*, at which point Wolf Dragoon security took custody of the unrepentant spies for 'disposal' to their respective embassies.

Frank was smart enough, however, to have each group of operatives carry several ‘advertisements’ for the purchase of the advanced data back to their Houses, complete with contact info for transactions. Even if the paper ads did not convince the House leaders, it was a foregone conclusion that the spies’ own testimonials would.

For this trip to Temptown, Frank had accompanied Forsen just to talk to the man who had started this whole business, specifically because of the discrepancies that had cropped up between Forsen’s retelling of the man’s story and Ally’s records.

Landar had claimed to have landed on the planet with a pirate band, but there was no record of any KF jump into the system for the past hundred years!

Not only that, but the small portable defense shield he had used to convince Forsen had turned out to be available only to the aliens, and not the Star League. And even the small device he had given Forsen had some crucial design differences with those of the Qlictorio.

Which all added up to one huge mysterious puzzle. And Frank hated puzzles, especially when they had cost so much in lives and material.

The key machine they had used to get into the base had its components fused, rendering the device unusable ever again. Lorik had been puzzled at this, because it had clearly been meant for reuse. Yet another mystery, because nobody had been spotted tampering with the machine, according to the surveillance cameras.

And the circumstances of Landar’s death had raised all sorts of question marks in Frank’s mind. It seemed too pat, too coincidental. It was entirely possible that Landar was still alive, but for what possible reason? Unless he was working for some hidden agency that wanted them to find the alien base, and then...

And then what? Frank couldn’t figure it out, try as he might, while he walked along the streets of Harlech towards the Inland South residential area.

*I have conspiracies on the brain*, Frank observed sourly as he nodded in greeting to a huge elemental policeman on patrol, clad in a blue uniform, his retractable truncheon swinging easily by his side.

Frank hoped there would be clues in the items in the bag, though he didn’t hold out much hope. If they had really wanted to hide their tracks, surely they wouldn’t be so stupid as to leave clues in the bag, right?

One can always hope, he told himself. And he wanted those responsible to explain exactly to him why all the subterfuge, the sleight of hand, of which Landar’s ‘death’ was one, was needed.

Frank halted suddenly as he remembered something. Forsen went on for a few more steps before turning around to look at him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Uh, Forsen, can you go get Des instead? I have to go to the Comstar station.” Frank smiled weakly from embarrassment. “I need to send a message to my girlfriend and my parents, and maybe check for any messages from them too.”

Forsen snickered, “What, can’t wait for a few more minutes?”

“Forsen, you don’t know how it feels like. I’ll meet you and the others at the Goat, ok?” Frank started running off without waiting for a reply, “Bye!”

Which left Forsen Mandela staring at the pavement tracks caused by Frank’s sudden departure.

Halting at the gate of a low fence, where a small path led to a small house with two floors, Descartin Winters debated internally whether to carry on his current path. The fingers of his right hand clutched a letter from Deserk, while his left carried a bag filled with a few items he had bought at the mall with the money Ian had given him.

He had been a liability to everybody in the previous two months. He had avoided anything and everything that had once been a normal part of his life, concentrating on his Great Work, where he direct his sorrow and energies to the music synthesizer. He had lost all taste for war and fighting, not caring for the results of the latest mech exercise by the mercs, or even some experimental new technology they were trying out, where once he would have been the first in line.

And even more than that, he feared the inner demon within him that had been unleashed during the battle. It had made him invincible.

It had also terrified him.

So breaking all manner of treaties and agreements, Descartin Winters traveled to Outreach, far behind the lines of the clan front. In a way, he wasn’t breaking anything, though Ian had commented that Comstar would have a fit once they knew about his presence.

And that was before considering the reaction of Khan Ariel Suravov. There was a very good chance that he would be declared a rogue by the clan, but Des did not care. After all, he should have been killed in the last battle. Every day that came after was merely a bonus, one he did not appreciate.

Captain Sheik and Bryan had already walked up to the door, and were waiting for him to join them. Yoshino Ihara waited behind him, patient as ever, one hand resting easily on his katana.

*Why am I doing this?* He asked himself. *As part of my repentance for surviving? Or simply to increase my ache in my soul?*

Another part of his mind answered back. *Because Deserk asked you to do this. That letter was for his wife. He trusted you to carry out his last wishes.*

What was that Ian Dorlacen had said about a healing process? Pain is easier when it is shared?

Des did not really subscribe to the idea of sharing his grief, but it still laid within him, a palpable sorrow that even now threatened to send him over the abyss of despair.

He made his decision, pushing against the gate and nodding to Bryan as he walked resolutely to the door to join them. He could hear the creak of the gate as Yoshino followed, the oil on the hinges worn away by constant use.

After all, he had come this far. Better to get it over with.

Bryan raised his hand to knock, and his knuckles rapped sharply against the wooden door twice, three times, as he called out, "Reena! It's me, Bryan! We're back from our mission!"

"Bryan?" A woman shouted from inside the house. "Hold on for a moment!"

The door was soon opened by a tall woman with short black hair. Her brown eyes conveyed warmth and strength at the same time. Her arms were white with flour powder, as was her face, though she had cleaned her face up a bit with a piece of cloth.

"Bryan!" She saw Jadine Sheik. "Captain Sheik! You're back! Where's Deserk?"

Jadine Sheik cleared her throat to speak, but Des could already see the realization and horror dawning in Reena's eyes.

Sheik spoke with a formal, emotionless tone. "I regret to inform you that Mechwarrior Deserk was killed in action on the planet Einstein. He..."

She was cut off by Reena, who collapsed to the floor near the door, one hand clutching the side of the door, while the other clasped the front of her dress. She muttered in shock, "No, no, no. It's not possible."

Descartin swallowed hard. "Deserk is dead. I was there. I saw it with my own eyes. He died with courage and honor. He saved my life."

Reena looked up at him. Her teary eyes brightened for a while, thinking he was Deserk, but they faded as she realized he was someone else.

"Who..." She asked, as the first tears began to flow.

He answered. "Deserk was my brother. We grew up in the same sibko. I am Descartin Winters, and I owe your husband, my brother, more than I could ever repay."

"Let's go in and talk." Jadine said as she moved beside the grieving Reena, wrapped one arm around a shoulder, and supported her into the house. Bryan and Des went in as well, while Yoshino closed the door behind them.

They sat down in the living room, while Bryan went into the kitchen to make some tea for the distraught Reena. The sofas were comfortable and a small baby crib hung nearby, where the smallest occupant of the house lay sleeping. Des put his items down on a nearby table.

"Tell me everything, Captain. I want to know." Reena said in a small voice, even as she tried to hold herself together to listen to Jadine. She tried to hold back her crying, but to no avail, even as she reached into a pocket for a handkerchief.

Sheik shook her head. "I wasn't there, but Star Captain Winters was. Let him tell you what happened."

Des sighed. "It was an all out fight. Our foes came on without mercy, without remorse. Deserk went with me to hold up a group of enemy reinforcements to buy time for the rest of our forces. We were badly outnumbered, but we held on. In the end, however, he was killed by an orbital bombardment from a warship overhead. Before he died, he destroyed my mech to make me eject, and that saved my life."

Reena visibly paled. "Orbital bombardment? Who would dare to use such tactics?"

Des clenched his fists. "I wish I can tell you more, but the long and short of it is that the agencies responsible for Deserk's death have paid in full for their crimes." The vehemence in his voice permeated the room, a sign of his rage.

He relaxed his hands, and the air, the atmosphere around him did likewise. "He left you a letter. I think you should read it." He reached over and plucked the envelope from the table, handing it to Reena.

She opened the envelope and took out the letter, unfolding it carefully as though it was coated with acid.

Reena spent a few minutes reading it, weeping silently.

She finished the letter, and fell back into the sofa.

"What did he tell you?" Des did not wish to intrude on her grief any more than necessary, but in a way, he was also sharing her pain.

"He knew he was going to die." The letter shook in her hands. "He wrote to tell me that he loved me, that he was sorry for not being here for young Rachel's birth, that he was sorry for not being here for me in the future. He said he just *knew* that it was inevitable."

What she had said was also the gist of the letter Deserk had left to him. Descartin had been furious when he had realized that if he had been a bit more perceptive before the battle, he might have been able to pick up Deserk's unease. And things might have been different.

"So what are you going to do now?" Sheik asked.

Just then, the baby in the crib began to cry. And no wonder, as the sense of gloom in the house was so strong that it was almost a physical presence. Reena quickly moved over to the crib and held Rachel in her strong arms, cooing and swaying gently to lull the child to sleep. Strangely enough, that brought some color back to Reena's pale face.

"I still have four months of maternity leave before I return to active duty." She said softly. "After that, we had planned to go into the Home Guard command, and work shifts, while we would be able to raise a real family here on Outreach. Deserk said he did not want Rachel to grow up in a sibko, where only hardship awaited her."

"And now?"

"I don't know. Tomorrow was so bright. Now... now all I see is darkness. I don't know what to do. I have to work, and then somebody will have to watch Rachel. She'll have to be sent to some child-care center in the day." Even as she spoke, she was already considering her options and discarding the least helpful ones.

Des stood up, and walked over to the crib. "May I?" He asked, as he offered to carry the baby.

When Reena hesitated, he said, "Deserk was my brother by blood, so that makes this child my niece. I will never harm her."

In fact, Star Captain Descartin Winters, for all his journeys, travels, and battles, had never held a child before in his life, but he was not about to be dissuaded by his lack of experience. Reena handed him the child gingerly, and he was tentative at first, treating Rachel like a porcelain vase.

Yoshino Ihara and the others stared on in amazement as Rachel initially cried loudly, her lungs bursting with sound, before being gradually calmed to sleep by the muscular clanner, who mimicked what he had seen and swayed his arms soothingly to an inner rhythm.

"A strong child." Des remarked, surprised that he could even feel pride in this *freebirth*, this natural-born child of Deserk's. The most striking features were her eyes, which were the same eyes that stared back at him every day in the mirror, and the eyes which he had shared with Deserk.

As he held the child, Descartin understood why Reena had seemed better after carrying the baby. In a way, it was a strong reminder that Deserk was still with them, in the child, his flesh and blood.

*These children are our future*, Des realized. That was what Deserk was also fighting for, what he had died for.

He looked at Reena as he slowly laid the baby into the crib. "Ms..." He was unsure how to address her.

"Just call me Reena. I was also a product of the iron wombs." *Nameless*, was the unspoken thought.

"Reena. I am sorry that events had turned out as they did on Einstein. Whatever happened there must remain secret for yet some time, but rest assured, I will not let his death, his sacrifice, be in vain. Whatever happens next, know that I am willing to help whenever you require it."

"And so are we. The Dragoons will never abandon the family of such a brave warrior. I was there too. And I made a promise." Bryan said as he walked in with a tray of tea. "And uh, sorry for taking so long. I had some trouble with the water heater."

They all sat down again, and before an awkward silence set in, Reena asked Des to describe his childhood with Deserk, of which Deserk had said little to her. She did not press further on the details of Deserk's death, as she probably knew as a warrior herself that some matters have to be kept secret.

They drank tea, and ate some biscuits which Reena made herself. There was even some laughter when Des recounted some of their misdeeds in the sibko, even as cadets in training.

As he related his youth, Des realized that by doing so, they were both recalling their happy memories with Deserk in their minds, and it helped to assuage the grief.

Time passed quickly, and before he knew it, it was almost five in the afternoon, when they would have to meet up with Ian and the others at the Goat.

Reena had seemingly accepted Deserk's death by then, though the anguish in her was still visible. But she was on the way to recovery, and Des finally understood what Ian had meant about sharing pain, because his heart did not hurt so much either.

He handed her the bag of presents he had bought at the mall, containing some toys and books for the child, including a cuddly Nova Cat plushie that he would not touch with a ten foot pole under normal circumstances. He offered some money as well, knowing full well that it was not his, but rather Ian's, but Reena refused.

It was the very least he could do. But with this last task accomplished, he felt empty.

*Is there anything left in the world for me to do?*

//route> Outreach-Woodstock; through to <New Avalon>; receive >Clarice Ferguson //encode text//

*Dearest Clarice,*

*Sorry for not sending this out earlier, but I just got back to Outreach. Ahead of schedule, I might add.*

*I'm fine, and all my limbs are in working condition, which is more than I can say for many of the other mercs who went to the Periphery. I nearly got killed more times than I could remember, but somehow I made it. If your father hadn't been so stubborn, I wouldn't have to risk my neck in the first place. I would getting a cushy garrison job with some Davion Guard unit, rebuilding after the civil war.*

*Still, I can't say this trip has been a waste. Far from it. I've learnt a lot, and seen a lot in these few months. Can't say more, but let's just say I'm getting closer to my goal of getting your father to accept us. If he still doesn't, then we'll elope. There's this paradise in the Periphery...*

*Yeah, I know, he might decide to take his anger out on my parents. That's always the sticky part. They aren't willing to leave Lackland.*

*So how are things going with you? Is there a lot of work at the hospital? I certainly hope not. In any case, take care of yourself. Doctors aren't of any use to anyone if they're sick themselves.*

*And how's the research going? I heard just before I left that funds were going to be pulled because they needed it for rebuilding, which would be a damn shame. There're many people who would benefit from your work. Maybe you could get Doc Banzai to help.*

*I miss you a lot. I miss your voice, the smell of you, the way you laugh at me whenever I did something stupid or funny. I miss having someone to talk to, when I could just be myself.*

*There's a file document for my parents attached to this message. It's in condensed form, so help me transmit to it them, because it's cheaper to do it from New Avalon.*

*With a bit of luck, I will be going to New Avalon in a few weeks time, so we might finally get some time together again. It's supposedly for business, but being near the top of new management has its advantages.*

*I'll tell you more when I get back. Take care.*

*With all my love,*

*Frank*

Frank nodded to the Comstar acolyte as the white clad technician compiled the message into the batch of data to be sent out.

He checked his watch. He was getting late for their meeting in The Goat's Tavern, a favorite hangout for mercenaries on Outreach.

Ian Dorlacen stared at Daniela Mattlov in disbelief as she polished off her third cheeseburger in as many minutes.

"Is anything the matter?" She asked on seeing his shocked expression.

"Uh, I know the food here is good, but can you stop gorging yourself like that? People are staring." He took a look around as he rotated his head, the grimace apparent on his face.

"They can stare all they want. I am not doing anything wrong, quiaff?" Ian winced at her use of the clan word. He really did not want to draw any more attention to themselves than they already had.

"No, but tell me. Have you ever had a hamburger before?"

"I have never eaten something as good as this." She said between mouthfuls. "All I had while in the sibko and serving in the clan were combat rations. Even in the occupation zones, we were not allowed to wander out into the freebirth cities. The Khans did not want us to become corrupted by their ways. Policing was left to the lower castes and the failed warriors."

*But you're getting corrupted now anyway. Score one for living in the Inner Sphere.* Ian wondered, not for the first time, why Daniela had insisted on becoming his bondsman after he had defeated her. He had expected her to simply accept the loss and return with her unit back to her clan. Instead, she had stayed with him, as well as the surviving elementals he had captured in his first battle. The reason she gave him was it was honor and clan custom.

She was not the only one. Much to Peggy Yeager's chagrin, Galietra Binneti had decided to stay on as well, citing that it was the Lancers who had taken him as a bondsman. He was quickly put in charge of their aerospace contingent, composed of the few remaining *Seraphs* and a handful of standard fighters that had survived the campaign.

He could always feel a certain tension between him and Daniela, but he could barely figure out what it was, and he was afraid to try. During the two months they had spent together, she had complained incessantly that he was not treating her like a proper bondswoman, granting her all the rights and privileges of a warrior despite her own insistence that she earn them first.

There was simply nothing to earn. She was an elite warrior, and even if she had fought and killed members of his unit, Ian could hardly bring himself to hate her. That was one advantage of fighting in mechs. Combat and death were largely impersonal affairs, and in the twists and turns of the wars of mankind in the past thousand years, there have been more than enough cases of foes turned comrades.

Ian had brought her, along with Benny, to Outreach. While it was largely to settle the affairs of the new unit they were forming, Ian also had another objective, to find out more about the situation of the Taurian Concordat before deciding how to return to Taurus.

The mercs had a chain of succession if anything happened to the main commanders, or the 'ringleaders', as Hamirah Rasouf, now a Brevet-Major, had commented ungraciously. Ian had a feeling he would not be in charge for much longer, and that command would eventually be handed to Frank.

They had entered the restaurant twenty minutes ago, with Lorik and Tina in tow. Seated around two tables arranged next to each other, they ate and talked quietly while waiting for Frank and the others to show up.

Ian caught a movement towards their table out of the corner of his eye. He turned around to see a Chinese man dressed in a fashionable black suit, holding a wine glass in his right hand even as his left hand came up amicably up in a sign of greeting to Ian. The long nails of the fingers on his left hand glittered with reflected golden light according to the traditional Liao custom.

"Good evening, Major Dorlacen. I trust you are well after your excursion to the Periphery?" In this one question, Mandrinn Lin De Jian served notice that he knew about the new 'arrangement' the mercs had set up, and his intention to persuade Ian to pass on to his government the data for the discovered technology.

*The vultures start to gather.* Ian tensed himself inwardly for the negotiation that was about to start. He pasted a smile on his face, and answered back. "I'm very well, Mandrinn Lin, thank you for asking."

"Ahhh," Lin drew out a long breath as he sat down on an empty chair and placed his glass on the table. The others looked at Ian expectantly, but he waved them to keep to their own business. This was something he could handle without their help, and they would not be able to understand the intricacies of the situation anyway.

Lin continued, "It is good that you are fine. There are certain issues that need to be discussed..."

Never losing the smile on his face, Ian interjected, "You can discuss them with the lawyers we have hired in the city. They are more than willing to settle the issues of payment and data transfer."

"Surely there is no need for such middlemen," Lin replied smoothly, "After all, we have worked together for many times now. That should be reason enough for us to come to an agreement that would be beneficial to everyone. That technology you have found could be the savior of all humanity."

*Wow, they got the info out of their operatives that quickly?*

"Which House Liao and the Capellan Confederation thinks it is? Sorry, but I'm willing to sell it to all the Houses equally, so that everybody would be on even footing. Also a chance at more profit." Ian took a swig from the bottle of beer in front of him. "We're not the Gray Death Legion, and I'm not a goody two shoes who is willing to save the human race from itself etcetera blah, blah, blah."

Ian stared hard into Lin's eyes. "You want it? You pay for it. Same as everybody else, and everybody gets a chance."

"I know you are a businessman at heart, and simply seeking more profit, but the more.. shall we say... partisan members of your little band might just decide to sell the information on their own, and earn more that way."

Ian dismissed that with a shake of his head. "Maybe, but they are all stuck on the cache world now, and they know that there are many who have paid blood for that knowledge, and that the others will gladly strip their hides if they decide to strike out on their own."

"I was referring to you, Major Ian." Lin arched his fingers, the long nails intercrossing to form an X. "You have contacts with a certain government at the highest levels, am I correct? That would place your loyalties in a rather... precarious position." Lin smiled as if delighted at seeing a fly caught in the web of a pet spider.

Benny paled as he overheard Lin speak, while Ian narrowed his eyes. Daniela polished off her cheeseburger, and stared at them with puzzlement written on her face. *He knows, and that must mean that Sun-Tzu Liao knows too. Lin has never hinted that he knew about my true identity before, or they would have tried to capitalize on it before. Still, I should never have discounted the abilities of the Maskirovka. No, they are certainly not stupid, but I'm not either. You are saying all this because you want me to get you the data at a cheap price, and to your House only. I will not be threatened this way. Two can play at that game.*

"My loyalties are mine to decide, but rest assured that I would try to be as fair as possible to all potential buyers. I won't be like the mercenary commander on Carver, who went one way then the other. Didn't the HPG on that world go down a few weeks before their independence?" Ian rubbed his chin speculatively.

It was a deadly hand he was playing, alluding to the destruction of the Comstar HPG compound by mercenaries under the employ of House Liao. He had been on Carver at the time as well, extricating the last remnants of forces loyal to House Marik from that war torn planet.

It was purely coincidence that he met the merc commander who had carried out the assault on the moon when the Lancers worked for the pro-independence forces later. The merc commander was more than happy to turn over the evidence to him, in return for the use of Ian's hired jumpship to transport them to the Periphery, where they could hide out from Katrina Steiner's wrath until the civil war ended.

That same evidence was in his pocket, ready as insurance should House Liao ever try to screw them over a contract. Comstar would jump onto the Liaos like a trachazoi on steroids should their attack on the HPG become known. Ian had never envisioned using it for threatening the Capellans to keep his identity a secret. For the time being. Because the matter of his identity might be a moot point in a few more months anyway.

Lin shifted uncomfortably, a sign that Ian's subtle attack had hit home. "It was an accident, I think. Thank you for the information, in any case. The Chancellor sends his regards, for you have been most efficient while in the service of the Capellan people, and he does not wish to see your talents wasted. He has expressed a wish that you would accept his invitation to form a new unit for the Confederation. Has your answer changed?"

*Cold day in hell before it does, especially now,* Ian thought. "No, my answer has not changed. I think we have talked long enough. I have issues to discuss with my dinner companions. Have a pleasant evening." He was essentially terminating the conversation with the last statement.

"Very well then. You know where to contact us if you should change your mind. I shall leave you to your dinner." Lin stood up and bowed slightly before leaving. He walked away calmly, but Ian could sense that he was seething on the inside.

*That's one win, but there'll be more. Hopefully, we can get out of here and leave things to the lawyers before anybody else thinks to short circuit the process by coming to me or Frank directly. Try beating them. Hah!*

Ian saw the door to the restaurant open as Descartin Winters, Yoshino Ihara, Forsen Mandela, Bryan, and Jadine Sheik walked in. They looked around for a while before spotting his table. As they started walking towards Ian's table, a flustered Frank Meronac burst in, drawing a glare from the waitress near the door.

Frank grinned sheepishly before joining the group. Ian greeted the newcomers with a wave.

"Good to see you all here. Have a seat, and place a food order. The stuff here is great, just ask Daniela. She's gonna have to work all that excess meat off after really grubbing all those burgers down." He ignored her as she stared at him indignantly.

A waitress took their orders, and it was not long before the food was on their table. They started eating while discussing the happenings of the day.

Ian started first. "I've set up an office in the Hiring Hall. Cost quite a sum, but the security there will ensure that nobody will dare mess with us because they'll be ticking off the Dragoons as well. The data we've brought with us have been stored there, ready for sale, so to speak, to potential buyers."

They had brought 5% of the Star League research files on the *Nile* to Outreach, where they would be sold to the Houses at a hefty price. The data would also serve as proof of their find of the Star League base world, evidence that they had yet more info to be sold at a trickle at a time. Frank and Ian were bent on milking this cash cow for all it was worth. And so did all the other mercs.

"I've reviewed the security arrangements, and they're pretty good. I've got my contract lawyer Fabien Dacort to handle the negotiations. You guys don't have to worry. He's been with me for the past ten years, and utterly reliable. He's not here because he's still preparing the office at the Hiring Hall. I expect the money to come rolling in soon."

"Any questions? I'll bring you guys to see Fabien tomorrow at our new office."

When nobody had any, Ian turned to Frank, "Did you find the man you were looking for?"

Frank replied. "Nope. We went to the address he gave Forsen, but the landlord told us he was dead. We didn't believe it, but a trip down to the local cops confirmed it." He shrugged. "They found this bag in his room, and they put everything he owned into the bag. There was a note telling them to simply hand over the contents over to Forsen should anything happen to him."

He asked Ian, "Is that the way things work in Temptown?"

Ian answered. "Yup. There're no real rules in that place, and even the police are there simply to keep the violence from spilling over to the other sectors. Sometimes they just stick around to pick up the pieces."

He remembered his first two years when putting together the Lancers. Many of his first contracts had been made in Temptown, and many of his first recruits had also been dragged off the bars of the shady ghetto. He had many bad memories of the place, and after he and the Lancers had gained some respectability, they had left Temptown and never looked back.

Frank snorted. "In any case, I don't believe Landar is dead. I think he is probably still alive, and got some poor sap to stand in for his death scene. I was thinking that the stuff in the bag might help us."

"Wait." Lorik interjected. "There is a problem with your logic. If he is still alive, then he would not have left any clues behind, quiaff?"

"Yeah, but there must be more to this. Why did he send us to the Periphery? How did he know there was a Star League base there? All evidence we found on Einstein, plus what Des had found, indicates that nobody else was supposed to know about the Star League presence on that world, much less the alien base there. So who else knew, and why didn't they claim it for themselves?"

Ian gestured to the bag, "Let's find out. Maybe it would have some clues."

Forsen zipped the bag open, and the first thing that came to sight were several "Soldier of Fortune" magazines, which were in the 11<sup>th</sup> century of their publication. Ian and Bryan flipped through them, but they found nothing out of the ordinary.

Next out were some "Penthouse" issues featuring scantily clad women on their covers, which brought a flush to the faces of the men, while Daniela wondered why there were even such publications in the first place.

Evidently, like the demand for mercs, human tastes haven't changed much in the past thousand years either.

Forsen took out several thick books, which were in stark contrast to the magazines, since they were academic in nature. There were two on history, and another on philosophy, while another one dealt with politics. Ian couldn't figure it out. Landar had seemed like a typical pirate on the surface.

*On the surface.* Ian was sure that Frank was correct. Landar was no more a simple pirate out for a quick buck than he was just a simple mercenary commander. There was someone behind it all, and Ian shuddered inwardly as he tried to guess at the organization responsible, which probably had in their possession advanced technology, and the most important asset of all in the war torn Inner Sphere.

*Non-existence.* Or at least as close to it as anything could get in the Inner Sphere. The fact that *nobody* knew about it was the same as being non-existent, right?

"Hey, look at this!" Bryan exclaimed as he held up a key chain in his hands. There was a key and a tag on it.

That drew all their attention to it, as Bryan handed it over to Ian, who inspected it.

"A clue." Ian said, "A real one this time. It's a locker key, I think, and the logo on the key tag belongs to the DropPort, so I would say that this Landar probably has a locker in the starport."

"But what's the number?" Bryan asked.

Ian flipped the tag around, only to be confronted with several weird symbols. Strange, there were supposed to be numbers there, indicating the locker number.

"I don't know. There's only these strange symbols." He passed the key chain around the table, letting everybody have a look at the key chain.

When it got to Frank, he nearly dropped the tag like a hot potato when he saw the symbols.

"What is it?" Ian demanded.

"Those symbols..." Frank paused, "They're numbers all right. But in a language that nobody else should know."

Ian arched an eyebrow critically. "Get to the point."

“The symbols are in the language of the Qlictorio. I ran across enough of them during my research that I can make out their equivalents in Arabic numerals. They used a decimal system too.” Frank took a closer look at the tag, and said, “The number’s 4892.”

“That’s probably the locker which this key opens.” Lorik agreed. “But am I the only one who feels uneasy about this?”

Ian finished off his bottle of beer, hoping that the alcohol would dispel the sinking feeling in his guts. “This whole business stinks. But we have no choice but to follow it through. I think we’re being led by the nose, but our best shot right now is just to follow the steps laid out in front of us until we can figure out what’s going on. So let’s finish our dinner, and then off to the DropPort we go.”

Standing in front of items locker 4892 in the Harlech Interstellar DropPort, Frank Meronac wished for the umpteenth time that his hands wouldn’t shake so badly as he rummaged in his pockets for the key. They had left Bryan and Lorik in the carpark, and Jadine in the Goat’s Tavern, in case it had turned out to be a trap.

Ian and Des Winters waited patiently beside him, as the others crowded around expectantly. The locker area they were in was deserted, leaving them the only people around. It was late at night, after all.

“Frank, can you hurry it up, or do you want me to take over?” Yoshino Ihara asked.

“I can handle it, I can handle it,” Frank mumbled disagreeably as his hands finally came up with the key.

Frank still had to fumble for a while before he managed to push the key into the keyhole of the green colored locker. He heard a sign of resignation from Yoshino as he did so.

Frank turned the key around until a clear click was heard, indicating that the small locker door was open.

Frank looked at the faces around him. “You guys ready?”

Everybody nodded. Frank took a deep breath.

*Here goes nothing.*

He swung the door open, and there was...

A wooden box, about the size of a large file.

Frank took out the box gingerly, as though it might explode at any moment. He noticed a strange symbol on the box. It was an eye situated in a triangular pyramid. There was a strange sense of foreboding around the symbol as he stared at it, trying to make sense of it all.

“Open it!” Daniela ordered.

Frank stopped looking at the cover, and lifted the lid off the box carefully. He handed the lid over to Yoshino.

There was a single sheet of paper in the box.

Frank took out the sheet, trying unsuccessfully to calm his frazzled nerves. He couldn’t understand why he was feeling this way, but he just *knew* that what was on that sheet of paper might change their lives forever.

He started reading aloud to the others.

“Greetings, mercenaries. Congratulations on your find of the alien civilization, which was only possible reason why you were able to find the locker which the box with this sheet of paper was in.”

“Now, you must be very curious, and you must have a lot of questions. I hereby apologize for the lies and falsehoods I had to use to get you to the alien base world. Know that it was necessary for such steps to be taken. You certainly have been informed by now that some massive alien horde is probably bearing down on the Inner Sphere. In a few years time.”

“As for who I am, that cannot be revealed yet. Yes, you may call me Landar for now, for that is indeed *one* of my names, but by no means the only one I have. And before anyone accuses me of murder, I did not get anyone killed during my ‘murder’. It was simply a well staged act. And paying off the morgue personnel and the cremationists did the rest.”

“So I have some questions for you. Answer them as best if you can if you want to track me down. This is my challenge. Prove your worth by solving this puzzle.”

“Who was the big winner in the recent civil war that ended? Which world is their capital, so to speak?”

“What is the sole guarantor of freedom? Free information or guns? And who has it all?”

“What happened on that grassy knoll?”

“Who was Akern Sanders? What did he do, and where did he get his inspiration from?”

“Who are you? Be warned, the answer may be more than you suspect.”

“Last of all, ponder this little poem.”

“All that is gold does not glitter,

Not all those who wander are lost;

The old that is strong does not wither,

Deep roots are not reached by the frost.

From the ashes a fire shall be woken,

A light from the shadows shall spring;

Renewed shall be blade that was broken,

The crownless again shall be king.”

“Sorry for plagiarizing somebody’s else’s work, but figure out the meaning of that poem, and who it applies to.”

“Here’s a major hint. One of you guys.”

“The last question. What does the symbol on the box mean?”

“That is about it. Think carefully on the clues I have given you, and then find me if you can. I shall reveal all when you do. I would wish you luck, but then again I think I need it all for myself.”

“Best regards, Landar.”

Frank Meronac looked up, disbelief plain on his face.

“Do any of you believe this crap?”

## Epilogue

*Harlech Interstellar DropPort,*

*Outreach*

*Chaos March*

A slender man stood at a distance, watching the warriors go over the flimsy piece of paper, trying to interpret the message within. He wore a faint smile, confident that the warriors were unable to see him.

Oh, certainly they could *see* him, but they were just unable to realize that what they’re seeing was actually a person and not part of the scenery.

Thanks to another of his... talents, he could hear every word of their discussion, as they argued about what to do next. A handy skill to have.

“Feeling very smug, are you?” The voice startled him from behind.

He turned around quickly to see a young woman with short cropped red hair grinning mischievously at him. He was not amused.

“Alyss! You nearly gave me a heart attack!”

“Serves you right for being so cocksure about yourself.” She inspected her hands nonchalantly as she spoke, seemingly more concerned about their appearance than about the conversation she was having. “You know, there’s this very useful cure for overconfident people over at...”

“Okay, okay! I get it! Sheesh, I can’t do anything without you hollering in my ear.” He grumbled. He liked having her around, but *not* when he was doing important business.

“What? Are you complaining now? Maybe I should stop checking in on you every few days and see if your so-called ‘important business’ succeeds at all.” She paused. “After all, this has been one of the most hare-brained schemes I have ever heard of in my entire existence. I think lizard-brained would be a better description, or even fish-brained. It really does suck. Big time.”

The slender man ran a hand through his yellow hair, trying to buy time for a retort. “Hey! I seem to remember that some of your schemes weren’t so... ouch!”

She poked a finger into his chest, the nails somehow puncturing through the clothing. “I did get you and that other fool out alive every time, right?”

*This relationship of ours gets more dysfunctional by the year.* “Right.” He sighed. “But what’s so bad about this current plan?”

She tilted her head slightly, considering the question. “Too complicated. Too many variables, too many angles, too many statistics... sorry, got carried away there for a moment. Anyway, it’s like you guys are basing too much on the actions of these new idiots to come out exactly the way you want. That’s not very workable.”

“Still, it’s better than walking up to them and spilling everything at once. And we know how well *that* worked in the past.”

“Hmm, so how about the dinner you promised me?” She quickly changed the subject, which he took to be a concession to his previous point. “There was something about ambient surroundings, nice cutlery, and lousy food...”