

Across the Sea of Stars

By: The Nice Guy

Prologue

Moreau's Dagger
Spiked Heart Desert
Babylon, Pentagon Worlds
20th June, 3067

A day in the desert. A goliath scorpion scuttled languidly past sunbathed rocks the colour of blood. The air shimmered with intense reflected heat, as the sky, devoid of clouds, is occasionally broken by the lazy flight of a vulture.

In the midst of this great expanse of sand and rock, stood several tall, black spires. Piercing up into the sky, they seemed to be trying to draw blood from the heavens. Many warriors have attempted to climb them using only their wits and their limbs.

Many have failed.

The cost of failure is death.

As we watch, yet another man strived to conquer the obsidian watchtowers of the desert. His hands, bleeding and bruised, searched for another handhold to use on the way up. His arms, aching and sore, protested at every new command from his brain. His legs, tiredly supporting some of his weight, were as heavy as lead. His lips, dry and cracked, struggled to draw more oxygen into his lungs to sustain his torturous ascent.

By sheer force of his will, he continued his painstaking, lonely way up to the summit of the spire he was on.

Moreau's Dagger, they called it. Where Ethan Moreau had gained many of his visions and goals for the future. Where it could be rightly said that the true origins of Clan Goliath Scorpion lie, and not on some forsaken training ground on Strana Mechty. Where humanity first witnessed the potent power of the gift of the Goliath Scorpion, contained within its sting.

The climber nears the top, and just barely maintained his grip as he was buffeted by the strong desert wind. Gritting his teeth, he resisted the temptation to just let go, to let the wind carry him within its deadly embrace. No, he told himself. He had gone through too much, too far, and for too long to give up now!

He finally reached the small piece of flat ground at the summit, flinging an arm over the edge, as he pulled himself off the side of the spire. Looking out below him, he could see the entirety of the desert he had traversed for the past several days. One could easily sink into sleep and exhaustion at this point, but this man had other ideas. Trained from birth to be one of the finest warriors ever witnessed by humanity, he had almost inhuman constitution and willpower.

Unslinging his backpack from his shoulders, he proceeded to build a small campfire with the wood he had brought along. It was not long before the flames were flickering strongly atop the spire, as night fell upon the desert, bringing with it the dangers of intense cold.

The man sat in a meditative position, staring at the flames in front of his eyes, as he struggled to make sense of the twisting path the fates had chosen for him. Everything he had undergone, every battle he had fought, every trial he had endured, had led up to this moment. His destiny, surely, must be close to revelation now!

Did General Ethan Moreau know what he had set in motion, more than two hundred years ago, when he had shouted Nicholas Kerensky's name, the name of the ilKhan of the Clans, from the top of the spire? Did he seek answers to the many questions that must have plagued him with the destruction of the 81st Division, nicknamed the Devils of Devil's Rock, or more importantly,

his command? Did the former Star League Defense Force Gunslinger ever regret his decision to remain behind on Babylon, contributing to its ruin?

The warrior knew none of the answers to these questions, but they ran through his head nonetheless, whispering doubts in his mind. He shook his head vigorously, driving away the extraneous thoughts. They were of no use to him.

A bottle of bright green fluid was placed to his right, as a black pouch was laid on his left. Never taking his eyes off the fire, he reached out with his left hand, and dug inside the pouch for an item.

It came out with a piece of blackened mech armour, torn off his mech by a missile from his enemy during his initial trial of position. He had gained the rank of Star Captain in that first battle. The armour piece was fed to the flames.

The hand went into the pouch several more times. As the relics of past battles during the clan invasion were tossed into the fire, he could feel a deep sense of loss, as though he was slowly expunging all physical traces of his past from his present. There were the remnants of a shattered ammo crate from the supply camp on Tukayyid, where he had witnessed such slaughter that even today, he still struggled to comprehend the complex feelings the horrendous campaign stirred within him.

Though it had been fifteen years, he had not forgotten the screams of his men, as the Com Guards swarmed their defensive position in the Losijie District in a singular wave of death, the endless shrieks of autocannon fire, the hoarse roar of massed missile launches, and the thunderous explosions of falling artillery shells shaking him to the very core of his soul.

The next item was a tattered unit patch of the Otomo, the personal bodyguards of the Coordinator of the Draconis Combine, who had fought with such shining courage during the Battle of Luthien. In the end, he had been defeated by a red and black *Archer* belonging to the Kell Hounds.

A piece of myomer muscle, from the *Atlas* he had defeated on Avon. The *Atlas* pilot had surprisingly become one of his most faithful companions, accompanying him on his meandering way amongst the clans. There was no one else the warrior trusted more to cover his back. There were more sacrifices to be made. The vineers of his career as a Nova Cat warrior were just the beginning of the story.

Now his hand came up with a piece of white bone. It was clear to an observer that the finger bone was too large to be that of any human, even an elemental. The massive claw at the end of it only confirms the fact. A piece from the ghost bear he had killed in a desperate duel for his life, during that clawing ritual years ago, when he was abtakha to Clan Ghost Bear.

A lock of hair from the fiery mane of a hell horse, when he had led his branding party, against all odds, to success and glory. He had been much hated then, within that clan of stouthearted warriors, although he had barely spent more than a year with the Bears. The ancient feud between the Horses and the Bears could never be resolved.

A piece from a hellion mask, taken from an Ice Hellion who had challenged him when he was in that clan of hot heads and hotter tempers.

A coyote tooth, taken during his one month sabbatical in Clan Coyote, where he had hunted alongside the ferocious beasts that were the clan's namesake.

A bent maltese cross, bequeathed to him from a dying comrade when he was with the Cloud Cobras. The Cloisters had started him on the road to better understanding of himself, and the world around him. He would be eternally grateful to ecKhan Peyes Mannix for opening his eyes to the fallacies inherent in the universe.

A patch of wrinkled, shed skin from a star adder, picked up during his Trial of Bloodright in the jungles of Arcadia. Then, he had been with Clan Star Adder, and fighting for his bloodname in an unaugmented battle. The piece of adder skin he had stumbled upon had proven to be a lifesaver. The fire was blazing with a frightening intensity, as it eagerly devoured the vineers the warrior had thrown into it. He gazed into the flames, watching the memoirs of his life shrivel and warp in the

intense heat of the inferno. Tired and drained from the efforts of the past few days, he felt a bit lightheaded, and had to center himself to prevent himself from falling into unconsciousness.

There was one last thing he had to do, as all his vineers had been used. The ritual he was performing was the first, and probably the last of its kind. The vineers he had sacrificed were unique to each clan, an identifier of their strengths and weaknesses. He had experienced life as a warrior in no less than eight clans, probably a record in the history of the clans since their founding by Nicholas Kerensky.

Now cradling the bottle of green fluid in his arms, he proceeded to unstopper it. A strong, slightly nauseating smell drifted up to his nostrils. He quickly fought against the wave of vertigo that had suddenly threatened to overwhelm him, and barely succeeded.

Necrosia. The name itself invokes thoughts of ambrosia, the nectar of the gods, and necromancy, the magic of death. And for good reason. The drink of the Goliath Scorpions is deadly and yet possessed of frightening gifts that are bestowed onto those who dare to consume it.

The warrior had to argue long and hard with his superior officers for the supply of the toxic fluid he had obtained before they relented. Normally, when a warrior imbibes necrosia for the first time in his life, it was to be in a strict ritual, with medical care close at hand. More than one Goliath Scorpion had failed the rite of imbibing the toxic fluid, proving the unworthiness of their genes. Famed for the visions it could bring, as well as the incredible sense of focus it could confer on the drinker at times, the warrior had brought it along specially for his vision rite, where he hoped it would improve his scrying of the future. The original vision rite of the Nova Cats was already very potent and draining, and could sometimes even kill the person undergoing it. By drinking necrosia in the hopes of attaining something even greater, he ran the risk of dying in his endeavour. He glanced once at the bottle of thick bright green liquid, then flung his head back as he chugged down the entire contents of the bottle in one swallow. He threw the bottle away, and turned his eyes back to the flames. He could already feel the intoxicating effects of the necrosia dulling his senses, beckoning him to rest. He gritted his teeth and strove to stay awake, waiting for a message in the flames. He remembered hearing that visions came easiest when a person was situated in the middle of dreaming and wakefulness.

His resolve sustained him for barely a minute, when his body convulsed from the effects of the necrosia. He collapsed onto the hard black rock of the spire, clinging onto consciousness as he continued to stare into the flames.

Unbidden thought begun to stray into his mind again, as it drifted through his memories. He saw in the flames a large building, metallic and forbidding, where a group of children were trooping out. Looking closer, he could see the sibko patch of the Burning Tooth Sibko on the clothes of the children, as they were led by a grizzled, limping warrior to a waiting hovercraft transport.

He remembered...

Seek out the past; it is your future.

Loremaster Ethan Moreau, Clan Goliath Scorpion Remembrance

Across the Sea of Stars

Ways Of Seeing Training Facility, Barcella,

Kerensky Cluster

19th April, 3042

“Hurry up, you little stravg dogs!” Secorra, their training officer, barked.

Aff, aff, I'm already moving as fast as I can. I am not little, nor am I a dog. Descartin grumbled in his mind, while lugging along the massive pack that he had just been issued with, containing all the necessities for barracks living.

It seemed very stupid that each and every member of the sibko was likewise grappling with an identical pack, which came to almost their height, and weighed as much as they did. How in name of the Kerenskys did the officers expect them to carry it with any speed?

The ground on which they walked was a flat piece of ground, the grass having been trampled flat long ago by the unforgiving boots of countless cadets and training officers. It served as a parade ground, drilling field, and general practice area. Des wondered why they never got to pave the area with concrete, which would have made movement over it a lot easier.

The line of a dozen cadets from the Burning Tooth snaked to a non-descript building two levels high, with the insignia of their clan on one side the only decoration and mark of affiliation. It would be their residence for the rest of their training lives.

Secorra continued haranguing them as they marched, his harsh tone hurting their ears and his incessant spittle showering the nearest cadets with droplets of saliva on their once clean uniforms, now soiled and dirty from the constant dust rising from the ground.

The huge pack had been presented to them the very moment they had stepped off the hoverbus which had brought them to the training facility from their former home in the city suburbs. Next their assigned training officers had introduced themselves, in a fast and unflinching manner that almost made Des' head spin with the speed of their short perfunctory speeches. It was a far cry from the comforting tones of Ulvor, their former sibparent, who had sent them away on the hoverbus.

Their immediate instructors' names were Secorra, a large, grizzled and uncouth looking man in his forties, and Jazelyn, a graceful woman who did not look as if she belonged in the training facility, but rather still on the frontlines of battle.

The overall officer in charge of the facility was Varro Drummond, a former Star Colonel who had decided to retire from battle after sustaining too many internal injuries during his last battle.

The instructors had not wasted any time, immediately shouting at them to proceed to their new barracks to stow their new equipment in their bunks on the second floor, and assemble at the parade ground in twenty minutes time. The cadets were still a bit dazed at the sudden barrage of instructions and orders they had been saddled with after a long journey on the hovercraft, as they hesitantly got to grips with their tasks.

"Not easy at all, quiaff?" Deserk commented as he moved behind Des, also struggling with his pack. Des noted with some relief that Deserk was also having the same amount of trouble with his load.

"Aff. Let us stop complaining and get this as over as quickly as possible." Descartin concentrated, tensing his body as he increased his speed, fighting the weight of the pack every step of the way. He knew he was tiring himself out unnecessarily this way, but he could hardly care less. In short order, he had taken over at the lead of the line, moving almost at jogging speed as he reached the stairs. Without pausing for a breath, he continued up the stairs at the same speed, pushing himself as he thudded up the steps to the bunks.

He picked the bed nearest to the door as he entered the room, throwing the pack into the locker beside it. He slammed the door of the locker shut, then ran out of the room, feeling a lot lighter and faster now that he was no longer hobbled by the pack.

He burst down the staircase, bounding down the steps one whole flight at a time, and needing only two dangerous leaps to get to the ground level again. As he went down, he passed his sibkin trudging their way up, all their expressions with the same mixed look of jealousy and concern. Jealousy because he had dared to take the lead on their very first task, concern because they still had a whole day of training in front of them.

Des liked, no, *wanted*, to win, to be the first, no matter what they were doing. From being first into the showers to the first to finish eating, he was always among the first few, if not the first

to finish a task. The same attitude carried over to their training, and everybody knew he was easily the best among them.

However, he had never sought to impose his own superiority on the others, and perhaps it was this reason, more than any other, that allowed him to remain on good terms with his sibkin. He was accepted as their nominal leader, their head mischief, and the benchmark everybody aspired to. He slid to a halt on the parade ground in front of Jazelyn, and snapped to attention, allowing a blank look to settle over his face, forcing himself to show no fatigue even as his lungs heaved for air. He kept his posture straight, fighting the urge to slump from exhaustion due to his previous exertions.

She stared at him appraisingly for a few seconds, then looked at the stopwatch on her wrist. She looked relaxed, as though she was not worried at all about the success or failure of his sibko, unlike Secorra, who was getting more agitated and even louder by the second, which Des had not thought possible. Jazelyn possessed a serene calm that was in stark contrast to the permanently uptight Secorra.

About two minutes left, Des estimated to himself silently. The others had better hurry up if they did not want to get on the wrong side of their training officer on the very first day.

He heard the sounds of his fellow sibkin as they formed up on him, coming to attention in the exact same posture as he was.

He knew that anyone who looked at the long line of cadets that had formed up would think that he was looking at a group of clones. Strictly speaking, they were not, but the products of a gene matching from two warriors. Siblings did tend to look very similar, especially in such a controlled reproductive process as the scientists used.

Their geneparents were bloodnamed, of course. The clan's eugenics program had a rigid set of rules and guidelines set down by Nicholas Kerensky himself that described in detail the process by which new generations of warriors are to be produced.

The scientists would first take the genetic material of two warriors, then in a reasonable facsimile of the reproductive process, split the chromosome pairs into their respective zygotes. The sperm and/or ova would then be combined in a tube to give the embryonic future possible warrior, who would then mature inside an iron womb.

The technique gives enough assurance of genetic similarity, but also ample randomness in the final genetic product due to the 'jumping gene' effect that nature had employed to ensure genetic diversity and co-opted by clan scientists.

The genefather of their sibko was Star Captain Jifandar Lenardon, an undistinguished warrior who served in many minor skirmishes for the clan, but who never really achieved great fame in battle.

Their genemother was the distinguished one, Star Colonel Hannah Winters. She died while defending one of their primary mech facilities in a Trial of Position with the hated Smoke Jaguars, her cluster destroying over twice their numbers in Jaguar mechs, while she alone accounted for at least five more. That act earned her genetic material immediate use in the breeding program. The Winters bloodname House was primarily known for its elemental lines, but there were still a few mechwarrior lines, all of them renowned and highly prized by the clan. Only the very best genetic material were used, to ensure the skill and abilities of the next generation.

And Descartin was determined to be the very best warrior the clans had ever seen.

Jazelyn looked at her watch just as the last cadet arrived, then looked up with a tight smile.

"Ten seconds of time left. Adequate." She remarked to Secorra, as he strode up just behind the last cadet to fall into line.

"Adequate?" Secorra nearly choked on his saliva as he said this. Des hoped he *would* choke. "That is not adequate. That is pathetic! These little cubs are weak and slow! Not a single one of them will survive their training, much less become a warrior of the clan!" Descartin tried to watch impassively as Secorra slobbered all over the place.

"Shall we put your belief to the test, then?" Training Commander Varro Drummond asked as he walked to the front of the line of cadets standing rigidly at attention.

“Each of you will bid for the right to take on these cubs.” He turned to the cadets. “And you, in turn, shall strive to defeat your instructors. Or at the very least try to.” He grinned evilly, a devilish leer that combined with the metal parts all over his body, would have sent others of lesser fortitude to hiding under their beds.

Descartin and his sibko was made of sterner stuff, though, and the display did not frighten them in the least.

“The starting bid is six for each of you.” Varro intoned solemnly.

“I bid four cubs for my most esteemed colleague.” Secorra sneered at Jazelyn, confident that he could handle all eight of the cadets, leaving her with no glory at all with her easy victory. Nine, on the other hand, would be too much for either of them to handle.

She countered easily. “I bid three for my colleague, and the right to choose his opponents.” Her eyes flicked over to Varro Drummond for a while in a gesture that Des could not understand. Secorra laughed cruelly. “Bargained well and done. I shall defeat any three of these cubs you choose easily, while you shall be pulled under by the weight of nine others. Choose my opponents now!” He swung his arms, loosening the muscles in anticipation of the fight.

Jazelyn did not hesitate. It seemed that she knew who to choose already even before the first bid was made. She pointed at him, Deserk, and Lintya, a girl who was the among the best hand to hand fighters in the sibko.

After himself, of course.

“Step aside from each other, and then we’ll begin.” Varro turned to the line of cadets. “All of you, do not hold back. They have not yet earned your respect, and to hold back is to hold them in contempt, to underestimate them. And we, the Nova Cats, do not underestimate anyone! Give it your all, and show me, show them, what you are capable of!”

As the line dissolved into two clumps of cadets facing their respective opponents, Varro shouted, “Begin!”

Jazelyn’s figure immediately blurred into action, smashing into the cadets with efficiency and effortless grace. Des found himself watching the fight for a while before his eyes were brought back to his own fight by an insult from Secorra.

“Come on, you spineless cowards! Fight me!” Secorra yelled as he started advancing on them menacingly, his huge hands balled into fists.

Turning his head slightly, Descartin exchanged glances with Deserk. Des jerked his head slightly towards Secorra, urging his sibkin to attack first. It was their usual plan for taking on any opponent. Des would let Deserk have the honor of trying to take down an opponent first, and only commit when Deserk was either defeated or severely overmatched.

It started off as a standard bidding ritual amongst themselves, but eventually evolved into its present form when Des seemed to win whenever he won a bid, and Deserk lost when he won the bid. They had come to this arrangement after Deserk had gotten sick of never having ‘any fun’, as he had put it.

Deserk’s eyes rolled upwards as he resigned himself to his fate, moving forward together with Lintya as they split up, forcing Secorra to divide his focus. Their plan was clear, to force him to try to defend from two sides at once.

Secorra laughed in response to their actions, and spotted Descartin standing aloof to one side. “No hiding, cub! Come and face me like a true warrior!”

Des refused to be taunted. He would let Deserk and Lintya have their chance at glory. If they won, he would not have to fight, while if they lost, he would have the advantage of having observed his opponent beforehand. *A true warrior employs guile and cunning in combat.* He stayed where he was, letting his stance irritate the instructor into making a rash move at his sibkin.

Secorra moved towards Lintya first, a massive paw smashing aside her arms as she tried to defend herself, winning through by sheer strength. He threw his other hand forward in a venomous punch, hitting her right in the stomach even as Deserk flung himself into the air on a jump kick.

Deserk smashed into Secorra's back as the big man finished off Lintya with a vicious kick to her face. She sprawled backwards on her back, and laid very still. The only evidence that showed that she still lived was the rapid rise and fall of her chest.

Des stared intently as Secorra easily brushed off Deserk's attack, charging a shoulder into his sibkin as Deserk tried to get up from his kick, then used both palms to slam them against Deserk's temples, as though trying to squash a melon with his hands. Deserk went out like a light, falling unconscious to the ground.

Secorra flicked a finger out disdainfully at Descartin. "I will make this especially painful for you." He was not even winded.

Des cocked his head to one side while walking forward, as if considering the threat. Secorra stepped in swinging a punch around without warning, his body movement not betraying any indication of his attack.

Except Des was already spinning below the blow and to one side, flailing a leg around like a chain as he did so, the tip of his boot a hammer into Secorra's knee joint. He spun away, a mocking smile on his face.

Secorra buckled for a while, before he recovered and tried to get in close to inflict his punishing blows on Descartin. He moved with deceptive speed for his size, getting within arms reach of Des.

As he punched again, Des dropped to the ground and rolled forward until he was to one side of the warrior, then clasped his hands to deal Secorra's knee another damaging blow. He rolled away again as Secorra lashed out with a kick, barely missing the fast moving cadet.

As Des gained some safe distance from the furious instructor, he could see that his attacks had achieved the desired effect of reducing Secorra's mobility. He was favoring his left leg, the one that Des had concentrated on. But Des also knew that he had yet to deal any real hurt on the man. He closed the distance, this time intentionally telegraphing a swing of his right leg up towards Secorra's face. The instructor predictably caught the foot, but before he could do anything with it, Des was already in the air, his left foot propelling his body from terra firma and then whipping up into Secorra's right cheek. As the injured man howled with pain and released the hold on his right foot, Des moved forward.

It was a trick, as Secorra suddenly slugged him in the stomach just as he advanced, the blow driving all the air from his lungs. Des fell to the ground on his back, as Secorra went in for the kill. *To hell with it!* Des shunted away the pain in his middle, but he continued lying on the ground. Just when he sensed Secorra within striking range, he twisted his body around, both legs angled as he spun on his back, using his last reserves of strength to gain momentum as his legs hit into Secorra's legs again. The man stumbled, his hands flailing, and it was all the time Des needed.

Instead of retreating, Des leapt forward this time, Secorra's out of position hands closing in behind him as he launched a hand at Secorra's throat. Secorra's thick arms closed in around Des even as his right hand managed to clutch the man's windpipe. A red haze fell over his vision, as he begun to crush his opponent's throat.

"Stop!" The red haze fled as quickly as it had appeared. "Cadet! You will release the instructor's throat right now!"

Des looked around uncomprehendingly, his hand still on the neck of Secorra in a tight death grip. The words took a moment to register, and Des relaxed his hand slowly. It took him another few seconds before he realized Secorra was already unconscious.

He got to his feet shakily, and took a good look at the other group which had tangled with Jazelyn. They were littered all over the parade field, while Jazelyn looked none the worse for wear. He could swear that she gave a smirk as she looked over Secorra's unconscious body, and a matching grin towards him.

Deserk was groggily getting to his feet as well, while Varro wore an inscrutable look as he observed the scene. Des realized belatedly that it was Training Commander Varro Drummond who had given the orders for him to stop. He felt the red haze threatening to cloud his sight again, as he grew angry at Commander Drummond for stopping the fight.

The Commander seemed to sense his rage, as he walked up to Des, who came to attention despite the pain in his guts. Drummond asked, "You seek satisfaction, quiaff?"

Never taking his eyes off the Commander, Des replied, "Aff."

Varro grinned sardonically as he opened his arms wide. "Take your best shot, cub." An invitation for attack.

Des did not care anymore, even though he knew he should not have spoke back to the Commander in such a manner. He went in, both hands held up, ready to block or absorb any attacks from the Commander.

Drummond did not bat an eyelid as Des punched forward cautiously, ready to pull back to defend. All of a sudden, the Commander shifted forward, his head meeting the punch before it had gained much speed, taking away its sting, and the next thing Des knew, he was hit in the head by a roundhouse that was harder than anything he had ever felt in his life.

He staggered backward, and then another blow that was equally as hard went into his stomach. Des felt something go snap inside him, and blood rising up to his mouth. He flew backwards several meters from the force of the attack, and rolled for several more before stopping.

Des could feel the blood trickling down his chin, as he looked up to Varro, who was standing over him.

"You will obey my instructions. And do not even think that your defeat of Officer Secorra impresses me in the least. There is only one way to earn respect from me, and that is when you are a true warrior of the clan. Jazelyn, get this litter of cubs out of my sight!" Varro started walking away, as Jazelyn started hauling cadets to their feet and shoving them into line. For the second time in the day, Des pushed away the pain his body was feeling, and got into the ranks.

If Varro Drummond had looked back, he would have noticed Descartin's grim smile.

Finally, a real warrior to look up to. I will beat you one day.

"March! Double time! Left! Right! Left!" Jazelyn started yelling, as the cadets marched back to their bunks, leaving a dizzy Secorra only just coming to his senses.

*Ways Of Seeing Training Facility, Barcella,
Kerensky Cluster,
19th December 3042*

"General Aleksandr Kerensky, the Great Father, led our ancestors away from the excesses of the Inner Sphere, after the corrupt and decadent House Lords were unable and unwilling to reform the Star League."

Their knowledge tutor Troussier spread his arms expansively. "The Great Kerensky brought the Star League Defense Force to this part of space, where they first colonized the systems that we now know as the Pentagon worlds. What are their names?"

Troussier pointed at Deserk, who was sitting ramrod straight in his seat. Deserk replied almost instantaneously.

"Babylon, Circe, Arcadia, Eden, and Dagda."

"Correct. Now," he pointed at another member of the sibko, a girl called Petra, "Tell me why they are *named* as such."

To her credit, Petra did not gape even though *none* of them knew the answer to that obscure question. She simply admitted, "I do not know."

"That is all right. To tell the truth, class, nobody knows the answer!" Troussier laughed madly for a moment, which made Des groan inwardly. *Did this have to happen every hour?*

"But there is a pattern in their naming. Arcadia, Babylon, Circe, Dagda, Eden. What is the pattern?" He stabbed a finger this time at Des, who was ready with the answer.

"The first letters of the names of the worlds follow the first five letters of the alphabet."

"Excellent! So you see, the naming of the Pentagon worlds was not wholly without logic!" Troussier beamed, then continued on relating the history of the clans, asking questions at specific members of the sibko and adding in some interesting anecdotes during the course of his telling.

It had been like this for the past few months, as they sat through lesson after lesson taught by Troussier, who seemed deranged with his wild hair, white in color with his advanced age. And in fact, many of them had concluded that he *was* indeed insane, with his crazy tangents in every lesson, spiced with his own observations, which often seemed to miss the mark, and were completely irrelevant besides.

Descartin wondered privately why Troussier was even allowed to remain at his job, but his lesson, ironically, was one of the few that every member of the sibko looked forward to, for entertainment as much as education.

Questions were allowed, but must be submitted on a small piece of paper at the end of the lesson, where they would be answered at the start of the next lesson. The small pieces of paper, however, were often barely adequate for more than one question. Still, Descartin was grateful, for it had served its purposes admirably without wasting too much time.

For four hours each day, they would sit in the stuffy classroom with poor ventilation, ignoring the sweat slowly accumulating on their bodies, the single slow moving fan overhead unable to wick away the moisture quickly enough. The high humidity of the weather did not help matters any.

The only thing that made it all bearable was Troussier. He would challenge their intelligence, force them to use parts of their brain that Des was sure had never been activated before, since it ached afterwards, and generally made them rethink much of everything they had learnt in previous years.

“Alas, soldiers do not take it well when they are forced out of their vocations, and forced to be common laborers, farmers, and merchants. But the Great Father had no choice. Without people to grow food, we would starve. Without laborers to produce machines, we would descend back to the Stone Age. Without merchants, we would not be able to have an infrastructure capable of catering to our needs.”

“Here is a question for the whole class. What did the Founder of our clan, Phillip Drummond, do after he was demobilized?”

This one was easy. They all shouted as one, “Scientist!”

Troussier nodded. “He was one of those tested out, but he accepted his new role, refining Streak SRM technology, or more accurately,” Troussier looked embarrassed, “tried to.”

“They did not succeed, though I must add that the basis of their work later did contribute to the advancement of Streak technology developed by other clans. But that was definitely not his greatest nor his last contribution to the dream of the Kerenskys.”

“He formed a family unit with our *other* Founder, Anna Rosse. Aff, she was a mere merchant, she was not a warrior, nor was she warrior trained. But to her we owe many of our customs and rituals, as well as the path of visions.”

Troussier glanced at his watch. “Ah, time is up.” He ignored the looks of disappointment on their faces. “Now you young aspiring warriors report to Training Officer Secorra as usual for weapons drill. Shoo!” He started shoving cadets out of the classroom, while collecting the small slips of paper from them at the same time.

Barely minutes later, Descartin was disassembling a projectile rifle and assembling them from scratch, under Secorra’s watchful eye.

Varro had been less than happy with Secorra’s performance during their ‘introduction’ to the cadets, but the warrior had nevertheless proven his worth over the last few months, being an expert on firearms, despite being an average hand to hand combatant.

Secorra’s perpetual cursing and swearing did not mark him out as an elite gunner at first, but their first day on the range, when he aced the course in a demonstration, changed their minds in a hurry.

It was difficult, however, as he insisted on total familiarity with any weapon before they were allowed to use it. They had to be able to strip weapons in complete darkness, recite all the range and specifications, and generally everything there was to know about the guns.

And on the range, Secorra had seemed especially concerned about safety, urging every cadet to take extra precaution before firing. Rumor in the sibko was that many cadets died once in a live fire exercise involving a machine gun under his watch. Even though Secorra was absolved of all responsibility (the dead cadets were trying to show off), it probably made him sit up and take extra notice of safety procedures. The death of cadets in silly accidents was wasteful, and the clans above all abhor waste.

Sliding home the bolt carrier group, Des slapped close the rifle casing, pulling the loading lever several times to ensure smooth operation, before pulling the trigger to clear the gun and shouting "Weapon ready!"

All around him were the clicking sounds of triggers being pulled, as his fellows completed their tasks. Descartin, as usual, was first, though he was only a second faster than Deserk, who came in second.

"Looks like you are slipping up, Cadet Des. Cadet Dee is getting better and faster." Des' only response to Secorra was a noncommittal grunt.

Everybody had taken to calling him by the first syllable of his name, because 'Descartin' was simply a mouthful. Likewise, Deserk was now called 'Dee', because his real name sounded too much like 'desert'. Not exactly the sort of name to strike fear into an enemy.

Secorra was the one who had made that remark on his progress, along with a nasty smile on his face. He had never really forgiven Des for beating him in their first fight, but he also knew not to go too far in case Des, who was getting bigger and stronger all the time, should lose his patience and decide to kill him just for the sake of getting another instructor to pound on. In fact, all of the cadets were growing very quickly, a stage of development described as a 'growth spurt' by Jazelyn. Troussier had once estimated that their full height would be about 190 centimeters, due partly to proper nutrition, and also partly due to the recessive but expressed elemental genes in their Winters bloodline.

Their height was not the only similarity that they share. Most of them had light colored hair, and piercing green eyes. The hair color was said to come from their genemother, and their eyes and facial features from their genefather, according to observations from Varro Drummond. They have never seen their geneparents themselves.

And the cadets never will, because they were both dead. Even if they were not, clan tradition dictates that there should be no contact between sibko cadets and their geneparents, citing inefficiency in training and other psychological reasons.

Des did not really care if that was true or not. If the clan said it was true, then it must be. There could be no other alternative, and there was no reason for them to lie about such trivial matters.

"Now that you have shown that you can strip and assemble these weapons in broad daylight, the next step would be to do that in total darkness." Secorra's hand flipped a switch on the wall, and the room plunged into darkness.

Des quickly ran through all the steps again, mentally preparing the locations of each and every component as they were taken out, placed, and a short while later taken up again to be refitted.

"As before, cubs. Two minutes. Ready, go!"

Click, clack, clock.

03rd January 3043

"And so Phillip Drummond and Anna Rosse, disillusioned with the loss of their children, embittered by the madness that had overtaken the colony, sought refuge with the Great Founder Nicholas Kerensky, who had established his base on Strana Mechty."

"Phillip Drummond tested out well enough to be a warrior in the Great Founder's new order, and was assigned to Clan Nova Cat," Troussier swelled with pride, "*our* clan."

“Anna Rosse became a merchant, and stayed close to Phillip Drummond even though Nicholas Kerensky had begun caste separation. She took care of their only surviving child Sandra, who would be one of our most important Khans.”

“Here is a question, what rank did Phillip Drummond achieve in the clan?” Troussier asked Lintya.

“He became Khan.” The girl answered confidently.

“Quite so.” Troussier continued. “For someone who was once in Amaris the Usurper’s service, this was a very high honor. What did the great Kerensky hope to show by allowing a former Rim Worlds Republic officer to be Khan?” Troussier asked Feelia, a girl who was notable for the fact that she was the tallest in their sibko, leading some to wonder if she should have gone for elemental training instead.

As for Troussier’s question, nobody knew the answer, but they could always guess.

“The Great Founder did not know about his past?” She answered tentatively.

“Wrong.” Troussier replied in irritation. “There are clear service records of every single person who went to Strana Mechty. How could they miss that detail? No, Nicholas Kerensky wanted to show that a person’s past did not really matter, that skill and ability are all that a warrior needs to prove his worth in the clans.”

“Notable members of the clan in the very beginning were Gabriel Devalis, Takaria West, Eliza Lenardon, and John Winters.”

“Devalis was a rare Land-Air Mech pilot, equally versed in mech and aerospace combat. Due to Kerensky’s new dictates, Devalis devoted himself solely to battlemech operation, although later on his bloodname became a general bloodname, with aerospace pilot, mechwarrior, and elemental lines.”

“Takaria West was an exceptional infantry combatant from Terra, her skills honed in the guerilla war on Terra, particularly the fighting in Italy and Greece. Incidentally, she knew Anna Rosse well, being in the same resistance cell as several points. In fact, it was Anna Rosse who advised Phillip to delegate infantry command to Takaria West. From her would come the elementals of the West.” Troussier snickered at his impromptu joke, which Des felt was particularly flat, since it was not amusing in the least

“Eliza Lenardon was a mechwarrior veteran of the Hegemony campaigns, initially a volunteer from the Federated Suns. She was famed for her ability to place laser blasts wherever she wanted. It was her who instituted our fondness for direct fire weapons, destroying our enemies quickly by targeting the weakest points on their armor.”

“John Winters, who was the progenitor of your line, was an infantry soldier from the Free Worlds League, later moving onto battlemech operation when he tested out well enough.”

“With these warriors in the lead, and of course Phillip Drummond himself, our clan easily reclaimed Circe in Operation Klondike. In fact, they were so successful that the other clans grew envious of our warriors’ ability to place their shots to best effect.”

“Nicholas Kerensky did not assign himself to any clan, however. He announced that he would join only the clan which had performed best in the campaigns. Obviously, competition was fierce.”

“Our clan placed well, but not enough to unseat Clan Jade Falcon and Clan Wolf. Clan Wolf won in the end, and the Jade Falcons have been somewhat... envious of the Wolves ever since.”

“Oh,” Troussier said, “And time is up. There is a change in the schedule today, because Officer Secorra is down with the flu. You will be having extra hand to hand training with Officer Jazelyn in Training Shed C.”

Ten minutes later, they were engaged in hand to hand training, supervised by Jazelyn.

Jazelyn was not like any clan warrior they had heard of. Most clan warriors are aggressive sorts, constantly craving sex and action to satiate themselves.

Training officers were no different, often beating up cadets for the slightest mistake and berating them constantly for no apparent reason. Secorra fell firmly into this category.

In addition, Des had heard plenty of stories about Training Officers forcing cadets to couple with them, especially in the more aggressive clans like the Jade Falcons and the Smoke Jaguars.

Jazelyn, on the other hand, was very different. She did not shout at them, she did not use threats, implied or otherwise, to spur them on. The only sign of her displeasure whenever they had performed below standards was a slight tightening of her brown eyes, and a look of disappointment on her slender face.

Strangely enough, that often made them feel bad inside, even more than any of Secorra's raging insults.

And she did not force the male cadets to have sex with her, though that might be due to other reasons. The scuttlebutt among the sibkos in the training camp was that she and Varro Drummond were practically sharing the same room every night, and some freebirth cadet from a neighboring cadet squad had even remarked that they might as well be married for all the time they spend together.

Des felt like throwing up whenever he heard of 'marriage' and its associated words. The idea of two people coming together to conceive children was simply... disgusting, not to mention the actual birthing process itself.

He could not explain it. It was just too ingrained in him, something that was instilled into every child of the iron wombs since their emergence from the birthing chambers.

Trueborn and freeborn. One the controlled product of scientists and technology, the other a random mix of one of nature's oldest processes. Trueborns are exalted, while freeborns are reviled. It was the way things were, the way things are, and the way things will be.

Des hurriedly brought his attention back to his hand movements hitting on the practice dummy before Jazelyn could notice his wavering attention. He cursed himself silently for letting his mind wander during training. He really wanted to make it to the next stage of mechwarrior training, and he did not want to slip up in the least.

He wanted to write his own legend. The Remembrance had inspired him in the beginning, with its accounts of brave warriors succeeding against impossible odds. From an early age, he had told himself, "My name will be in the Remembrance one day, tales of my glorious deeds told to all to hear."

And the only way into the Remembrance was to be a warrior.

13th February 3043

"Here is an interesting question from Cadet Descartin about our breeding program. He asked, quite reasonably, why did we not simply produce clones of successful warriors from their genetic material? This ties in quite well with the question that Cadet Petra asked, why were so many from your sibko weeded out even before coming here?"

Troussier ran a hand over his hair, organizing his thoughts for a moment, then continuing, "Sometimes, nature truly knows best. Evolution is only possible if there was some form of mutation, some sort of change, from generation to generation. Or else, nothing would ever improve, nothing would even change. How can we even predict future improvements, even to our own species?"

"Aff, if we started mass cloning of warriors who are proven winners, we can guarantee ourselves a steady pool of warriors of a certain base standard. At the same time, our gene pool will also hardly improve, because we have removed the randomness factor completely. Trust me, even the process by which you came about was random to some extent, which accounts for your differing abilities. Some of you are better shooters, some better runners. Why? Do not answer, this is a rhetorical question."

“Genes can mix and match with each other during certain stages. Transposing, the scientists call it. In effect, it is a roll of the dice.” Troussier produced two six sided dice from a pocket, placing the dice on the table in front of him.

“Cadet Jovre, you are quite good at mathematics. So tell me, what are the chances of these dice getting a result of two when I roll them?”

Jovre, a muscular looking boy, answered, “One in thirty six.”

“And a result of twelve?”

“Also one in thirty six.” The reply came immediately. Jovre was the best at abstract thinking, and that was one of the few things that Des was not the best in the sibko at. But only Jovre was better than him, which was some consolation.

“And so it is. There is a chance of abysmal failure, represented by the result of two, in the sense that the trueborn in question is so utterly stupid, slow, or weak that he is weeded out almost at the very beginning. Then there is also the chance for spectacular success, the result of twelve. And cadets, what the clan wants are the results of twelve.”

“But they are very rare. In effect, the clan accepts as warriors those with results eleven and twelve, so to speak. Which most of you are. Sevens, the mode of the rolls, are not accepted, even if they are theoretically on par with the potential of the original genetic material, in other words, the geneparents.”

“Here is something which most people do not know. Ever since the genetic breeding program started, the tests *have* been getting more difficult. Scores which are acceptable ten years ago are laughable today. You surpass your forebears in ways that many of them could not even imagine!”

“And so generation after generation, our warriors would improve. In time, when we return to the Inner Sphere to reform the Star League, our warriors would be far better than anything the barbarians can throw up!”

20th February 3043

It was another lesson on the history of their clan, the Nova Cats.

“Sandra Rosse offered her aging father the opportunity to step down voluntarily from his Khanship. Unwilling to fight his own daughter, and knowing that her claims had merit, Phillip Drummond bowed to his daughter, stepped out of the Circle of Equals, and for the second time in his life, walked away from everything he knew.”

“Upon claiming the Khanship, Sandra revealed that the plan for replacing Phillip Drummond came to her through a vision quest. Many were skeptical at first, but she eventually managed to convince them to accept her changes, which she felt was the way to a more perfect society.”

“She led the way for the clan to take a longer view of events, that every action has consequences that would not appear for centuries. She encouraged people from all castes not to view their lives as unchanging routine, physical training and privileges denied, but rather to explore the spiritual and mystical aspects of their existence, enabling them to focus better on their tasks.”

“When you reach a certain age, your instructors will lead you in your first vision rite. Then you shall also discover the way to focus yourselves and bring greater glory to the clan.”

Greater glory? Right. Des thought to himself. The importance of visions had been stressed from the start, and even dreams were sometimes analyzed for any portents of importance. There was a fable about how a particularly cadet was so good at predicting the future that his dreams of glory in battle were dashed when the clan decided to reassign him as a tech instead to preserve his vision ability.

Hopefully, it was only a fable.

But there was that one time...

It was just a dream he had at night, when they had just arrived at the training center. He had dreamed of a nova cat stalking its prey in a grassland, only to be caught within a trap that caught its foot.

The very next day, they were having an obstacle exercise in an area that had borne remarkable similarity to the one in his dream. It was even more incredible for they had never been to the area before. Des found himself especially alert that day, due to his dream, and managed to evade all the caltrops that were scattered over the area, even though the savasrhi trainers had 'neglected' to tell the cadets of the extra dangers.

The others were not so lucky, and many had suffered injury to their legs. Des kept quiet about his dream, though he knew many of his fellow sibkin were more than a bit miffed at his coming through unscathed, and assumed that he had been warned beforehand, which was definitely not true.

It had taken a few weeks of covering for them in crucial tests to get back on their good sides. However, he was more than a bit worried, and mystified. Before that incident, he had always taken the clan's constant preoccupation with visions and dreams to be mere fantasizing, with no basis in fact.

His opinion had changed a bit, but Des was still leery. Not even the scientists had ever proven as fact the use of visions and dreams, and that did not seem to change in the future. He had no wish to announce his abilities based on one single event, and set himself up for disappointment in the future.

No, being a warrior would be good enough, and an honorable way to gain glory. After all, who cared about a bunch of stupid visions?

When they are proven wrong, people turn on the supposed soothsayer. When they turn out correct, people could always claim they knew it all along. Nothing beats hindsight for accuracy.

Another two years, Des told himself. Another two years to getting to my first mech cockpit...

*Ways Of Seeing Training Facility, Barcella,
Kerensky Cluster,
16th March 3045*

"This is great!" Deserk yelled exuberantly as he swung the torso of the mech around to target a slow moving dummy practice drone. Pressing down firmly on his trigger, Deserk was thrilled to see a brilliant laser beam flash out to disintegrate the drone.

Sure, the mech was unmovable, and it was not much of a mech, but it was the very first time they had the chance to actually sit in a mech cockpit. After years of staring at cutboard cutouts, scaled down mockups made of recycled plastic and metal, listening to Seccora and Jazelyn drone on about the basics of mech operation, they finally had the chance to show their mettle.

"Cadet Deserk, watch your 4 o'clock." The harsh voice of Secorra barked into his ear.

Deserk complied, and saw three more drones heading his way. He started to panic a bit, and missed with his laser. The drones came ever closer, as Deserk waited agonizingly for the laser to recharge.

Despite this being only a first mech run for the cadets, nothing in the clans was ever without risk. The drones were rigged with explosives, which were strong enough to destroy the training mech's legs, which were bereft of any armor, and were seemingly made only of tinfoil. They would detonate once they touched the mech, and were programmed with rudimentary evasive programs. The mech itself was ancient, an old *Wasp* that was left over from the Exodus. Nevertheless, it was still an awesome sight.

The pinnacle of human warfare, a mech stood more than 8 meters tall, a towering machine of myomer and alloy that could often level a city on its own using lasers, missiles, or autocannons.

Except this pathetic Wasp, Deserk griped as he managed to connect with one shot. One drone became an orange ball of fire that engulfed one of its companions, leaving just one last drone to threaten Deserk. However, it was getting very close.

Deserk had no doubts that failure here could very possibly mean the end of his life as a mechwarrior cadet. Ever since their arrival at the training facility, two sibkin had washed out of training, while another two were killed in live-fire exercises.

He had no desire to be the fifth.

Not for the first time, he wished he had Descartin's coolness under fire. Des had already wiped out every one of his target drones, and had a hundred percent shooting accuracy. The same could not be said for himself.

Sweat dripped into his eyes from his brow. Deserk used his left arm to wipe off the sweat, cursing the lack of a helmet along with its forehead padding that would have soaked up the sweat. He was able to control the targeting stick with his right hand though, guiding the cursor slowly before the oncoming drone.

Certain that he had a lock, Deserk shot, and was gratified by a satisfying golden blaze. The mech rocked a bit from the force of the drone's death throes, and Deserk realized just how close he was to having the *Wasp* blown out from under him.

"That is enough, Cadet! The exercise is over! You can exit the mech now!" Secorra roared again over the cockpit's speakers.

As Deserk jumped down from his mech to join his sibko on the training ground, he could see differing expressions on their faces. As usual, Descartin was his confident self, his oft-practiced air of indifference and arrogance a well-worn cloak around him. And no wonder, for he had performed the best among them all.

Petra and Lintya, who could pass for identical twins, stood silently at attention, but their faces were still flushed from the thrill of being in a mech for the first time. Deserk could not detect any sign of disappointment on their faces.

Feelia looked fearful, for she had let a drone get too close to her mech, and the explosion had almost destroyed it. She was not hurt, a testament to the toughness of mechs. Deserk wanted to console her, but it would be a sign of weakness.

And weakness of any sort is abhorred in the clans.

Jovre, Ori, and Nioco were much like Petra and Lintya, excited at their chance to finally pilot real mechs, and eager to hear what their instructors had to say about their performance.

"You are all pathetic." Secorra snarled. Deserk was surprised, and as he looked around, he realized he was not the only one. Almost everyone looked as if they had their faces splashed with icy cold water.

Except for Des, who had a feral light in his eyes as he listened to Secorra's tirade. Deserk hoped Des would not do something foolish, like killing Secorra out of hand.

"You almost failed in this test, all of you, and if we had sent just two more drones after your mechs, all of you might have been dead! I expect better, and you all *will* deliver the next go round, or I will toss your carcasses into the forest for the nova cats to eat!" Secorra stalked away as he finished his debrief.

Jazelyn stepped out in front as Secorra left. "Cadet Feelia, can you tell me what went wrong for you?" Her tone was almost casual, her face expressionless. Feelia replied out loud, "I was not fast enough!"

"Aff. Quite right. At least you are honest to yourself. I know you are afraid of being drummed out the program, but we believe in giving chances, even to those who barely deserve it. Foul up one more time, and you will be reassigned. Am I perfectly clear?"

"AFF!" The waves of relief coming off Feelia were almost palpable.

"That is all for the day. You are free to rest, but we have an inspection by the Star Colonel at 0500 hours tomorrow morning, and I expect everything to be in perfect condition, down to the folds on your uniforms. Dismissed!"

As the cadets dutifully trooped away, Des shifted closer to Deserk.

“So how did you do?” Des asked.

Deserk sighed. “I almost blew it. The last drone got very close to my mech before I was able to destroy it. If I had been a second slower, I might be the one in Feelia’s position.”

Descartin nodded. “I understand. But you passed this one, and that is all that matters. Tomorrow is a new day, and another chance to impress.”

“Like what you do all day long?” Deserk grinned. “I suppose the rest of us should be glad you are not taking every opportunity to insult us or put us down for our deficiencies.”

“Why should I do that? I prefer to get along on my own merits.” Des paused. “Besides, what good does it really do to me? This is not really a competition. If we measure up, we will be warriors. It is not a matter of only the best cadet being a warrior.”

“And last of all, maybe I need you to keep me on my toes.” Des smiled wickedly.

They reached their barracks, the others already ahead of them, fighting for room in the two sonic showers stalls. They headed for their bunk, where they started ironing their uniforms on the table in the center of the room. Ironing boards were considered to be a waste of resources.

“So how did you feel the first time in a mech?” Deserk asked as he plugged in the power cord for the iron into a wall socket. He supposed they should be glad the clan did not force them to use archaic irons with hot coals inside.

“Powerful. In control. It was as if there was nothing in the world that could stop me.” Des repositioned his uniform as he started work.

“Except another mech.”

Des scowled. “Of course. And the feeling did not last long anyway, once those strag drones started attacking. It was then I realized that the mechs they let us use were utter wrecks.”

“Well, you could hardly expect them to let mere cadets use omnimechs for training.”

They fell silent at the mention of the word ‘omnimechs’. The ultimate in modern warfare, omnimechs were even more powerful than ordinary battlemechs. Often equipped with cutting edge technology, they could customize their weapons loadout for every battle, giving their pilots an incredible advantage over ordinary mechs.

To pilot an omnimech on the front lines of battle was the dream of every mechwarrior cadet. There fame, honor, and glory could be achieved. On the battlefield, they could gain immortality.

But they had to become warriors first.

And that was no sure thing.

They ironed their clothes in silence, their hands moving according to familiar routines while their minds dreamt of glory to come.

“So how did our cadets do today?” Varro Drummond asked Jazelyn, who was sipping a cup of water in his room. “Their first day in a mech, even those decrepit hulks, quiaff?”

“Aff. It took most of them a while before they realized that even in a mech, they are not invincible.” She smiled. “Except for Cadet Descartin. He reacted as if he had been a mechwarrior all his life.”

She continued. “You should have seen it. He destroyed all of his drones in record time, and was even able to time some of his shots in such a way that the explosion from the destruction of one drone would take out another. Some of the others managed it as well, but more by happenstance than by deliberate skill.” She shook her head in disbelief.

“Your verdict?”

“He is either the best mechwarrior since the Kerenskys, or the luckiest cadet alive. Somehow, I do not think it is the latter.”

“Then we will have to push him harder. I do not want him to rest on his laurels.”

“Definitely.” She hesitated before speaking again, as if afraid of raising the issue. “Do you think he is the one...”

He nodded. "That is a distinct possibility. But the strange thing about vision quests is that some of them are fulfilled only after a very long time. And warrior ability alone does not mean anything."

"And if he is the one?"

"Be careful, Jazelyn. Even the Oathmaster was unable to decipher the vision. We do not even know its meaning, so how can we even be sure of its fulfillment? No, let us wait and see."

A tinge of anger entered Jazelyn's voice. "Wait and see? How much longer must we wait? You gave up your chance at Galaxy Command for a vision quest, that might be nothing more than a wild dream!"

Varro tried to calm her down. "Jazelyn, listen to me..."

"No, I followed you, gave up my place on the battlefield. My chance at a bloodname too, remember that? All gone now, just because of a vision you had!"

"You had the same vision too." Varro replied quietly. "Yes, my ending was a bit different, but for all intents and purposes, what we saw were two possible endings for the same path. The salvation of humanity, or its utter doom."

"The end of humanity?" She barked out a harsh laugh. "The broadsword carving through the Inner Sphere could be anything! *And we are not even there yet!*"

"We could be in a few years. The Crusaders are agitating for a invasion, momentum is shifting towards our return to the Inner Sphere to restore the Star League, and it seems the verdict is sooner than later." His eyes took on a fervent glow as he thought about the restoration of the Star League, the hope and promise for all humanity.

"And if we do start our return, I do not want to stuck here." Jazelyn said. "Back into the action, that is where we truly belong."

Varro nodded in agreement. "I feel the same way, yet we must sometimes sacrifice our personal happiness for the good of the clan. It was Oathmaster Biccon Winters who gave us this sacred duty of finding the nova cat who would be the one to break the broadsword."

"Or fall under its blow." She countered.

"Not if we do our job well. Preparing these warriors as best as we can also serves our clan. Unlike many other training centers manned by disgruntled and aging warriors, we are relatively better motivated, which translates into better scores. This batch of cadets has had some of the best scores for the past several breeding cycles. And I do not think that is a fluke genetic boon."

"That hardly matters to us. You are trying to justify to yourself the reasons for staying here."

"Maybe. But we have been given our tasks by the clan, and no matter what we feel about them, we must strive to fulfill them."

He added, "If you really feel that you cannot stay here, then I can make the arrangements for you to transfer to a combat unit."

Varro sighed, "But I would wish you to consider carefully."

She held up her hand in denial. "I am not asking for a transfer. I just want to be sure that we are doing, well, something significant here."

"We are. We just have to hope in our quest, that it is not an empty one."

"Des?" A voice shook him out of his sleep.

"What?" Des replied drowsily, with a bit of irritation in his voice as well. "Feelia, is it? Can it wait until morning?"

A hand clamped over his mouth. "Shhh! Keep quiet! Do not wake the others up!"

His curiosity piqued, Des sat up on his bed. He stared at Feelia at a while before she pulled back her hand. "Okay, so what is the problem?"

"I need to know how you were able to kill all the drones so easily today."

"You could have asked me after the exercise."

“Not with everyone glancing over my shoulder. I do not need snide comments and insults coming my way from Ori.” Her shoulders slumped. “I am going for another run tomorrow, and I have to pass it, or else I am out. I really need your help.”

Des thought to himself, *what is the harm in telling her anyway?* He nodded mentally.

“All right, I will help you. Now listen very carefully. I saw what happened today. I think you took too much time making sure of your shot. While that confirms a kill, sometimes speed is more important than accuracy, especially when you are facing multiple foes, all coming at you. Be confident in your targeting, and fire once you get even a partial lock. You do not even need to be one hundred percent accurate when shooting at a clump of drones. Even if you missed, it would probably hit one of the other drones near it.” Des shrugged. “Luck also plays a small part, but I guess until somebody figures out a way to challenge Lady Luck to a Trial of Position, she would always be capricious in her choices.”

“Lady Luck? Who is that? I do not understand you sometimes.”

“Never mind.” Des hurriedly waved off the comment. He did not need anyone finding out about the small store of holodisks he had found one day in a salvage dump after an exercise.

He had managed to fix up an old hand projector to run the disks, and it had remained a secret source of entertainment and information to him. He ran the old holovids whenever he was alone in a hidden corner of the facility, and he was constantly on the lookout for more disks to add to his collection.

“What matters is that you *must* be constantly aware of what is going on around you. How many drones are left, the amount of time for your laser to discharge, the distance between you and the drones. These are the three basic factors for the run, and for practically every other mech run, I suspect.”

“So why did they not teach us these? And how did you know such stuff anyway?”

I learnt them from old military training holovids, but that would take more explanation than I am willing to give right now. Des yawned.

“Look, it does not matter if they did not tell us. It does not even matter how I know about these things. It is very late, and we have a long day ahead of us. As long as you know, and I know, that should be good enough.”

“You are a strange person, Des. The others, save perhaps for Deserk and Lintya, would not have lifted a finger to help. You act all aloof and cold, but when it comes to somebody in need of help, you are often the first one to offer a hand. So what are you up to?”

Des tried to look innocent. “Why does everybody assume that I have some ulterior motive in mind?”

“Because you seem almost too good to be true.” Feelia left this final rejoinder as she went back to her own bed. Too far away to protest, Des could only grumble to himself.

“Too good to be true, eh?” A voice from his left whispered.

“Deserk, you are supposed to be asleep.”

“How can I keep my eyes shut with the two of you talking away? I should have known you were holding out on us. How many more pieces of information do you have that can help us?”

“How would I know? What I told Feelia was what I had come to realize during the run itself.”

“Are you sure the holovids had nothing to do with it?”

Des could swear he could hear Deserk’s smile, even if he could not see it. There was a long pause.

“How did you know?”

“You do not really expect to sneak off and not have anyone come across you at times, quiaff? I do not know if the others are aware, but since there is gain in the information from the holovids, I expect you to tell us next time if there is anything in them that could help us. For the good of the sibko, quiaff?”

“Aff, for the good of the sibko. But if you tell anyone else of this, I will beat you so bad you will not walk for a month. We are not supposed to have such material.”

“Aff, my lips are sealed. After all, it is to everybody’s gain.”

Just wonderful. Oh well, there is no real honor in being better because of a hidden advantage anyway. No, I will prove myself to be the best on level terms.

As he went back to sleep, Des kept telling himself that.

Ways Of Seeing Training Facility, Barcella,

Kerensky Cluster,

04th December 3045

“Left arm armor damage 80%.” The computer droned as Des desperately swerved his *Mercury* to the right in a futile attempt to avoid the storm of missiles coming from a *Wyvern*.

The arm damage had been caused by a laser blast from the same opponent, which Des was sure had Secorra at the controls.

Recon nav pint beta, pick up the metal package, get out, and the test is over. Yeah right. Freebirth! Des cursed silently.

It was supposed to be a simple test. Instead Des found himself fighting for his life against a mech more than twice the mass of his 20 ton *Mercury*, and with a fully trained warrior at its controls.

The weapons were all operating at lower levels, but the shuddering of the mech from missile hits attested to the ferocity of the test, and the cracked cockpit plexiglass on one panel from a laser hit showed that even powered down weapons could be lethal. There was no better way to drive home the fact that this was no simulation.

As far as Des could make out, he had only one slight advantage, and that was the speed of the *Mercury*. *Wyverns* were city fighting machines, with a slow top speed and jump jets, but packing a lot of serious firepower.

Firepower that was sent his way time and again.

The location of the battle was not good for him as well. A narrow rocky pass with steep slopes on either side limited the utility of his speed, and forcing him to charge at the *Wyvern* in an attempt to get to the nav point.

He had approached the narrow pass when the *Wyvern* had suddenly powered up without warning. Retreat had not really been an option, and even though there were other ways to get to the nav point, it would have been relatively easy for the *Wyvern* to cut him off an every approach. So Des decided to bite the bullet, and attempt to get the package while his armor was still fresh.

The *Wyvern* was perfectly content to stand and shoot at the oncoming *Mercury*, using its fearsome array of LRMs, SRMs, and lasers to pummel Des’ mech.

Des returned fire with his own lasers, and the sight of melted armor plating on the *Wyvern* was heartening. It still had more than armor to spare though, and the worst part of it was that the other pilot knew it too.

Goal is to get the package, not to defeat this monster! Des reminded himself. It was impossible anyway for him to beat the *Wyvern*.

Des grimaced as another piece of the battered *Mercury* was torn off, while a series of missile near-misses buffeted the light mech, forcing him to concentrate on keeping the mech upright as he finally saw a chance to slip past the *Wyvern*.

The enemy pilot had been too eager to shoot at his *Mercury*, only twisting his torso around but not actually moving the *Wyvern* in order to get a better shot. Des had managed to move his mech such that when he finally unleashed the power of the Myomer Acceleration Signal Circuitry, he would be in a position to get to the nav point *and* threaten the *Wyvern*’s rear.

Des thumbed a switch, and there was a deep throbbing emanating from under him as the myomer muscles went into an excited state, contracting and expanding much quicker than normal myomer, thus enabling the *Mercury* to reach incredible speeds.

The mech was already moving around at top speed when the MASC engaged, and it almost seemed as if a rocket pack was strapped to its back as it suddenly shot forward, whipping around in a tight arc to run around the *Wyvern*.

The *Wyvern*, momentarily thrown off by the sudden acceleration of the *Mercury*, could only trigger off a series of laser blasts which nipped at the heels of the fast moving mech, spraying up bits of dust and sand as the .

Des found himself sweating profusely as the *Mercury* dashed past the *Wyvern*, even as he used the right arm laser of the mech to fire into the *Wyvern*'s rear.

The *Wyvern* slowly turned around to deal with Des, but he had already sprinted away for the safety of distance. In fact, Des estimated that there was more armor on the *Mercury*'s rear than its front!

The *Wyvern* fired its long range missiles and its large laser at the *Mercury*, but Des managed to avoid the shots, running a zigzag pattern to confuse his opponent while keeping one eye on his rear view displays. The mech burst through the pass into a small bowl-shaped valley, surrounded by rock walls on all sides.

Another three hundred meters, he told himself. He could already see the package lying on the ground in the center of the valley, a large metal box, waiting for him to pick it up with the *Mercury*'s hands.

Except that his left hand actuator had already been shot off, and the other arm was hanging on by a few strands of myomer aided by a few grateful thoughts from Des.

Des concentrated hard as he leaned the *Mercury*'s torso as far to the right as possible, trying to maintain the mech's balance while moving at faster than a hundred kilometers per hour. By inserting his hand into the close control interface glove, he extended the right arm of the mech down fully, and snagged the package as the *Mercury* sprinted past.

The *Wyvern* was in hot pursuit, but now that Des had managed to get the package, he had several other routes to use for his escape. There were at least three ways he could use to get out of the immediate area, not counting the pass where he had battled the *Wyvern*.

However, the thought of defeating the *Wyvern* tugged at his mind. What glory he would achieve if he could defeat the mech!

A full missile and laser salvo drove such thoughts out of his mind with a vengeance as the *Wyvern* cut loose, not willing to let the impertinent upstart get away.

Des nearly panicked, and almost bungled his retreat as he almost lost hold of the package, the box almost blasted out of the mech's grip.

It was clear to him that defeating the opposing mech was not the objective of the test, even if it was one he could defeat. Getting away with the package was.

Des engaged the MASC system again, hoping that the myomers would not freeze up under such strenuous use. He could not see any other real alternative to getting away as fast as possible.

He turned into one particular pass away from the *Wyvern*, knowing that the *Wyvern* would not be able to keep up on sheer ground speed alone.

A flare of golden light from above informed him of his mistake, as the *Wyvern* descended on fiery jump jets right in front of him, flying over the steep walls and showing the advantages of having jump jets.

Freebirth, I forgot the Wyvern has jump jets! His mind screamed even as he calculated his chances of turning around and making a run for it again.

He came to only one conclusion. *Extremely poor.*

There were a few final options he could take, none of which were appealing, but he was already desperate, and desperate men take wild chances.

Using the right arm of the *Mercury*, Des flung the metal box at the *Wyvern*. His aim was true.

The *Wyvern* seemed shocked as the package connected solidly with its head, even denting one side of the human-like face. It stood there for several long seconds as the *Mercury* closed with all guns blazing, more to distract than to truly hurt. Then almost like a tree, the *Wyvern* slowly

toppled over onto its back in a tremendous crash. The ground shook violently as a massive dust cloud erupted from around the fallen mech.

Des did not waste any time thanking his good fortune. He grabbed up the box again, and ran back to base.

“I have seen some extremely stupid ideas in my time, *but this one beats them all!*” Varro Drummond roared loudly, half in laughter, and half in mortification at what his cadet had done.

A sheepish Descartin and a furious Secorra were gathered in Varro’s office for the test debrief. By all standards, Des had passed the test, which would determine whether the cadet could move on to more advanced and powerful weapons like missiles, autocannons, and advanced electronics, as well as heavier and more advanced mechs.

Secorra was extremely angry, however, due to Des’ highly questionable tactics. Varro thought the large purple bruise on Secorra’s head also had a lot to do with his present anger. “He used physical combat! That is ground enough for disqualification!”

Varro remained calm in the face of his instructor’s outburst. “I do not recall, Officer Secorra, any direct physical contact made by the *Mercury* on your *Wyvern*. Therefore, cadet Descartin did not engage in physical combat, and thus the result stands, that he has qualified for the next round of training.”

Varro took a glance at Des as he spoke, and he noted the blank expression on the cadet’s face. *Good, he knows when to be silent.*

“Is there anything else, Officer Secorra?”

The big man shook his head, seething to himself. “Neg.” He hissed out the words.

“Then you are free to leave the office. I am going to have some words with the cadet.”

Varro waited patiently for Secorra to leave, and the look on Secorra’s face as he left the office was one of sheer fury at Descartin.

“Cadet Descartin, you have impressed many with your performance in the test.” Indeed he had, for no other cadet had ever faced such odds. In all truth, Varro had assigned the opposing mechs himself, with the other cadets facing old *Valkyries*, *Panthers*, or other light mechs that were only slightly more powerful than the 20 tonners they were using.

Only Descartin had been pitted against a 45 ton *Wyvern* in confining terrain, almost insurmountable obstacles. Varro had not actually expected him to succeed in the test, and was willing to let the cadet through with just a good performance.

But Des had exceeded even his expectations, beating all the odds and returning with the package that was the objective.

The *Mercury* that returned was a walking wreck, with burnt myomer strands protruding from all over the shattered armor.

Appearances could be very deceiving. The techs had already confirmed that the mech would be back to full operational status in just ten hours, which had surprised Varro greatly. Apparently the damage was mostly skin deep, with no damage to the really critical parts like the engine shielding or the massive gyroscopes. Actuators were relatively easy to replace compared to the nightmare of a fusion engine leaking intense radiation.

“So what should I do with you now?” Varro asked the cadet standing stiffly at attention in front of his desk.

“The cadet believes he should return to his bunk for rest, sir!” Des shouted.

Varro hid a smile. It was apparent that the young warrior was exhausted, and tired enough to demand rest that was denied to him but not to the other cadets.

The entire sibko of eight cadets had all passed the test, an excellent record and a testament, Varro hoped, on the abilities of his staff.

He got back to the matter at hand. “I shall give you your rest, provided you could answer a few short questions. This won’t take long, quiaff?”

“Aff!”

“What did you feel when the *Wyvern* appeared? Be truthful.”

“The cadet was shocked, sir!”

“Why?”

“The cadet thought there was no way past the situation!”

Varro smiled grimly. “And why did you use the box as a projectile? That was supposed to be the objective of this mission.”

“The cadet was desperate, sir! And anything and everything can be a weapon!”

“In other words, you were also considering physical attacks, quiaff?”

There was no reply.

“Quiaff?” Varro asked again with an edge in his voice.

“Aff,” Des replied softly.

“At least you did not actually carry one out. And even if you did, there are no written rules forbidding the use of physical attacks, except for a psychological taboo against them.”

Des looked confused. “No written rules forbidding physical attacks?”

“Aff. It was strictly an unwritten taboo laid down by the Great Founder. However, he was also flexible enough to realize that some opponents might not follow these rules, so it was not cast in stone, so to speak. Using such tactics would result in a loss of honor in the eyes of the clans, but some warriors are willing to pay the price for success if it can bring them victory.”

Understanding dawned in Descartin’s eyes.

Varro continued, “When you get back to your bunk and meet up with the other cadets, you will find out that your test had not been entirely fair to you.”

“The cadet wishes to know why, sir.”

“Simple. The others faced only light mechs, equipped with few weapons, making it easier for them to get the package. You were the only one that faced a medium mech, one that was well suited to close in fighting in the hills.”

Varro could see Des trying to hold his anger in check, his jaw muscles tense as he replied,

“The cadet thinks it was not fair to him. What if he had failed to accomplish the mission?”

“You would have passed to the next stage of training anyway, just as long you had done as much as you could.”

“Then why?”

“Because I wanted to see how well you would do in an impossible situation. If we had given you a standard test, I have no doubt you would have qualified easily.”

Varro leaned over his desk to stare into Des eyes, “I wanted you to know that nothing in the clans is ever easy. From now on, you will be pushed harder and further than your sibkin. If you can measure up, you will be one of the best warriors in the clan. If you cannot, you will wash out. Are you willing to accept such a challenge?”

Des stared back defiantly. “Aff, I accept.”

“Hey! He is back!” Deserk announced as a sweaty and drained Des tramped up the stairs.

The sound of clapping could be heard all the way to the parade ground as the sibko gathered around Des. A bubble of noise surrounded him on all sides.

“I saw the ROMs, you were great!”

“How did you ever think of using the box as a weapon?”

“That Secorra got what was coming to him!”

“Quiet!” Des suddenly shouted, exasperated at the amount of attention he was having. “I am practically dead on my feet, and do you all not have any other better things to do than to pester me?”

The sibko shrank back from his voice, all of them scrambling away to their own tasks.

“You know, they were just concerned, that is all.” A nonchalant Deserk, seemingly unworried about Des’ temper, leaned back against a nearby wall. “You were the last one out, and we all thought you did not make it after we learnt that you were facing Instructor Secorra who was using a *Wyvern*.”

“No confidence in me, quiaff?”

Deserk nodded slowly. "Aff. You are good, but realistically speaking, it was not fair for you. What if you had failed?"

"I did not."

His friend persisted. "What if you had?"

Descartin sighed. "Commander Drummond said that as long as I had put up a good fight, I would still qualify for the next stage."

Deserk's ears perked up. "He really said that?"

"Aff."

"So that must mean that he wanted you to fail the test, but you ruined it all by succeeding anyway. So what happens next? You do know that one way or the other, we are all depending on you to lead us through the next few years, quiaff?"

"I go on. Commander Drummond intends to push me as hard as possible, so you all might get caught up as well. As for being the leader, why me?"

"Because you have not failed us yet, and those tips and hints of yours are coming in very handy."

Deserk paused, "Oh, and we all have been given a day off for rest. Lintya and the others plan on taking a shuttle to the city tomorrow morning, and Jazelyn had already granted us her permission. Want to come along?"

"Sure. We have not left this stravag place for a long time. A trip to the city might be interesting."

"It is settled then. I will go tell them."

Des slumped to the wall just outside the bunk, bone weary after the events of the day. Then he felt a strange prickling at the back of his neck, a sensation of danger.

He spun around to see Secorra facing him. The big man was a menacing sight, his fists clenched, an expression of rage on his face, his teeth pulled back in a snarl.

"Instructor Secorra, do you require anything?" Des's words were respectful, but his tone was not.

Secorra growled, "I have enough of being made to look like a fool by a barely grown whippet of a cadet! Tomorrow, we shall settle the score between us once and for all!"

"What are you talking about, *sir*?" Des asked mockingly.

"I know from Jazelyn that your sibko is going to the city tomorrow. I want you to be at Firm Street at 1100 hrs. You will be there, or I shall break one of your fellow sibkin, if not now, then in the future."

"Is this what it all comes down to? You just cannot get over your defeat, quiaff?" Des scoffed. "So be it. Bargained well and done. I am sick of seeing your stupid face. We need a new instructor who can finally teach us proper skills instead of insulting us all the time."

"You try to bid like a warrior, but you are not one yet. You *will* pay!" Secorra said as he left.

Des went back to get his stuff, thinking all the time. *He wants to fight outside the training center because he knows that Varro would disapprove. I doubt Jazelyn would know either. Either way, I am committed. I had better wash up and rest. The fight is going to be important. I do not want to lose.*

Because if he lost, he would probably be dead.