

**19 January 3135**

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Recording Begin. Normally I hate these things, so if this seems a little odd, bear with me. My name is Deandra Lowe, and I am courier for Periphery Express. It's my job to take information and items from one place to another within the Republic of the Sphere. It's a pretty good job—it takes me all over the Prefectures, and it never gets boring. I've been to a lot of worlds and met a lot of people, and it never ceases to amaze me the lengths some people will go through to get their information from one place to another. I've decided to keep this journal as a way of keeping track of what's happening around me: In my line of work, it pays to remember where you've been and who you've met.

## 24 January 3135

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### ***JumpShip Tamarack***

We finally got word. Announced more than two weeks ago, but we finally got word.

It's Levin.

I think I'm relieved. I don't know why I'm worried about it, really – as long as JumpShips keep running, I can function regardless of who the Exarch is – but it had been on my mind. I kept worrying Kessel was going to worm his way in or get one of his proteges through. But they went with Levin, and he'll at least be stable, I think. He may not be everything we need, but that's because we need nothing less than the long-awaited second coming of Devlin Stone. But he'll do for the time being.

Planetfall's only a couple of days away. Should be easy – maybe too easy. Chances for extracurricular activities diminish when the job's too easy.

**26 January 3135**

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***Hallanan, New Wessex, Prefecture I***

Honest to God, who pays a courier to pick up a damn book? Do these people know how expensive I am? No book's worth what they're going to have to pay me.

The upside, of course, is that I now have something to read while I'm darting across The Republic, as long as I don't noticeably stain any of the pages. It's that Wainright guy again, trying to get everyone worked up about some boogeyman or another. I'd just dismiss him as a crackpot if he didn't have this annoying track record of being right.

Going to stay on-planet a few more days. Probably be a good idea to gauge local reaction to this thing, if there is any.

## 27 January 3135

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A review of Wainright already. Interesting.

### **"When Conspiracy Theorists Go Bad," from the January 27, 3135, New Wessex Times**

by Cintus Domingo

When our esteemed editor, Valance Jameson, asked me to review Signus Wainright's new ebook, *Dominion Over All: The Rise of the New Ghost Bear Threat*, I knew I was setting myself up for a long read and an even longer attempt to make sense of the crazy conspiracy theories Wainright has become famous for. Although Wainright's previous works – *Dragon's Blade: The Kurita Threat* and *Prefect Tormark and Sword in the Stone: Lord Governor Sandoval's Links to House Davion* – became bestsellers across The Republic, and some of his less extreme warnings have indeed come to pass, *Dominion* proved that two hits does not a genius author make. Wainright returns to the Chicken Little style of writing that made his first book such a hit, but the author overdoes the effect in *Dominion*. Although Wainright's warnings that Prefect Katana Tormark was planning to rise against The Republic and that Lord Governor Aaron Sandoval was creating a new force to cause chaos in Prefectures III and IV may have been borne out, he has certainly gone too far with his harebrained ideas about the threat posed by the Ghost Bear forces in the Rasalhague Dominion.

The main thrust of *Dominion Over All* is that the forces of the Rasalhague Dominion, most notably members of Clan Ghost Bear, intend to use the current disruption in The Republic of the Sphere as an excuse to resume the age-old Clan assault upon Terra itself. Some of Wainright's information is eerily specific, leading me to wonder whether he simply made up numbers that sounded good, or whether he has somehow managed to find sources within both the Republican Armed Forces and the Rasalhague Dominion. Wainright strings together an absurd number of facts that he could not possibly have obtained, spinning a web of deceit and trickery worthy of old Succession Wars political drama holovids.

As with *Dragon's Blade* and *Sword in the Stone*, Wainright gathers some of his information from credible sources, which he uses to distract from the fact that the majority of his information is scarcely more than hearsay and rumors, used without any attempt at citing the source (to "protect his informants," of course). Because *Dominion* mainly discusses forces outside The Republic of the Sphere, unlike *Blade* or *Sword*, Wainright just doesn't have enough credible information to back up his alarmist theories.

Beyond the unsubstantiated rumors and leaps of logic, *Dominion Over All* simply isn't written as well as *Dragon's Blade* or *Sword in the Stone*. Wainright uses an overly bombastic tone to push his paranoid point of view, trying to paint the improbable invasion by the forces of the Rasalhague Dominion as the next Clan invasion. At times, Wainright unnecessarily refers to the fact that the conspiracies he "uncovered" in his previous ebooks were realized, as if even he knows that *Dominion's* conclusions are shaky at best.

Wainright's previous forays into the realm of the written word have garnered him a great deal of attention and some fervent fans, but *Dominion Over All* does not have the sort of immediate impact that *Dragon's Blade* or *Sword in the Stone* did, as the latter two works dealt with dangers from within the very heart of The Republic of the Sphere, while the threat in *Dominion* is light-years away. Some conspiracy theorists might enjoy the theories and warnings put forth in *Dominion Over All*, but most readers would do well to stick with Wainright's proven works.

## 01 February 3135

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I happened to be glancing through some random communiques when I noticed a reference to the Wainright book.

### Courier-borne Com Message, February 1, 3135

**From:** Corporal Isaak Williams, Third Battalion, Triarii Protectors, (censored for the safety of The Republic)

**To:** Simon Williams, Centralia, Graham IV, Prefecture X

Da,

We've seen some action out here, mostly against the insurgent factions, but I'm still doing fine. We're moving off of (censored for the safety of The Republic) today. I heard that we're moving to (censored for the safety of The Republic). Scuttlebutt says that the (censored for the safety of The Republic) are making trouble, and we've got to be there to stop them.

Sergeant Kirkwood lent me *Dominion Over All*, an ebook by Signus Wainright. I'm sure you've heard of it; they made a Lana Spinner holovid out of it just a little bit ago. I assume that the show made it to Graham IV already, or at least will by the time this note gets there. It's about how the Rasalhague Dominion's been looking at all the splinter factions within The Republic, and how Jaine Tseng, one of their leaders, is starting to get an army together to invade The Republic. I thought Lana was great as Jaine, but the movie really scared me in some ways. When you're out on the front line, you see what war can do, and I can't even think about what those Clan bastards in the Dominion might do to a planet they conquered. And with (censored for the safety of The Republic) and (censored for the safety of The Republic), there really isn't (censored for the safety of The Republic). But that's what The Republic and the Protectors are here to stop, and I'm going to do my duty, no matter what.

At times, I miss work on the assembly line; it was hard, but duty with the Protectors is even harder in its own way. You don't have the same schedule all the time, but the sergeants keep us busy – and a turret isn't all that comfortable after a few days. The scrubber on our tank went out a couple weeks back; it got pretty ripe in there before we got the unit replaced. I'm looking forward to the move over to (censored for the safety of The Republic). It'll feel good facing down the (censored for the safety of The Republic) and making sure they don't make any trouble and take any planet . . . me and the other boys are set to tear them up if they try anything.

I hope that all is still going well at the factory; tell Scott and Moira I miss them, but that I really think that I'm doing some good out here. If all goes well, I'll be home soon. Give my love to mum, but don't tell her what I was saying about Dominion; I don't want her worrying.

Your son,

Isaak

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Deandra: Corporal Williams' Battalion of the Protectors was previously stationed on Talitha in Prefecture VII. Williams is the gunner of a Kelswa Assault Tank, and his Company is a specialized 'Mech-hunter unit; Williams believes the unit will be redeployed to Tsukude in Prefecture I, which – if he is correct – suggests that someone in Republican Planning is taking the so-called "Dominion threat" seriously. Corporal Williams also has a taste for Terran whiskey, and he can drink a rhino under the table – you owe me a bottle when I get back.

**04 February 3135**

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***Hallanan, New Wessex, Prefecture I***

It's amazing what you can do when you convince people to trust you. I should know – that's the basis of the majority of my career. Signus Wainwright's figured it out, too. He was lucky (and maybe even a little good) with his first two books, and now half of The Republic thinks he's the closest thing there is to a prophet. He's spun this latest book out of rumors and wild guesses, with enough real evidence to fill a single footnote. But he's got people buying it.

Problem is, once people believe something bad is coming, they have a way of making things happen. Maybe not the thing that was predicted, but something. I'd like to stay here a little longer, see how this works itself out, but I think maybe I've already been here too long. The Sphere's too busy for me to stay in one place for long. Should leave soon, but I'm guessing I'll be back before long.

**08 February 3135**

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***JumpShip Discipline  
Prefecture I***

On the move again. Actually stayed a day or more on New Wessex than I should have, because I'm sure there are more important places to be. Wainwright's interesting and all, but there's more pressing stuff going on than his theories.

I really think I should be in Prefecture IX right now—plenty going on there that needs to be seen by the right pair of eyes—but the jobs aren't falling right. Best I can do right now is move a little more toward the core, then hope to find something that will take me where I want to go.

Best case scenario would put me on Skye in a week or two. But more people seem to want to get away from there, so finding a way to the planet isn't simple. I've got to look, though—call of duty and what not.

## 15 February 3135

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Here's another one:

### Article from the February 15, 3135 Lambrecht Daily Gossip: *Dominion Over All* Set To Start Rolling

By Simon Vandenberg, Hologrid Correspondent

The hologrid based on Signus Wainright's mega-hit e-book *Dominion Over All: The Rise of the New Ghost Bear Threat* has started filming today on Kervil in Prefecture II. Signus Wainright himself will be penning the novelization of *Dominion Over All*, and with his dynamic writing style and flair you can bet that the script will be spectacular. While Wainright claims that his e-book is a work of non-fiction based on iron-hard data, but says that the movie will depart somewhat from the specific facts that he knows, adding dialogue and personalities but still staying true to the facts.

Wainright's books have caused quite a scandal on some worlds, with some pundits claiming that *Dominion Over All* and Wainright's other works are nothing more than paranoid alarmism. Other scholars, after careful examination of the facts available to them, have come to much the same conclusion that Wainright has. Professor of Political Science Elias Tamrin of the Lambrecht Academy had this to say: "...Wainright certainly was on to something with his previous works..." The theories advanced in Wainright's previous e-books, *Dragon's Blade: The Kurita Threat and Prefect Tormark* and *Sword in the Stone: Lord Governor Sandoval's Links to House Davion* have both been borne out by the formation of the splinter groups the Dragon's Fury and the Swordsworn. Neither Governor Kyle or Legate Bekkar would comment on the threat of an attack on Prefecture I by the Rasalhague Dominion.

Signus Wainright isn't the only big name attached to the production of *Dominion Over All*, however, as famous director Alphonse Knightly is lined up to direct, and rumor has it that mega-star Lana Spinner has signed on to play the femme fatale Jaine Tseng. The last time Lana Spinner was involved in an Alphonse Knightly production, was of course *Fire in the Heavens*, with Lana taking her award-winning turn as the infamous Black Widow herself, Natasha Kerensky. With Knightly and Spinner teaming up once more, signs point to *Dominion Over All* becoming a big hit.

*Dominion Over All* won't be without competition, however. Several other hologrids are either in post-production or currently filming, and more than a few of them focus on threats to The Republic of the Sphere. I spoke to Filip Otomo, instructor of film at the Lambrecht Academy about this somewhat worrying trend in subject matter. Instructor Otomo noted that public entertainment has always played to the fears of the populace, "showing people what they are most afraid of and then showing that they can defeat it is a sure-fire way to make money." Otomo also mentioned that if the current crop of movies would most likely follow this formula and end with The Republic of the Sphere triumphing over its enemies.

Signus Wainright, however, wasn't quick to confirm Instructor Otomo's guess, however, "While I made up details for this film, it isn't a work of fiction... I don't decide how it's going to end, I write what's real." Not exactly reassuring for anyone who has read Wainright's e-book. I asked the author if he thought his previous works might also be made into hologrids, but he just flashed that grin that has become so famous on the news dailies and said, "I'd like to get this movie finished before I start worrying about my next one." Here's hoping that *Dominion Over All* is a hit, and Wainright can follow up his success with further adaptations of *Dragon's Blade* and *Sword in the Stone*.



## 16 February 3135

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### ***Prefecture II*** ***JumpShip Discipline***

I keep getting booked on the *Discipline*. Not sure why—someone trying to send me a message? I always tell people I'm plenty disciplined when I want to be. Why am I the only person who thinks that line's funny?

Anyway, I'm going the opposite direction from where I intended to be, going away from Skye instead of toward it. Two good reasons for it—first, there were approximately zero (give or take zero) good ways to get me to Skye. Second, a few new things have cropped up, including a message waiting for me on Lambrecht. Kervil, it seems, would be (and I quote) "a useful place to be."

Not exactly sure why (coded messages are renowned for their brevity) but I've got a few guesses. May need to make sure the pirates of Bernhard Island are still quiet, and I'm hearing some rumblings about Senator Leeson that might be worth some attention. There's some other chatter in Prefecture II about the border, but it's too early to tell what, if anything, it means.

## 17 February 3135

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Don't ask me how I've come by a piece of Levin's personal journal. I'm recording this so I can look back later.

Well in a few days, it will be official and I'll have taken the oath of office for Exarch. Overwhelmed by this fact, I will still face this challenge as I have in the past; head on.

I can't help to reflect back to where this journey started. It seems a lifetime ago. Many of a friend lost and gained. Still, I count on one. Anna, my wife, has stayed by my side through it all.

She's and my two teenaged children are making their way here. It will be good to see them again. Somehow, being with them sets the world right.

Family has a way about it, a cleansing effect if you will. To remove the stress of the real world, centering your focus on what matters most.

One day, when this is over, I'll retire to Kervil, and just grow old. Okay, it's a pipe-dream, but I've got to have something to wish for.

A goal.

What is a man without one? Goals serve to set focus on a direction that we must follow. Without one, we're nothing more than a rudderless ship, navigating life's peril filled seas waiting to sink under the turmoil and unabated seas.

So what's my goal now? That's an interesting question. One that I've thought about since Heather's speech put me in this position I'm in now.

"But we can't just elect someone who will fight well; we need someone who we know will fight fair," Heather said in the Hall of Paladins.

Well...I guess not all nice people finish last. Back to my goal. Times have changed since Devlin Stone led the Republic. We are assailed on every front now. A cancer is growing within the Republic. It's called nobility and greed, each go hand-in-hand with one another. The nobles' lust for power will destroy the republic. What the Ghost Paladin told me in our first meeting, rings true.

"Many of them see themselves as nobility first and senators second, particularly since the HPG blackout. While there are many senators who are loyal to the Exarch's office and who continue to support The Republic, a significant number have begun to show a tendency to fall back into the old ways, in which nobility automatically equates to rulership."

"Won't make my job easier," I responded

"I'd say not," the Ghost Paladin answered.

Then I asked, "Can I arrest them all?"

With a ghost of a smile he said, "Eventually, maybe."

I looked at him for a moment contemplating what I'd say next. Finally, like a light bulb, it came to me.

"The whole idea of Paladins and senators working together—the nobles and the military, all cooperating for the good of the people—that was one of Stone's best moments. That goal was supposed to keep all of us thinking of things larger than ourselves."

His reply was to the point, "That's difficult for many people, especially nobles."

I almost laughed and finally said, "I wish we could just blame the nobles. But it's clear that The Republic's problems run deeper than that." Therefore, there's my goal. To remind the people, the Paladins and the Senate, the Republic is larger than we are and together, united, can make it work. Otherwise, the Republic, Devlin Stone's dream dies a horribly slow death into the abyss of history.

Implementing it is the hard part. However, charging into it straight one may not work this time. Therefore, I'll take this one on in the same manner as I did investigating Prince Victor Steiner-Davion's murder. I'm sure Burton Horn might enjoy some extra money. Meanwhile, the Republican forces and I will hold the line for Devlin Stone's dream.

## 21 February 3135

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### ***Iron City, Kervil, Prefecture II***

I should stay here longer, but I can't. First, everyone always expects a courier to move along quickly. A courier who hangs out for a week after the job is done is either lazy or can't get another job, and neither of those is a reputation I want. Second, other jobs need doing. The Republic's clearly way too interesting for me to want to stay in one place for long.

Leeson's in trouble. It's a shame, because she always seemed like a decent sort. I've been here only a few days, and I was able to uncover that without breaking a sweat. If I had more time . . . oh, well – at least I managed to avoid the set of the Wainwright movie.

But Fletcher awaits. And after that, it might be time to get to Terra for some face-to-face time with Those Who Remain Nameless (in my journal, that is). Some situations simply demand in-person meetings.

## 24 February 3135

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When you're glancing through data and find something like this, it would be a waste not to record it.

### Alert Message

**Security Level:** Top secret, ultra black

**To:** All Ghost Knights

**From:** Ghost Paladin

**Date/Time Group:** 3135-02-24/1800Zulu

Knights,

We are preparing for war. The question, however, is against whom?

The Republic is currently engaged on multiple fronts in Prefectures I, V, and VIII, and we are currently suffering massive incursions from House Liao, the Draconis Combine, and Clan Jade Falcon.

Because all of this is known, I will not go into details: Many of you have fought defending The Republic.

Currently, Republican forces have held the line. Though a number of worlds have been lost, and we have not broken, our military is quickly preparing itself for more aggression. Events on Terra surrounding the death of Paladin Victor Steiner-Davion have shed light on another enemy. This foe will have far-reaching repercussions should it prevail. A cancer grows within the leadership of our own Republic. This involves senators, certain military commanders, and ComStar.

A few of our illustrious senators were implicated in an attempt to place warriors hand picked from certain families and groomed for special positions. One such person is a paladin. Thankfully, that Paladin's honor and sense of duty overrode his obligations to these traitors.

Yes, traitors: This is what they are. They acted of their own accord for power, and they attempted to usurp paladin authority in a blatant attempt to manipulate the voting result for the office of the Exarch.

To do so, they used terrorists and insurgents. Thanks to our new Exarch and Paladin Heather GioAvanti, however, these criminals were stopped dead in their tracks. Senator Geoffrey Mallowes was indicted for his role in this conspiracy.

We should have seen this coming. We are the eyes and ears of The Republic. We are currently too focused on external events and not enough on internal matters. This must change immediately.

My discussion with Exarch Jonah Levin proved fruitful and insightful. He knows that nobles are part of the equation, but that the root of the problem is deeper.

Ghost Knights, we must find where this cancer is growing and remove it before it grows too large and ultimately destroys The Republic.

ComStar is another problem. Since the disappearance of Tucker Harwell, they have repeatedly rebuffed our inquiries of his whereabouts. They say that it is an internal matter and that The Republic need not worry about it.

ComStar grows bold in their dealings with The Republic. Not only that, but they've also shown they have reconstituted and rearmed the Com Guards.

This does not bode well for us. If they have reactivated the Guards, what about ROM? We must assume this is the case.

ROM is the foe we'll need to concentrate on. ROM's history is one of resourcefulness, secrecy, and uncommon aggressiveness and brutality, and I expect ComStar to use ROM as the tip of its sword as they attempt to expand their influence.

We must stay vigilant. You are the best The Republic has to offer. I know I can count on you all to go beyond your duty.

You are Ghost Knights, and you fight in the darkness against those who would see Devlin Stone's dream destroyed. You are shadow warriors.

The moment to shine is here. The time has come for us to stand up and be counted. The fate of The Republic is in our hands. Good luck and God speed.

Respectfully,

GP

**02 March 3135**

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***JumpShip Alacrity, Prefecture IV***

Already gone from Fletcher. Never even opened my bags, just shipped them from one DropShip to another.

I don't want to believe the report about Acamar. I don't want to think about it, to spend even a minute pondering a universe where something like that could happen. How can anyone in the IS even think about deploying a nuke? Is our memory that short? Is our lust for power and conquest that strong?

Sadly, most of the time, the answer to both questions is "yes."

Okay, clearly I'm not in a mood to think or write properly. This'll be just another item to discuss with the good folks on Terra, though I've got little more than rumors and guesswork to feed them. One more stop, and I'll be there.

### 03 March 3135

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All this jumping is making me lose track of things. But I did get this interesting bit of data – an interview with Wainright.

#### **Transcript of an interview between Signus Wainright and Anna Crennov of the Vega World News Network's "Good Morning, Vega!" on 3 March 3135**

**Anna Crennov:** Good Morning, Vega! [applause] We've got a great show lined up for you today. Joining me first is Signus Wainright, author of such e-books as *Dragon's Blade: The Kurita Threat and Prefect Tormark* and *Sword in the Stone: Lord Governor Sandoval's Links to House Davion*. Mr. Wainright's newest work, *Dominion Over All: The Rise of the New Ghost Bear Threat* has been receiving a great deal of attention in the newsfaxes. Mr. Wainright, thank you for joining me on Good Morning, Vega!

**Signus Wainright:** Thank you, Anna, it's a pleasure to be here. AC: Mr. Wainright...

**SW:** [SW laughs]...please, call me Signus. "Mr. Wainright" is my father.

**AC:** [AC smiles] All right, Signus, *Dominion Over All* has raised a number of eyebrows and ruffled a lot of feathers. How do you respond to those who say that your book is nothing but a paranoid conspiracy theory?

**SW:** Wow... coming out of the gate full-speed ahead, aren't you, Anna? [SW laughs] Aren't you supposed to lob your guest a few easy questions to let him get his feet under him?

**AC:** Sorry, I can ask another question if you'd like...

**SW:** No, I'll answer that one. I was just joking around a bit. [SW frowns] Really, I only have two things to those who doubt the veracity of my work. First, there's *Dragon's Blade* and *Sword in the Stone* to consider—

**AC:** Your first two books...

**SW:** ...right. These same skeptics called both *Blade* and *Sword* paranoid conspiracy theories too, and now if you look at these so-called Dragon's Fury and Swordsworn forces jetting around The Republic attacking planets left and right, you can see that I was exactly right about ex-Prefect Katana Tormark and Lord Governor Aaron Sandoval. Though the Draconis Combine and the Federated Commonwealth have not yet acknowledged their respective ties to the Dragon's Fury and the Swordsworn, it is obvious that these revolutionary factions have been receiving supplies from The Republic's neighbors.

**AC:** There is certainly some truth to that, Signus. You mentioned two things you would like to say to your detractors?

**SW:** I did, Anna. The other point I would like to make for those who think that my studies are nothing but paranoia is the ominous silence radiating from the Rasalhague Dominion. If the Ghost Bears and their Rasalhague subjects weren't planning anything, they would have denied this whole thing by now.

**AC:** But couldn't that silence also be caused by the failure of the HPG network? I mean, it's hard to say anything if you can't broadcast.

**SW:** Well, that's certainly one possibility. But it's worth pointing out that we've received JumpShip courier runs from deeper in The Republic, as well as from the Lyran Commonwealth and the Draconis Combine—and yet nothing from the Rasalhague Dominion. That implies to me that they have a military quarantine in effect.

**AC:** Another good point. We have only a few more minutes, so I was hoping you might be able to shed some light on rumors that *Dominion Over All* is going to be used as the basis for a new big-budget holovid.

**SW:** Well, I'm really not in a position to say anything at this point. [SW smiles] Let's just say that I would love for that to happen, and there are some people in the broadcast world who have shown interest in *Dominion*.

**AC:** Well, thank you very much, Signus. Once again, Signus Wainright, author of *Dragon's Blade: The Kurita Threat and Prefect Tormark* and *Sword in the Stone: Lord Governor Sandoval's Links to House Davion*, and now *Dominion Over All: The Rise of the New Ghost Bear Threat*. Thank you for being on our show.

**SW:** It was a pleasure, Anna, thanks for having me. [SW leaves the stage]

**AC:** Our next guest is retired Colonel Erich Rigger of the Vega Militia, an expert on military law and the Ares Conventions in particular....

**07 March 3135**

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***JumpShip Heart of The Republic, Prefecture X***

One day I hope to spend enough time on a planet to make a journal entry while on terra firma. But every moment on land is filled with running, talking, listening, and occasionally poking my nose into places where nobody but me wants it. Doesn't leave a lot of time to sit and think.

Epsilon Eridani was a milk run – hectic, but a milk run nonetheless. Nice to be on a planet that didn't seem to be on the brink of a major crisis. Of course, everyone there was talking about how many other planets seem to be hurtling toward some crisis or another, so they were about as tense as people everywhere else.

On to Terra next, to meet and greet the elite. And to do a little planning; I feel like I've been bouncing around like the rubber ball of the universe.

## 08 March 3135

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Considering that many within the Oriente Protectorate have never accepted the loss of some worlds in Prefectures VI and VII, Baron Ryan may be hedging his bets with his statement. In the eyes of some in the Protectorate, taking back that which they still consider theirs would not be an attack on "the sovereign planets of another nation."

Eselda Fashions all the Rage in High Circles Princefield Military Academy, Princefield, Oriente Protectorate by Damien Noche, society columnist

The partners of several prominent officers at Princefield Military Academy, including Baroness Elizabeth Ryan, wife of Baron General Patrick Ryan, commandant of the Academy, have been seen wearing attire designed by Eselda, the most famous fashion designer in The Republic of the Sphere, where her work is often seen as archetypical. She favors utilitarian functionality with graceful lines and careful tailoring. Lana Spinner, the premier holovid actress of The Republic, has often been seen wearing outfits designed by Eselda.

Baroness Ryan often mentions how much she enjoys the "simple elegance" of Eselda-inspired gowns and everyday wear. But comments made by several of the baroness' companions suggest that there may be more to wearing Eselda's fashions than meets the eye.

A member of the baroness' inner circle, who asked not to be identified, said, "We will have to show the people of The Republic that we understand who they are, and that we have no intention of destroying their national identity. We wish to be liberators, not conquerors." Another, also speaking on the condition of anonymity, noted, "If my wife is going to be assigned to garrison duty in The Republic, I'll certainly want to be able to blend in with the populace."

Concerned by the imperialistic tone of these sentiments, we asked Baron Ryan about the rumors suggesting that the Oriente Protectorate plans to intervene in affairs within The Republic. Ever the politician, the baron said, "I am sure that the comments you mentioned are the results of a misunderstanding. Although the Oriente Protectorate is concerned about the increasing anarchy within The Republic of the Sphere, it is not an aggressor state, and it would never attack the sovereign planets of another nation." Reassuring words from the commander of the most prestigious military academy in the Oriente Protectorate, although perhaps he should pay closer attention to what his wife's friends are saying.

Whether or not there is any legitimacy to the rumors circulating through the upper circles here on Princefield, The Republic of the Sphere, via the incomparable Eselda's fashions, has already taken the upper echelons of the Academy by storm.



**11 March 3135**

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***Geneva, Terra, Prefecture X***

This day has been too risky. I understand the value of face-to-face meetings and all, but having so many of them in a row . . . if anyone followed me for any length of time today, they'd know something was up. Could've blown my cover. I know everyone's dying for information, but it might be better for them to wait a little than to compromise me. At least until I assemble a new cover.

Anyway, some good came out of it. I am, as I'd hoped, a little more put together. I'll be getting to the places I want to be. Of course, judging from the reports coming out of Prefecture V and other similar gossip floating around The Republic, by the time I get where I want to be, a hundred new hot spots will have erupted.

Well, we'll see how many of 'em I can hit.

**16 March 3135**

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***DropShip Esther Maize, Prefecture X***

I'm still uncomfortable. People on Terra seemed too distracted by everything else in The Republic to remember to be covert – when, of course, troubled times are exactly when you need to be more covert. I'm really not sure why it's still bothering me now that I'm safely off-planet, but it is.

This is going to be a long one, heading out to the edge of Prefecture I. I knew I'd be back there before long, but I didn't know it would be this soon. But there's enough going on to keep people concerned, and I have the real bad feeling that once I land I'm going to be hit with more from that firebrand Wainwright. The man's got the sucking pull of a black hole, and the influence he's brought to bear on The Republic should be beyond his abilities. But isn't that the dream of all humankind: to get more from life than we deserve?

## 17 March 3135

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I wish I could say that this doesn't scare me, but it does. This is from the Ingress News Times.

### **The Last Word: Nuclear Bonds?**

*by G. Fredrick Will*

With all the discussion surrounding the possibility that the Capellan Confederation used nuclear weapons in its conquest of Acamar, certain other facts have gone relatively unnoticed. One such fact is the recent revitalization of the Oriente Protectorate under Captain-General Jessica Marik, and the recent overtures made by the captain-general toward Chancellor Daoshen Liao. Rumor has it that the captain-general sent envoys to the Capellan chancellor with an offer of alliance against The Republic of the Sphere. Given the fact that only the alleged use of nuclear weapons, despite the strictures of the Ares Convention, allowed House Liao to strike as deeply into The Republic as it did, it may be worthwhile for the chancellor to consider Jessica Marik's offer.

Such an alliance is not as far-fetched as it might seem: The parent nation of the Oriente Protectorate, the Free Worlds League, joined with the Capellan Confederation against the Federated Commonwealth in 3056 to wage an extremely successful war. If the Oriente Protectorate were to join the Capellan Confederation, the scattered forces of The Republic would likely not be able to repel them. The Oriente Protectorate would stand to gain a number of worlds ceded to The Republic just after the Word of Blade Jihad – worlds that the Oriente Protectorate has long claimed.

The downsides to such an alliance are minimal, but significant. The Oriente Protectorate would be associating itself with a power that has apparently shown itself willing to flout the Ares Convention. This could lead some companies or states to levy economic sanctions against the Protectorate by proxy. War, however, has shown itself to be a strong motivator for economic growth, and a successful war could be just what the captain-general needs to reconstitute the Free Worlds League.

So what can The Republic of the Sphere do to prevent the Oriente Protectorate from joining the conflict? At this point, it really has few options, all of which are limited by the presence of the splinter factions fighting within The Republic. One option is to look to its neighbors for assistance. Until recently, The Republic of the Sphere has enjoyed good relations with its surrounding states. But this seems unlikely to succeed given that the Federation Commonwealth, Draconis Combine, and Lyran Alliance have all recently lost supporters within The Republic's borders. It seems that The Republic must hope for a diplomatic solution, or trust in the madness of Chancellor Daoshen Liao to prevent an alliance between the Capellan Confederation and the Oriente Protectorate.

**21 March 3135**

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***JumpShip Regal, Prefecture I***

I've had way too much time to think, and the more I go over it in my head, the less sense it makes. I mean, the Ghost Bears? Invade? How out of character is that?

So then I think this: Wainwright's theory is clearly wrong. But he believes it. And his sources, whomever they may be, believe it. And he's made enough of a case to convince others.

So we have (at least) two options. First, the Ghost Bears have totally lost their heads and turned their backs on everything that made their Clan what it was. Second, some third party wants everyone to believe the Ghost Bears are up to something and has done an incredible job planting enough information to convince people that this could actually happen.

I think the second explanation is both more likely and more frightening.

## 22 March 3135

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Why is it I get the feeling that some of the stuff I'm carrying around isn't as random as I'd like to think it is?

**5 March 3135, Log-Entry Transcript Excerpt**  
**Merchant-class DropShip Burning Starways**  
**Captain Hector Ian, Commanding**  
**St. Andre**

...even sure why I bothered. Cramped DropShip. Got that rattle in the heating system that Chief Gantz can't seem to track down, and that, of course, routes through the bulkhead just aft of my cabin.

And I hate – hate! – dirt-side ports. How do I always forget that? And they're especially bad along this stretch, with the war mucking up what used to be a sweet run. All this new snarking red tape. Suspicious glares. Boarding party after customs inspection after political interview.

What? They think I'm spying for The Republic?

Who needs that kind of bilge?

The way the Cappies are moving stuff around so openly, organizing right there on the spaceport tarmac, it don't take a cloak-and-dagger expert to see that it's all a sham anyway. Mighty Capellan war power. Sure. What I saw more than anything was merc troops. Lots of them. And the local grapevine is full of that news as well. Few regular line units have shown their faces on St. Andre. All hired guns, bought and paid for off Westerhand.

Some units I recognized. The Long Striders. Burr's Cobras. Can't miss those crests splashed over the sides of a few grounded DropShips. But there were a lot more, too, scraped off the sides and the bottom of the barrel without even a unit patch to their name. Just a few rifles, war surplus socked away by Daoshen or old Sun-Tzu, I'll bet.

And the Mag units, of course, though that hardly came as a surprise. Has there been a Cappie conflict in the last hundred years that didn't borrow troops from the Magistracy? Or from somewhere else? Always getting someone else to fight their wars.

Now them, the Mag, they did try to keep away from us. Always at a distance, or where they didn't think we'd see. But you can't miss a Canopian field unit. The turquoise and black. The three-star crest. The long hair they allow under relaxed regulations.

Those tight officer uniforms showing off curves that belong under a pleasure circus tent.

Make a good dog break his leash.

No pleasure circus has been set up that I saw or heard of, though. And no orbiting party-vessel, either. Thought about asking, but I figured it wasn't worth the trouble. Questions aren't exactly encouraged when the Cappies come to town, are they? More likely, asking after local Mag ships would get me a visit from some Maskirovka agent and another "interview." Who needs it?

Yeah, feels like business as usual with the Capellans. They don't got so much as they want everyone to believe. Grab a few worlds. Shake down the neighboring systems for some protection money, maybe. Put the fear of Liao "divinity" into The Republic. Same old, same old. They probably have their main line units resting on a safe Confed planet, ready to throw back any attempt at a counterattack. That's my bet.

What else could they be planning, after all?

## 24 March 3135

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What happens when you put all kinds of words in a search engine? Let's find out.

PLEX Search Engine Results

Found: 1,152 titles/entries matching criteria\_Capellan+war; St. Andre+troops; New Aragon+war+Paladins; New Aragon+St. Andre; Terra+Capellan; Terra+Paladins+troops; Anders+New Aragon; Bannson+(\$ et al)...

### 1. Troop Consolidation on St. Andre

St. Andre, March 19, 3135

A parade, headed by a company of McCarron's Armored Cavalry, swept through the capital today, accompanied by marching bands from 50 different high schools and vehicle after vehicle of waving politicians, officers, and celebrities. Marching tunes included the Capellan Anthem, Liao's State Address, and works composed by Po Singh Li, a popular Capellan nationalist.

Although some reporting did focus on the lack of regular line military, the Confederation went out of its way to display a battalion from the Magistracy Home Guard, which anchored the festive procession. And guarding every intersection and rooftop was a mercenary cadre composed of many different units. Most notably...

### 2. St. Andre Worries New Aragon Politicos

New Aragon, March 24, 3135

Dynasty Party leader Hu Khan Sei issued a scathing response to Governor Grogan's statement that St. Andre's recent embrace of Capellan nationalism reflects an armed enforcement of Capellan culture against Republican freedoms. That such "shows of spontaneity are shams, meant to dissuade fence-sitting politicians from undertaking the necessary defense of our borders."

"The governor should be worried," said Hu Khan Sei. "It is clear that she understands little of the desires and basic heritage of so many of her own constituents. The Republic effectively managing to suppress Capellan heritage, which so many took pride in for centuries, does not mean that a resurgence is anything more than a natural expression of expanded freedoms, not restrictions. Or does the governor believe that behind every flag-waving mother is a mercenary with a rifle pointed at her children? This only goes to further prove..."

### 3. Paladins on New Aragon Discuss Ongoing War Policy

New Aragon, March 23, 3135

On the record, Paladin Anders Kessel made it clear that local Republican representatives do not expect a large offensive to sweep over New Aragon anytime soon. "I have discussed this with Sire McKinnon and others," he promised. "The current Capellan policy seems to be one of containment, not conflict, when it comes to New Aragon." When pressed, Sire Kessel would not comment as to why that was, or what advantage he or the other paladins hoped to take from it.

Although New Aragon has not been immune to Capellan depredations, it does seem that the level of warfare visited on neighboring worlds such as St. Andre and Menkar is, in fact, missing here. Some analysts believe that this is because of New Aragon's deepening political crisis. With the rise of the Dynasty Party, and Governor Grogan's current disfavor, the Confederation may be waiting for a political maneuver to hand over the world without...

### 4. Bannson Ties the Knot with House Liao?

St. Andre, March 16, 3135

According to unnamed sources, Jacob Bannson, CEO of Bannson Universal and the most successful and important business leader within three Prefectures, has married a distant relative of Chancellor Daoshen Liao. The wedding supposedly took place on the world of Sian late last year, and it has been kept a secret pending the outcome of the war of Capellan aggression.

Talk of this unlikely union reached St. Andre just this week, perhaps prompted by rumors that Bannson Universal is supporting the Capellan war effort. Given Jacob Bannson's diverse interests and known stance on remaining a neutral party, it is likely that subsidiary businesses have taken Capellan contracts. However, most close associates of the business tycoon think it is unlikely that he has chosen this time to marry, or that he would accept a Capellan bride, no matter how strong her ties to the powerful family...

*Page 2, 3, 4, 5 (more)...*

**25 March 3135**

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***JumpShip Regal, Prefecture I***

I've known for a while that I can't just sit around during long hops. Skills like mine get rusty quick, and I don't like to go more than a couple days without getting some practice. On long trips, that comes from mingling with other passengers. Usually I'm just getting fun stuff: who's on vacation without their spouse, that kind of thing. But there's a group of people, four of them, who are simultaneously hiding something and dying to tell someone what they know. They're pros at covering up, but info like they've got is too interesting to keep a lid on for long – it seethes out from under any lid they put on it like the hot water it is. There's something happening on Wyatt. They're being cagey, but I've squeezed that much out. And whatever it is, it's not small. Not small at all. I hope to have more before Vega.

## 29 March 3135

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I am reminded that the olfactory prowess of sharks has not been exaggerated.

### **Editorial *Sudeten Star-Lance***

I write today because the blood in my heart boils over. I do not pretend to be politically astute, nor would I ever pretend to be as tactically instinctive as the great warriors of our Clan. I do, however, know an opportunity when I see one.

If I, as the owner of several small mining outfits, were to learn that holdings claimed by rival corporations had lost contact with their superiors—nay, with anyone beyond local boundaries—I would consider this an enormous boon. A chance. An opening. I have men and equipment at my disposal, and it is very likely that my goods are far closer to these sites than to their owning corporations. What do I do? I send my men, I send my ships, and I claim these assets for myself. I am a shrewd merchant, and I say this only because I can prove it. Only humble modesty keeps me from revealing myself in this letter, because I appeal to all of you readers as a fellow Clansman—not as businessman with clout and prestige.

Some assets might be easy to take. I might find it useful to take my time in acquiring many of them, sending some of my more inconspicuous personnel to collect and gather information on the current standings of each operation. Some assets might be desperate for real management and will readily agree to my offers.

Some might not. Loyalty runs deep, and even though it may be arrayed against me, I respect it. And this is where my money and the quality of my men and equipment come into play. Some outfits I will purchase outright. Though my monthly expenditures will be prohibitive for a month or three, depending on the asset acquired, the immediate profit loss will be worth it. Some outfits will require more duress. I am not afraid of such tactics, and—I arrive at my point—neither should we.

The Republic is coming apart at the seams. I have seen warriors of our Clan chafe at sitting quietly, training every day to keep themselves sharp and deadly. I can only acquiesce to the wisdom of our great commanders, and I know that they bide their time for a reason. Because clearly the moment of returning—the moment of finishing what we have started—is upon us. The Republic was ill-conceived from the start. It allowed weakness of all kinds to reside in it and make it soft. And now it reaps the fruit of those unaddressed maladies.

Tradition is a powerful thing, methods established long ago by people wiser and stronger than me. Methods whose very soundness has been proved by the passing of time. Do things that fail, last?

And so it is time, with this most-timely HPG collapse, for us to make our presence known once again in the Inner Sphere. Not as we are now, but as we should be. As we will be.

Our Clan knows and understands how valuable and important the work is that we nonwarriors perform. In our decades of softness—a harsh word, but I am deeply aware of our storied warrior history—we have become comfortable with our lot, with the small struggles we have on the worlds we claim.

No more. Terra calls, on frequencies no HPG could ever transmit! The weakness of The Republic has shown itself utterly, and though I do not know who or what has taken down this communications network, I thank them in my prayers every morning. Remember Tukayyid, as if we could ever forget. Because this is our chance to finish what we started those decades ago.

—An anonymous but concerned civilian, merchant, asset manager, and acquirer



## 31 March 3135

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Wrinkles, wrinkles everywhere. Comments to come after I've had time to digest this.

### Contact Report 27 January 3135

Emil,

I've successfully made contact with the target, thought it wasn't easy. She's more skilled than reported, as she was able to spot and ditch two of my operatives.

I reacquired her trail two days later. She was hiding out at the Cross Creek Motel. It was a stroke of luck that I found her, actually, as I stumbled into her coming out of a communal restroom.

I waited a minute for her to get outside before I stepped out of the restroom. She had begun to head south down the street. Snowfall was heavy at the time, and I could tell she was nervous about being out in the open. Several times I saw her checking for a tail.

I radioed Chandra to pick up her trail, while I moved to get ahead of her one street over. Chandra radioed back that the target was getting jittery, which I expected. We had dogged her for nearly three weeks, and her nerves had to be frayed.

The target soon moved into the alley that I had positioned myself in, in anticipation of her looking for cover.

When she leaned back against the alley wall, I knew she was exhausted. Her posture gave it away. Not only that, but she was scared. I quietly tapped out an order for Chandra to cross by the opening of the alley in order to distract the target.

She froze at the sound of crunching snow beneath Chandra's footfalls, turning to draw a weapon. I moved in closer. Then I noticed a change in the target's body language; she had sensed my presence, as expected.

But she was too late.

When she turned, I placed the muzzle of my weapon against the back of her head and told her to hand over her weapon, which she did. Smart girl.

Here's the recorded transcript of our conversation:

**MD:** Don't try anything stupid, Norah. Or should I say, Cassandra Raines? Hand me your gun. Ah! Slowly, there you go.

**CR:** Who are you and how do you know my name?

**MD:** How I know you is not important, though I suppose I should tell you something: My name is Donelly. Sam Donelly. I know all about you, dear. You're good—really good. This is why I am talking to you instead of killing you. The Republic requires your special talents, Ms. Raines.

**CR:** Oh and how might that be?

**MD:** We want you to help us bring down the rest of the Kittery Renaissance for starters. After that, we'll see.

**CR:** Betrayal? Just like that?

**MD:** Yes.

**CR:** That's pretty presumptuous of you, don't you think?

**MD:** No. You see, I know your history. I know who your grandmother was and what she did, just like your mother and father.

**CR:** You should find higher-quality sources, Mr. Donelly: I'm an orphan. My family died in a fire.

**MD:** Yes, you are indeed an orphan, but not for the reason you believe. Your grandmother was a ROM counterintelligence operative. She fought against the Blakists both before and during the Jihad. Your parents were Ghost Knights, murdered by neo-Blakists. You were placed with a special family who would care for you.

**CR:** I don't believe you. How do you know all of this?

**MD:** There are some things even the Paladins and Knights don't know. That's why I am here delivering this message.

**CR:** And if I refuse?

**MD:** Then I'll have to realize this mission's other ending.

**CR:** Congratulations, Mr. Donelly. I must submit to your powers of persuasion; it looks like I'm your agent provocateur.

**MD:** That's good to hear, Norah. Welcome to the team.

Then I safed my weapon. She's currently in our safe house outside of Geneva waiting for further interrogation and your orders.

Respectfully,

Mason Dunne

## 04 April 3135

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### *JumpShip Regal, Prefecture I*

In-between wriggling information out of the four techies that are my new best friends, I had a chance to review some of the hundreds of files the friendly folks of Terra dumped on me. A lot of it's useless—already too old to do me any good—but buried in the dirt I found a gem.

Dunne managed to turn Norah.

That's an impressive piece of work. Just finding her must've been hard enough, but getting her to turn is a tremendous coup. True, it would be more significant if it weren't for the fact that other groups have eclipsed Kittery Renaissance in terms of the threat they pose to The Republic (what with their way bigger armies and all), but it's good work nonetheless.

Dunne had better be careful, though—one reason Norah might have decided to turn is that she's already figured out a way to use her new position to undermine The Republic, going from double agent to triple agent in one quick move.

**06 April 3135**

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***JumpShip Regal, Prefecture I***

Three little letters. Three magical little letters: H. P. G.

That's what my techie friends know about. We're finally getting serious about firing it up again, and maybe we will. I hope, I hope, I hope!

If I were more poetically inclined, I'd write an ode. I'd call it "Ode to Data," lauding it as it hurtles through known space at speeds greater than anything else we know. Truly a glorious thing.

In case you can't tell, I really, really want it back. Godspeed, my techie friends!

Incidentally, I've got another new friend besides the techs. I didn't choose this one, though; he chose me. He hasn't spoken to me at all, but I keep seeing him wherever I go. Much as I'd like to think he's just smitten with my beauty, I imagine his motives are more sinister. He'll bear watching.

## 07 April 3135

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Bannson's getting sloppy.

**Confidential Bannson Universal Document**  
**Styk: On Further Review**  
**Prepared by Senior Engineer Walter Plunkett (RA)**

I am uncertain where to begin.

Security, I suppose. It was just as stringent as I expected. The time I spent waiting allowed me to examine the four VTR-9K *Victors* on display at the local spaceport. They were not older machines, as I thought they would be, but neither were they line equipment: They were unfinished shells, lacking any fusion engines or final control components. They could be made battle ready in a handful of weeks—a few months perhaps—but only with a knowledgeable team and the right components.

It wasn't too hard to get close to them, which led me to believe that I—and others on-world—were supposed to. It also led me to decide that there would be no strong turnout of military materiel from Styk. Not in the near future. Another empty Capellan threat.

Another effective play! Circles within circles. What a tangled web Daoshen weaves.

The factories, sire, are not only working, but they are in excellent condition and have no shortage of workers. There are satellite facilities spread all across Styk, most of them with redundant sites capable of assuming a full load in case any one facility (of a certain type) is damaged, destroyed, or captured. And the main assembly plant! With a large underground network, safe from anything save perhaps orbital bombardment (and I wouldn't bet too heavily against that either), the above-ground facility could be brought down, and still 'Mechs could be produced, stored, and shipped as needed.

There are automated rooms where a single worker might oversee a molding press to shape armor or see that an actuator is tested to its demanding limits. And there are a number of team-orientated rooms where the majority of all final production takes place. Hardly an assembly-line mentality, but with enough educated and dedicated manpower, production goals will not be difficult to meet.

In fact, there was enough industrious activity going on that I began to wonder why I, and the rest of my team, were brought in at all. Soon, Daoshen would be storming the battlefields with legions of new *Victor* assault-class BattleMechs.

And then I saw something I was not meant to see so early in our . . . indoctrination. I should have guessed it, though, given the wide range and redundancy of the satellite facilities. They are not making just one type of BattleMech here. On a testing range yesterday, I saw the first of a new style of *BattleMaster*, I am sure. Very similar to the Steiner variant and, looking at some of the overall build and the main gauss weapon, also not dissimilar to the *Victor*. This was certainly why the facility was chosen (by Daoshen or The Republic?) to begin producing this new assault-class machine.

I can't be sure that there is much difference at all, in fact, between this *BattleMaster* and others, except for cosmetic changes meant to give the 'Mech a more Asian look. But I am guessing that they are incorporating a few equipment variations, thus the additional engineers and techs—they are trying to solve some flaw they discovered in field trials.

The more I see, the more I discover there is to learn.

**11 April 3135**

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***DropShip Mercury, Prefecture I***

What a surprise. Although my tech friends have departed on a different course, my silent friend has stayed with me. He's really quite bad at his job—I would've noticed him much sooner on the *Regal* except I was distracted by the difficulty of yanking information from the techs. If he were any good, or decently funded, he would have a teammate or two, and they would have found some angle to watch me from, where I wouldn't have seen them so easily. This guy is one of those types who thinks holding a scandal sheet in front of his face will make it so that I don't notice him.

So I'm not terribly worried about him, but still, a tail is a tail. I'll shake him on Vega, and that will end it.

## 12 April 3135

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Bannson's even *sloppier* than I thought, but apparently so am I. The Styk report I logged last time had a preview—and possibly a sequel. I'll keep perusing...

**Confidential Bannson Universal Document**  
**Styk: On Arrival**  
**Prepared by Senior Engineer Walter Plunkett (RA)**

I have to admit, I was prepared to be underwhelmed by what I would find on Styk. A world that The Republic would let go so easily, I assumed, the Capellan Confederation would not find reason to garrison so strong or to factor in so heavily in their war plans.

I became quickly disabused of that notion when we were met by a Capellan WarShip while traveling in-system!

*A Feng Huang-class cruiser! If there are more than two of them in existence, I'd be surprised. And one of them is here, in the Styk system, intercepting all inbound and outgoing traffic. We were boarded, searched by Confederation Marines, and interviewed (albeit briefly, thanks to our bonafides) by Maskirovka officers.*

*Styk, as you may know, has a checkered past. During the Marik-Liao Offensive of '57, it was one of several worlds that House Liao failed to reclaim. But it was able, on its own merits, to throw off Davion stewardship and assert its independence for a short time. (No, sire, I am not a historian. But the DropShip has an excellent library, and I looked it up.) By agreeing to a partnership with Gan Singh, they formed the Styk Commonality, which managed to remain neutral until Liao finally rolled in and established dominion once again during its Xin Sheng campaign a few years later. The world was lost to Word of Blake during their Jihad, and it was held until the final years of that war when it became contested between the Capellan Confederation and the forming Republic. It was one of the reasons House Liao fought so hard.*

*What made the world so attractive to all was, of course, the Tao MechWorks facility. House Davion helped to retool this long-abandoned factory in order to produce the VTR-9K Victor assault BattleMech. I would have thought the facilities ruined in all the fighting, or, at the least, mothballed to the point of obsolescence when The Republic pushed through its disarmament policies.*

*It would seem that neither happened quite as any of us suspected. Either that or the Capellans intend to pour more resources into the industrial complex than we anticipated.*

*I won't get to the industrial center for at least a week, I'm told. Clearances. Security. More damned background checks and polygraphs, no doubt. These facilities are either extremely important to the Capellans or all this is some of the best military misdirection I'm leaning only slightly in favor of misdirection, mostly because I think I was meant to see the lance of new Victors standing at silent attention on the spaceport tarmac. Of course, they could have been standing there for a month or a year. They could have been old machines scoured down to fresh metal and put on display.*

*Damn. They've got me running in circles. I know enough to begin asking intelligent questions, but not much more. Not yet. Whatever they are up to, the Capellans have learned very well from past mistakes and are going at this in a whole new way. It will make my real job here more difficult, but where there is intrigue, there is usually information worth guarding. Let me see what there is to learn here. See exactly what it is they want from me—and from us.*

*When I know more, sire, so will you.*

**14 April 3135**

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Not good.

**Confidential Bannson Universal Document**  
**Styk: A Final Report**  
**Prepared by Senior Engineer Walter Plunkett (RA)**

This may be my last report for some time, sire. In fact, I may be killed before much longer.

I can verify that my earlier reports have been accurate to the extent that anyone can be trusted to know what is happening here on Styk. Tao MechWorks has been refurbished, and it appears to be making *Victor* and *Zhang-da-shi* (*BattleMaster*) designs at a feverish pace. Live-fire tests continue. There is still no obvious transport method in place to move these machines off planet, and the on-planet forces and local security make taking this world all but impossible, unless an army could be raised that would be capable of taking worlds like New Aragon—or Terra itself.

The troubles with the *Zhang-da-shi* seem limited to command and control functions, meaning that not every MechWarrior can pilot one of these new designs. How extensive these problems are, I cannot say.

Many machines are prepainted with the crests of Capellan warrior Houses, McCarron's Armored Cavalry, or the insignias of secondary line regiments. As far as I know, the machines are being delivered as marked. I have seen empty hangars and abandoned DropShip landing pads. But I have yet to see one machine loaded and lifted off of Styk, though certainly they must be taken away and shipped by some method.

There is still so much to learn here, so many leads I have yet to follow. Not the least of which is how this—all of this—was accomplished in such short order. Millionaires—and, in effect, new Capellan lords—have been created virtually overnight. But the amount of resources and funds spent here—though boggling—cannot begin to explain the speed at which the Tao MechWorks plant has been brought online. The only explanation, in my professional opinion, is that the Exarch or some very powerful noble (acting on his own or in concert with others) had already made significant headway in advancing the local military-industrial complex before Liao ever took control of this world. In so doing, this person may have handed the Capellan Confederation the keys to The Republic's downfall.

This is where I must leave off, if I am to get this message away. Time is of the essence. We understood from the first that the Confederation would tightly control all security and access, but still they needed the extra hands and minds badly enough to justify bringing us in. Our connection was to be sparingly used, but reliable. We never assumed the Maskirovka would truly attain a deep penetration into our network.

They have.

My usual "connection" has been terminated. Literally. I managed to find a way to jump several levels in order to get this final report to you, but after that, the agent passing this along will be going underground. It is all very confusing, and if I did not know better, I would say that Bannson Universal has been heavily infiltrated by Liao sympathizers. Or, possibly, it is a competitor fomenting inner struggle among highly placed executives. Whatever the reason, sire, do not expect another status report for some time, if ever.

And guard your local communications network with great, great care and suspicion. There is no telling how far the treachery extends.



**15 April 3135**

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***DropShip Mercury, Prefecture I***

Look at me—I'm gone again. This is what I get for trying to have a spot of fun. I relay some of the stuff I learned from my techie friends, and I am told to get my pretty little rear end off of Vega as soon as possible. Where to? Prefecture IX, finally. Been wanting to go there for a while, and it should be fun.

Bad news is, I'm not traveling alone. I tried to lose my other new friend on Vega, but nothing doing. I thought he was just some chump, because he'd been so obvious, but now I'm worried it's something else. Maybe he was letting me see him as a challenge, a way of telling me that he was so good at keeping up that he didn't need to be subtle.

I'm more worried now.

## 18 April 3135

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### ***JumpShip Star of Kerensky, Prefecture I***

This is when slow information hurts. This is when I needed to know something the day—the *hour*—it happened, instead of learning of it 10 days later. *Ten days later!*

There is no more Senate. Levin disbanded it, just like that. “We have shown ourselves to be divided,” he said, in the most colossal understatement since Aleksander Kerensky said, “I’ll be back soon.” So long, see you later, good-bye.

But it’s not that easy, of course. I’m sure he anticipated the reaction—I can feel it already on the ship. The bluebloods are up in arms, raging on and on about Levin’s ignorance, his unmitigated gall, and his lack of popular support.

As a courier, I’m not supposed to get involved in these things, and I need to keep a low profile. But tonight, when I am certain I am alone and unwatched, I will raise a glass of champagne and silently toast the Exarch’s cast-iron guts.

**22 April 3135**

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***JumpShip Star of Kerensky, Prefecture IX***

I've been watching my friend in return. I've given up trying to shake him—big as they are, a JumpShip's too small to get away from a dedicated tail. I've come to a few conclusions about him. He's probably from The Republic, or at least some aspect thereof. He's got all the right mannerisms. He also has pretty refined, expensive tastes—I've seen him sneaking a drink from a bottle of Alioth wine, and a quick check with the ship's stewards confirmed they hadn't brought any aboard themselves.

Anyone who packs Alioth wine across the galaxy is likely to be a blueblood, which has got me thinking more about the Exarch's executive order. Clearly, the problems in the Senate didn't pop up overnight, and the Senate might have been digging in its heels before the order finally came down. All this is to say that the senators, who are the bluest of the bluebloods, might well have an interest in tailing people who they think are valuable to The Republic. All of which makes me wonder why he's following me.

## 26 April 3135

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Being a member of the courier network has its privileges—especially when you're owed a favor or two.

***Kev Rosse Personal Journal***  
***Spirit Cats Enclave, Outside McPherson, Marcus***  
***Prefecture VIII, The Republic of the Sphere***

Star Commander Nikki brought me a package today, delivered by special courier. I knew there was something familiar by the way the package was wrapped. Once I opened it and dumped the contents into my hand, I knew who had sent it: The origami-styled Nova Cat in the palm of my hand confirmed it.

Benjork Nova Cat. Ah, Lone Cat. I thought I would never hear from him again. Though a pleasant surprise, it dredged up old memories. Painful memories that troubled my spirit.

I lovingly laid it down on my desk. Its head seemed to track my every move, watching. I felt a little uncomfortable, a little cold. I dismissed the feeling, yet still it stared at me, judging.

The package also included a holo-disc, which I plugged into my personal holo-player. I watched with fascination as the screen flickered to life and displayed the Nova Cat symbol. Soon it faded, and Ben's face appeared.

He was older now, hair bleached silver with time. His face had a few more scars than I remembered. Still, his eyes held the intensity of a much younger and hungrier warrior. There was a smile on his face—something that Ben did not display often. When he spoke, his baritone voice was still rich and strong. Impressed by the confidence in his voice, I found myself answering him.

"Greetings, Ovakhan. It is me: Benjork Lone Cat."

"And to you, my old friend," I answered.

"I know I am the last person you expected to hear from; however, something has prompted me to contact you."

"I guess time does heal all wounds," I found myself saying.

"By now I am certain that you have heard of what transpired here on Alkalurops. You will be pleased to know that the path I journeyed for so long has finally ended. Even still, I found it necessary to seek a vision quest for guidance in my new position as Legate."

That was interesting. I was proud of him for trying to find his place in life. I knew Ben was serious when his eyes narrowed and the wrinkles around his eyes became more pronounced. I leaned even closer to the viewer to make sure I did not miss what he was about to say.

"After spending seven days fasting, I was rewarded with another vision. I know it is not unprecedented to have more than one vision, but it is still not common."

"Aff," I responded automatically. Unlike Ben, I am not a "true" Nova Cat. I am a descendant of those Nova Cat warriors of Delta Galaxy who followed Stone. Ben, however, was a true Nova Cat.

"I am telling you this because I need your insight—because I cannot speak of this to the Nova Cat oathmaster."

Truly, my friend had forgiven me.

"After placing my veneers in the fire, I closed my eyes in meditation. When I opened them, I saw flames of black and silver. Hovering above was the symbol of The Republic. Haggard and torn, it was pierced by multiple swords from all directions. Blood poured from the wounds. Finally, it exploded, disintegrating completely."

I sat in stunned disbelief. For how long, I do not recall: I had the same vision, not two nights ago.

I stared at the Nova Cat origami when I spoke: "Old friend, I believe we have foreseen the death of The Republic."

## 27 April 3135

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### ***DropShip Hollyberry, Prefecture IX***

Initially, I wanted to come to Skye because it looked like one of the true hot spots in The Republic, where the constant threat of hostilities had boiled over in recent months. Hot spots are always more fun than cold spots.

That was, of course, before the whole Republic became a hot spot. Throw a dart at a map of The Republic, there's a good chance you'll hit a planet engaged in battle, a planet where fighting is imminent, or a peaceful planet with local troop movements that might indicate when the fighting will begin.

In short, every planet in The Republic is now really interesting. Which is bad from the point of view of the people who, you know, have to live here—but great for business.

It takes a little luster off my visit to the Isle of Skye. It's no longer a unique pool of violence; now it's just another part of the ever-growing storm.

## 28 April 3135

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That buzzing in the hornet's nest just got louder. Really.

Aliezhyn-054: Deposit 2933, synchronize at aforementioned hour; signal reference 05.03.33

[[begin encryption Lazarus-13]]

It is just as you suspected. Forces are mobilizing across Sudeten, as far as intelligence can demonstrate; check with outlying sources A, F, and G for corroborating data. Am working on getting dossiers on faculty in academy. Low to negligible chance of infiltration; data useful nonetheless. In general, infiltration a greater risk. Morale increasing. See commentary on broadcasts below.

Hydraulics Subtechnician Teresa remains uncompromised. Have searched for possible source of breach, but found none so far. Please see included crystal for further details. Will increase surveillance frequency, but recommend searching for breach elsewhere.

Local broadcasts have increased. Some entertainment, though most programming is now local news and historical documentaries. Tearful review of glory days, patriotic schmaltz. Mood growing restless, expectant. Trials of Grievance up threefold. Two fatalities in past week. One fatality an older, unpopular officer with conservative views. Other fatality, untested warrior. Training exercises up by 25 percent. Increased use of real ammunition. May explain accelerated technician tracks.

Work staff at most Borealtown industrial zones up by 200 percent. Recommend additional personnel to augment monitoring. Stick with low-skill laborers. High demand right now, some officers struggling to fill rosters, likely not to check thoroughly. Will recommend placements in next missive. If Uomi-393 available, request presence. U393 ideally suited for this environment.

Traffic into and out of location up by 323 percent. Intense mobilization! Military and civilian activity each equal. Infrastructure being carefully maintained; evidence of long-term use and occupation of facilities.

Back to Teresa. Mentioned, in casual conversation, ideas for her "thesis." This and other factors indicate high mobilization at earliest levels. Academy track for technicians usually three years. New activity indicates acceleration to half that, if not faster. Some rumors of "on the job" training. Something very big about to happen. Working on details, nothing surfaced as yet.

If "thesis" is valid, may indicate unexpected levels of innovation in JF ranks. Suggest seeking corroborating data from alternative sources and locations. Again, U393 ideal for additional local coverage.

New placements should occur before end of next month; evidence of new security protocols, much higher complexity than previous. Will likely not interrupt this operation; however, may affect any new missions in area. Recommend additional placements in surrounding municipalities.

[[end encryption Lazarus-13]] \*\*asynch\*\*

\*\*UPDATE\*\* Deposit 2944, asynch AM-PM drop. Location redirect. Protocol refresh. All protocol, one year, disregard. Asynch ONLY. U393 requested.

[[begin encryption Wencesz-07]]

Held report for one week; drop impossible, new security procedures. Massive mobilization. Live ammo training daily. Technical academy now accelerated to one year. Regular channels of arrival compromised. Safe for incoming ground; no direct spaceport arrival.

Lyrans are topic of daily discussion; nothing clear. Mobilization clear indicator of organized assault, likely in the next 12 months. MiningMech fabro working 24-7; enough retooling inside; final products could be anything. Most likely not industrial.

Technical academy curriculum change: Morning PC now includes heavier combat training. Mood is entirely changed. Removal of nonessential ops highly recommended. Security measures of greater complexity, updates every day (possibility of updates in AM and PM by next week).

For continued quality of data, U393 absolutely necessary. Also recommend Ginro-251 and Ximenez-992. Do not relocate personnel from Lyran locations! All intel indicates push toward Terra. Inevitable. No solid data to prove, but what else could it be?

Consider relocation of this agent. Status uncompromised, but possible overstayed welcome. Channels closing for my talents. Relocate to Skye? Decision ASAP. Will wait three months for reply. If in danger of compromise, will leave by middle of fourth month.

Drop rescheduled, now asynch. No more direct contact.

Brace yourselves.

[[end encryption Wencesz-07]] \*\*asynch\*\*

## 02 May 3135

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### ***Heaven's Gate, Ryde, Prefecture IX***

I'm in enemy territory, and it looks like I'm going to have to get used to that particular thrill. We're losing. It feels like more and more planets are slipping away each day, and I imagine the powers that be are going to want me in those spots. Fun for me, but pretty damn terrible for the incredible shrinking Republic.

The Jade Falcons are an interesting lot. I think what's most unnerving is their calm in the face of chaos, but I guess that's what a firm sense of destiny does for you—you know where you're going to end up, so why worry about how you get there? We could swarm this planet with every 'Mech we have and stomp every last Falcon machine into fine metal dust, and they would just shrug, mumble something about destiny, and get ready to hit us again. When you've got a destiny, you don't stay knocked down for long.

## 03 May 3135

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Ooh, ComStar bits.

### Situation Report

**To:** Paladin Kelson Sorenson

**From:** Alexi Holt, Knight Errant

**Classification:** Eyes Only

**Attachment:** Encoded file – 3113.HZ.WB 12k

Sire Sorenson,

My infiltration of ComStar is nearly complete. The history you had prepared for me proved invaluable. I expect to pass my final indoctrination shortly. Once completed, I'll be inducted with the rank of acolyte.

This, however, is not the reason for my report: I uncovered data while attempting to locate the whereabouts of Tucker Harwell.

The attached file gives you the information I retrieved. Unfortunately, much of the data is corrupted or intentionally edited by others.

```
Transmission Code: Velvet Level Access Only
Date: [data corrupted]
To: Precentor ROM
From: Tempest Stryker
RE: Unit Dispositions
```

Per your request, I have gathered specific information on unaccounted-for Blakist units.

The 3rd Division (Pure Thoughts and Actions) [data corrupted], however, a few of the level IIIs survived to [data corrupted].

The 10th Division [data corrupted], listed as destroyed, remnants scattered throughout the [data corrupted] periphery. Though they fought against [data corrupted], most were able to [data corrupted].

The 11th Division [data corrupted], though the unit was located on [data corrupted] and [data corrupted], along with supporting units. This division may still [data corrupted].

The 12th Division (Harbingers of Blake) [data corrupted] moved from base in [data corrupted] on orders from St. Jamais. [data corrupted] located mercenary command Blanc's Coyotes in the [data corrupted] system after they broke [data corrupted]. A portion of the Coyotes [data corrupted] Samoyedic Colonies [data corrupted]. The Bloodletters (level III unit) [data corrupted]. Prior to the Regular sterilization of Circinus, Precentor Decline Chaney ordered the remaining 12th [data corrupted] with the Master and followed [data corrupted].

Sire, one might infer that the Master — and perhaps some of the Blakist troops -- may still be alive. These are my thoughts, though I am not an intelligence analyst; perhaps you will choose to make this information available to those who are? I am certain they can provide you with a better analysis.

I did acquire the information on the Samoyedic Colonies. It is a 12-world system in the deep periphery. Allegedly, Blanc's Coyotes returned from this system after misjumping — some four decades after the event. Curiously, the local population is alleged to have interplanetary travel capability and other advanced technologies. I have encoded the coordinates in this message; you have my activation code.

I'll leave it to your judgment whether to inform the Exarch, though he may need to know. Based on the resurgence of the Com Guards and other activities we have uncovered, however, ComStar may know exactly what happened. We should take care to protect The Republic from a ComStar who, it seems, has reverted to what it was before the split.

Until next time, sire; I am your humble servant.

Alexi Holt,  
Knight Errant



## 05 May 3135

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Yeesh, talk about your podunk city writers.

### ***Voidrunner* Can't Make Kyrkbacken Run, Needs Spare Parts Sao Paulo, Asuncion, Prefecture VI**

by Terrence Smythe

The JumpShip *Voidrunner*, so long the strongest and most dependable link in the communications chain between Asuncion and Kyrkbacken, has been forced to cease its tireless journey because of a malfunction in its Fuchida-Kearny drive. Legate Rodrigo de la Cruz released a statement today announcing that although *Voidrunner* is unable to swim between stars, he and Governor Peter Ogden will be doing everything in their power to ensure that communications remain open with Kyrkbacken until replacement parts have been brought in from New Canton. A list of the parts that *Voidrunner* needs will be going out with the departure of the JumpShip Crimson Hawk tomorrow, bound for New Canton along the usual series of relays.

But could the loss of the *Voidrunner's* Fuchida-Kearny drive be the last nail in the coffin of Asuncion's isolation? Even with the *Voidrunner* in perfect shape, we got news of happenings throughout The Republic of the Sphere only twice a month, and the captain of the *Voidrunner* had long been telling Governor Ogden that so many jumps were creating excessive wear and tear on the aging JumpShip's interstellar drive—a warning the governor ignored until it was too late.

Now that the *Voidrunner* is offline, it may be months before we have regular communication with the rest of The Republic, and with events rushing forward all around us, by the time we hear about important events, it may be too late to do anything about them. Although this reporter certainly doesn't support any rash actions, the governor and legate should have known what they were doing when they insisted on pushing the *Voidrunner* beyond her limits.

Winona Everren, a former engineer aboard the *Voidrunner*, spoke with me about the situation.

"The FKD [Fuchida-Kearny drive] had this funny rattle every time we kicked it up, but it always worked," she said. "We couldn't figure out what it was that was causing the problem, so we just left it alone."

Frankly, it startles this reporter that such a vital piece of machinery would be maintained by people who did not know the first thing about fixing it.

Although both Governor Ogden and Legate de la Cruz have promised that the *Voidrunner* will be fully functional within three weeks, this reporter has his doubts as to whether any part of their "too little, too late" policy will succeed.

[Deandra: This is about as overdone and hammy as I've seen, and I've seen some pretty overdone stuff. But the point is still important: The JumpShip relays that were set up after the HPG network went down are starting to fall apart, and it's going to take some serious work to get them up again. As an interesting side note, the *Sentinel* published the following column the next day. Looks like Smythe got just what he deserved for writing this rot.]

The *Asuncion Sentinel* would like to apologize to Governor Ogden, Legate de la Cruz, and Ms. Winona Everren for comments made by Terrence Smythe, former *Sentinel* reporter. The editorial staff of the *Sentinel* wishes to assure the governor and legate that we have every confidence in their ability to guide the people of Asuncion through these difficult times.

## **06 May 3135**

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### ***Location Unknown***

Is this on?

Hello?

What ... where...?

I still have it. The recorder. Why did he leave that? Took everything else. Why did he leave that?

Oh, God. He thinks I'll talk. He thinks I'll be incoherent, and I'll talk into the recorder by reflex, and I'll say stuff he wants to hear.

I won't. I won't say anything. There's nothing to say. I'm just a courier. There's been a mistake. I don't know anything.

Oh, God.

**11 May 3135**

---

***Unknown Location***

I think I'll sing:

*I'm a little teapot short and stout*

*Here is my handle, here is my spout*

*When I get all heated and release some gas*

*Tip me over and kiss my ass.*

You hear that? I know the drill here. Take it away for a few days, keep me in isolation, give it back, and then I'm so grateful and so disoriented that I'll spill my guts into the stupid machine.

Well, I guess it's not a bad plan. Except *I've got nothing to tell you!* I'm a courier! You've made a mistake! Play all the games you want—I still won't have anything to say.

Bastards.

**16 May 3135**

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***Unknown Location***

I'm not sure where I am. They're moving me, but I'm not sure where. I was unconscious most of the time, but I woke up for a few minutes in what I thought was a JumpShip. I was in an empty, sterile room, so really I could've been anyplace—but it felt like a JumpShip.

Then I was out again. Then conscious. Then out again. In the same room. And it still feels like a JumpShip. So I think I'm moving somewhere, but I can't say where.

They've lightened up on the interrogation. They're just keeping me drugged and out of it. Not fun, but I don't hurt as much. I imagine the only reason I'm awake now is they forgot to redose me.

Footsteps coming down the hall now. They remembered. Nighty-night.

**20 May 3135**

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***Unknown Location***

I don't know. I don't know what you're talking about! I go to Terra *all the time*—that's where work is.

[unintelligible input]

No, no, no, not the, no, not ...

[unintelligible input]

Wha? My, uh, my, ... oooooohh.

What?

Recorder?

I don't know. I don't ... oh, God ...

No. No, I didn't. Not on purpose. I didn't activate it on purpose.

Turn it off. Yes. I will. But my arm. I can't move my arm. I can't feel anything there anymore.

The red button. Press it. That'll turn it—

## 25 May 3135

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### ***Unknown Location***

Dunwallop slew on the kailin brosh. Vrip! Vrip! Heedle heidle hodle.

Krrrrrrrrrr. Bunsocket.

Fancilface. Bennis lawg with geedle fram. Pankling. Pankling on the majintour.

Hee hee! Majintour! Pankling on the majintour! Get it?

No?

Krrrrrrrrrr. Bunsocket.

Vreeep vreeep vreeep vreeep vreeep.

Vreeeeeeeeeeeeeeep.

**30 May 3135**

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***Unknown Location on Skye, Prefecture IX***

I'm out. Damn them all to hell, I'm out.

Shouldn't talk much. Shouldn't make noise. They'll be looking. Don't know how many there are. Don't know how much they care about tracking me down.

Away from any cities, towns, anything. Pretty sure I'm on Skye—two suns, lots of fog, accents on the few voices I've overheard. Where I wanted to be, but now I don't really want to be here. Too much trouble.

Need to sleep. Find a copse of trees, leaves. Dig a hole. Hope I don't sleep in it forever. Then maybe food? Jaw hurts too much to think about chewing.

But I made it out. Nice to sleep without four blank walls around me.

## 31 May 3135

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The world doesn't stop while you're away... I don't have the energy for this right now.

*From the office of The Honorable Raymond Fritz, Muphrid System Governor*

*To Deandra Lowe, Independent Courier*

### Muphrid System Government Independent Contractor Agreement

This Agreement is entered into by Deandra Lowe (hereinafter "Independent Contractor") and the Muphrid System Government of Prefecture X of The Republic of the Sphere.

The parties hereby agree to the following terms, conditions, and provisions:

#### I. Term of Agreement

The term of this Agreement shall end upon completion of the agreed-upon delivery.

#### II. Services Performed by Independent Contractor

Independent Contractor will perform the following services for the Muphrid System Government:

1. Transport official mail packets from the Muphrid system to the Yorii system.
2. Transportation includes ensuring that official correspondence is not tampered with and that it reaches the appropriate government authorities in the Yorii system.

#### III. Payment Terms

Independent Contractor will receive 1500 Republic Stones upon intact delivery of the official mail packets to the authorities in the Yorii system.

#### IV. Independent Contractor

Independent Contractor's status in all matters pursuant to this Agreement shall be that of an independent contractor. Independent Contractor may not directly or indirectly represent or imply in any way that he or she is an employee of the Muphrid system government. Independent Contractor, in the performance of this Agreement, will be acting in his or her individual capacity—not as an agent, employee, partner, joint venturer, or associate of the Muphrid system government. Independent Contractor shall not have any right, power, or authority to create any obligation, express or implied, on behalf of the Muphrid system government. Independent Contractor is liable for providing all necessary insurance to protect against losses, claims, injury, damage, compensation, and/or other actions for which Independent Contractor is responsible. Independent Contractor will be solely responsible for payment of any and all taxes levied and assessed under any law with respect to rewards given to Independent Contractor under this Agreement.

#### V. Terms and Conditions

The Muphrid system government reserves the right to modify the terms, conditions, and policies applicable to Independent Contractor's services provided pursuant to this Agreement at any time without prior notice.

The Muphrid system government reserves the right to penalize Independent Contractor if he or she has not provided services in a manner consistent with this Agreement. Penalties may include, but are not limited to, reduction in payment and/or inactivation of Independent Contractor status.

#### VI. Indemnification

Independent Contractor hereby agrees to indemnify, defend, and hold harmless the Muphrid system government from and against all claims, actions, lawsuits, losses, damages, and expenses (including, but not limited to, attorneys' fees) arising from Independent Contractor's acts or omissions.

#### VII. Governing Law

This Agreement and Independent Contractor's participation in the Program shall be governed by and construed in accordance with the laws of The Republic of the Sphere and the system and planet of Muphrid without reference to any conflict of laws principles.

#### VIII. Entire Agreement

This Agreement constitutes the entire agreement between the parties with regard to the subject matter hereof, and supersedes any prior oral or written agreement regarding the same.

Signed,

Danielle Gryf, Aide to the Honorable Raymond Fritz, Governor of Muphrid



**03 June 3135**

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***Outskirts of New Glasgow, Skye, Prefecture IX***

I almost feel sane again. It's a miracle.

Let this be a lesson to all would-be jailers, kidnappers, and all others who want to hold on to someone against their will—deranged people generally need to be watched more carefully, not less.

I think this lesson has sunk in pretty well in jails and hospitals across most of civilization, but you amateurs sometimes still have trouble with the concept (thank God). I put on my deranged act for a few days (and, honestly, I didn't have to act that hard), and the more I kept on gibbering, the more they lost interest in me. As their visits and supervision eased, I had more time to work on loosening bonds, finding exits, that sort of thing. The fact that they were pretty much starving me helped, because I could fit through some really narrow spaces. I bet they looked at that floor vent a million times and thought "It's okay—no human could fit through that."

Suckers.

**07 June 3135**

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Even the Falcon chicks are building weapons!

Aliezhyn-054: Deposit 2956, asynch luck-of-the-draw; signal reference 15.07.33 [[begin encryption-Santiago03]]

\*Transcribed conversation between this agent and Dual Track Hydraulics Subtechnician Teresa. Entire conversation recorded for thoroughness; salient points marked with emphasis.

T  
Gary! Hey! Over here!

A  
I tell you, I just want to die.  
[pause]  
Then I might actually get some sleep, quiaff?  
[half-hearted laughter]  
Would you like some coffee?

T  
Neg! Coffee is no good.

A  
This is decaf.

T  
So you drink it just because it tastes good?

A  
I drink it black. It keeps me awake just fine that way.

T  
What do you have next? I can barely remember my own schedule....

A  
Information Systems. Oh—I wanted to know if it would be all right if I took some of the data from Electricals to plug in for test architecture.  
[pause]

T  
Okay.

A  
If you would prefer not to do this, I do not mind. It just seemed like a good idea. We have the data handy, and if my work is correct, then we get some free analysis in the bargain.

T  
If your work is correct.

A  
Nice to hear the faith you have in me!

T  
I would not want you to think that I...this data is important.

A  
Resistance ratings of different superconductors?

T  
There is a reason I chose the project we have.

A  
Okay.

T  
I want this to be a part of my thesis.

A  
Ohhh. I have heard you say some things about your ideas, but not very much.

T  
I—I do not want to jinx it. [nervous laugh]

A  
I can help you, if you like.

T  
This is my thesis.

A  
So? There is no reason I cannot contribute data analysis, quiaff? Maybe I can be your QA person. You do your analysis, and then I back it up. Thoroughness is a sure sign of diligence.

T  
Neg. You will laugh.

A  
I promise I will not. But I think it is a shame that you have so little confidence in your idea.

T  
I have full confidence in my idea. I just...hesitate to talk about it when the idea has not been fully developed.

A  
Sounds like weakness to me.

T  
[pause]  
Reconsider your words.

A  
How can I? Your threat is empty.

T  
The idea is not yet fully formed. It is unseemly to display something malformed, quiaff?

A  
Neg! This is how we ensure the idea is strong and benefits the Clan.

T  
[pause]  
What you say is true.

A  
What matters most is that this benefit the Clan, quiaff?

T  
Aff, aff. But I feel I should not need help.

A  
Help does not indicate weakness. It indicates thoroughness. You are simply being extremely cautious with all your work.

T  
[pause]  
Simply put, it is an extended-range plasma cannon.

A  
Has this been tried before?

T  
In the little research I have done, I have seen some evidence of it, but it has not seen much success.  
[pause]  
I would welcome your expertise on this. My math has never been that strong.

\*end transcription\*

[[end encryption Santiago-03]]

**08 June 3135**

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***Outside of New Glasgow, Skye, Prefecture IX***

Here's the dilemma: First, I'm in enemy territory. Not a great thing, but not so bad, either, because couriers, cogs in the world of commerce that they are, get better access than do a lot of other folks, like military and government people. But the second thing is the real problem, and it's this: There's no official record of me coming on planet. I'm pretty sure my kidnappers didn't bother to get the appropriate visas and other crap. I believe I was just smuggled in. Possibly in luggage.

Oh, and let's not forget number three: I have no identification. The kidnappers have all that stuff. And all my money. So although I'd like to get off planet, my current status is pretty much Homeless Vagabond. Tough to get on board a DropShip that way.

Luckily, I have connections. But I've got to get to the city, which means my next course of action is getting my fingers all loose and nimble and ready to hunt through some innocent people's pockets.

**13 June 3135**

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***New Glasgow, Skye, Prefecture IX***

Asylum. Wonderful, glorious asylum. Not the political kind, of course—too complicated, too fraught with national loyalties. No, it's the business asylum I've got, and it's wonderful. Safe in the protective grasp of Periphery Express. And they have a shower. A *shower*. Heaven.

Thankfully, my reputation with PE is such that they don't ask too many questions when I find myself in a bind. They just help me out. I love these people.

I'll be out again tomorrow—my little side trip has put me behind schedule, so there's no time to sit around. And I'm going out with an extra mission in addition to the work backlog. The face of my old friend, who followed me across The Republic, is emblazoned on my brain. I'll find him.

## 16 June 3135

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The mole is blinking in the sunlight again....

Aliezhyn-054: Deposit 3001, asynch AM/PM double-blind; signal reference 22.12.31 [[begin encryption-Ignatius18]]

As planned, will be staying as second-tier student-instructor. Dual Specialist Track Subtechnician Abruzzi detailed to new unit. Determined information on project as follows:

Viability of new weapon chancy at best. Not likely to be implemented in foreseeable future.

More importantly, size of forces mustered is enough to comprise three Galaxies. Verifying numbers as of time of this report.

Coordinated efforts with Uomi-393 indicate focused intent on Inner Sphere, primarily Terra, via Lyrans Commonwealth. Status against Wolves unclear; recommend relocation of Ginro-251 (see prior Wolf infiltration reports for further consideration). If Wolves confrontation is a goal, reassign Ximenez-992 for opportunity assessments. The splitting of forces must be supported.

Secondary evidence of Falcon infiltration into Sphere. Nothing very clear; however, all indications are that infiltration is single person or isolated cells. Purposefully disjointed chain of command. Fairly sophisticated operational procedures, especially for Falcons. Assassination attempt unlikely. Intelligence gathering most likely goal. Corroborate with M. Perry. Request information from Static Assignments if necessary; allow extra time for clearance verification.

Outside news increasingly difficult to find. Most news propagandized, inaccurate. In next Objective Brief, please include general news update from INN and other sources.

Local laws and restrictions heightened in city and surrounding regions. New drop schedule successful; will adjust again in one month to prevent patterning.

Current production at highest in weeks. Mostly small materials, perhaps small arms, infantry equipment. No hard evidence, but most vehicles from MiningMech factory appear to be BattleMechs of varying designs. Few support vehicles, not enough seen to say for certain.

Surprising amount of consumables—rations, uniforms, “house wares.” Leave every week on a freighter. Destination not revealed. Presumably coreward.

Academy tracks accelerated to single year. Incoming classes tripled. Some minor technicians, NCOs, being graduated and deployed in 3–6 months. Many headed coreward. Recruitment at all-time high; selectivity very high as well. Veterans on-planet being deployed, replaced with newbies. Makes drops easier. Possible drop increase if intel warrants it.

### **\*\*UPDATE\*\***

Invasion of Lyrans Commonwealth. News is nonstop, word of crushing defeats on Porrima, Chaffee, and Ryde. Brutality on Chaffee and Ryde unthinkable. Are numbers accurate? Hamilton gone? Horrifying vid from Ryde invasion: Malvina Hazen screaming and bleeding, troops howling behind her. Propaganda? People here eat it up. Frenzy of fervor; dangerous mob mentality. Many people from academy staying on campus, locked in dormitories. Not a bad idea.

Never seen this before: partying for two days straight. Celebrations, drunkenness. Even the factory scaled down for a few hours. Movement into Laiaka, Alkaid? Rumor, no evidence. Please verify or corroborate, reply with data. Status of Zebeneschamali and Carnath unknown, presumed conquered. Please update on this as well. After Ryde, possible movement to Zebebelgenubi, Kimball II. Alcor and Mizar? Too far from verified line of movement, please clarify.

Will overstay welcome soon, probably. Will be reassigned to new post by end of training year. Sounds like coreward, but difficult to say. Stay in current mission? No guarantee of placement. Will fall out of contact for at least three months. Can we afford it?

Also, what is Republican reaction to Falcon activity? Have heard in other intel circles that something is breaking in Knights. Any truth to this?

Combine made its move; how is it pressing its advantage? Lyrans on defensive, no offensive plans? Even thwarted by invasion? Also, status of HPGs. Still down for foreseeable future? Has sublink system been established as planned? Pony express very tiresome, highly unreliable. Very expensive. Please send fresh funds in next drop. Also, a bottle of whiskey. The booze is insufferable here.

**17 June 3135**

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***JumpShip Periphery Express XI, Prefecture IX***

The blessing and the curse of torture is that you can never remember it all. Your mind mercifully suppresses a lot of it, plus part of the exercise is to make you confused and disoriented and not sure of what you're saying. And when your mind is in that state, you just don't remember much.

Which is good. I remember too much as it is. The pictures in my mind are horrid, and I shudder each time I remember these are things that happened to *me*. The pain, the humiliation, the anger, the complete degradation comes back with each memory I have, so it's good to have only the few images I can dredge up.

But when I find him—ah, that's a time I'd like to have each and every memory clear in my mind. So when I do whatever it is I decide to do, I'll know exactly why I'm doing it—and why he has it coming.

## 21 June 3135

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People are scared all over the place. They should be.

Hey there, fair reader. If this is your first time glancing over my scattered electrons in the sky, I'm just a gal trying to make sense of the world—and to make sure that the kind of stuff that usually falls through the INN's cracks ends up in your hot little hands anyway. Information wants to be free, sez I. So if you ever have a line into something astoundingly cool, strange, outrageous, impossible, or just plain astounding, don't hesitate to drop me a line.

—*Rilke Spess, concerned citizen of the Republic of the Sphere*

Okay, so, for those of you who weren't aware of it already, the Falcons are blazing a bloody path toward Terra. I mean, pretty much so. It's looking really, really grim. You want to see grim? Take a quick gander at this transcript I found, from some local Skye news broadcaster. I've only read it, I haven't even heard it, and it still makes me cry. We are all in some SERIOUS trouble. I know I post stuff here two, three times a day, and I always have my tongue firmly planted in cheek, but there's nothing else I can say. I guess it all reads glib.

I'm terrified, people. Not that it helps all that much to say it—well, actually I think it does—but maybe it'll make you feel a little better, too.

I have something else that might make us all feel a little better. Barely, but I'm grasping at straws, okay? Run with me, here.

So, we've got the unimaginable violence and brutality on Chaffee and Ryde. But have you guys read about Summer? Alkaid? It's not the same thing. It's like night and day. Gentlemanly diplomatic offers and counteroffers—all at the point of a sword, don't get me wrong—but people are TALKING. Not slaughtering. Especially not civilians.

So, what's happening here? Is there a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde thing going on with Falcon leadership? Is it a psychological experiment? Help me here, people. Anyone is welcome to comment, but I'm especially interested in hearing from the academicians among us.

### COMMENTS

**H. Murakami**

**Posts:** 521

Unless you grew up in the Clans, understanding them is almost impossible. I know only that the Falcons are really staunch traditionalists. I don't know what Kerensky had to say about how to wage war, at least not like this. If anything, I'd say that Mongol tactics aren't very honorable. Maybe there is an ideological split in the Clan. But I don't think it'll help us, or the people of Skye, in any way. And that transcript? Heartwrenching. I can only imagine. I'm scared we'll be seeing that soon.

**Rilke Spess**

**Posts:** 4122

Scared is the watchword of the year. Ever since the HPGs went down, it's all gone straight to hell—for pretty much everybody. Is the Republic so bad that people want out? If so, I don't understand it. Maybe someone can post and give me a clue.

**Guest**

The Republic is a sham it was going to fall apart anyway. Noone believes that many people can be good and noble and caring. Corruption is corruption.

**Rilke Spess**

**Posts:** 4122

I was going to slam you for your hideous abuse of the English language, but I'm just too heartsick to do it. And for anyone else who'd like to give me some anti-Republic clarification, please cite some reasonably hard evidence. And use the freakin' spellchecker.



## 22 June 3135

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### ***JumpShip Periphery Express XI, Prefecture VIII***

You want proof that I'm good at what I do? You want it? I'll give you proof. April 4, there's your proof. I said Wyatt. I said HPG. And what do you know, while I'm being beaten and drugged within a millimeter of my life, it turns out the old HPG on Wyatt came to life. Could I have been *more* right?

Not sure what it all means, though. The network should be repairable, but it doesn't seem like we've made great strides since Wyatt came back online. The whole network's not working yet, not by a long stretch. We're still pretty much in the Dark Ages. But there's hope that it'll be fixed, which is more than I had before. I love those techies I met even more now than I ever have!

In other news, I've been cleared for work, and the ship's captain has let me know we're going to Murphid, where work awaits. Can't wait to see what it is.

## 23 June 3135

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Howdy Max,

All these little brush-wars have been causing havoc with my supply lines. Do you think you could get the following items out to me on Nashira? I should be stopping there in the next couple of weeks, and I can get it then. I know that I could pick up some of this stuff on the open market there, but it'd be much easier if it was all waiting in one batch.

**G**lobal Enterprises Low-Rise Hiking Boots, brown; **L**iberty Industries Model 6 Weight Resistance Machine; **E**selda Loose-Weave V-Neck Shirt, Republic Red, size small (I got an annoying hole right along the waistline of my last one); **N**ano-Laboratories Incorporated Printer Cartridge for a Senetex F32 data-pad (make sure it's for the F32; the last batch I got was for the F34, and the blasted things didn't work at all); **G**in, two bottles (Bombay Opal only, I don't know what that last lot you got me was, but it was vile); an **A**C/DC Power Adapter for my data-pad; **R**ealasis Hop-Up Caffeine Pills, two bottles; **R**eading Light, Landmark Technologies goose-neck type; **Y**eancy Technologies Travel Alarm Clock; **G**io-Avanti Type II Electric Toothbrush, with recharging base; **O**zawa Fudge Company Milk Chocolate Fudge, 2 kilos (I won't eat it all at once, don't worry); **V**ictory Conditions, Inc. Model TC300 Light Laser Pistol; **E**ight extra battery packs, V.C.I. LLP011 Laser Pistol; **R**eading Line Noise-Canceling Headphones, slim-line for use with a flight helmet (I broke my last one in a hard landing, and the noise of the engines has been driving me batty ever since); **N**ine 8-packs of AAA batteries, nickel cadmium; **O**ne Brainard Trading Company Shoulder-Bag, khaki with brown trim; **R**isk Systems Wireless Stylus Model Tee-Kay 4-21; **P**owered Hand-Drill, Tactical Advantage Ltd Model 367H; **L**ipton Iced Tea, plain, 1 case (I once had the tea they make over on Lipton, and ever since then I can't get enough of it); **A**nwar City Curry Company Hot Curry Paste, 2 jars; **N**orm Bars, 1 case, peanut butter cup flavor (I really hate these things, but they keep you going when you need a bite quick, and I ran out on my way to Yorii); **S**even Blank Memory Chips, high capacity; **R**isk Systems Graphic Interface Monitor; **E**ight-foot Extension Cord, with ground; **V**ictory Conditions, Inc. Mark IV multi-tool; **O**ne copy "*Dominion over All*" by Signus Wainright; **L**andmark Technologies Series IX holo-link adapter; and **T**hirty 36 Solaris VII Championship season holodisks.

On a side note, never get caught carrying mail. The temptation's huge to dip in and take a look at some of what you're carrying, but they've got enough security on most official Republic Mail that even I couldn't crack into it. I tell you, it was pure torture carrying that pouch from Muphrid across to Yorii and not even being able to peek at any of the juicy details I knew I was carrying (that's why I ran out of Norm bars; I kept eating the nasty things to keep my mind off of what I was carrying).

Thanks Max—I owe you one.

Deandra

**27 June 3135**

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***DropShip Murphid's Law, Prefecture X***

Neither rain, nor snow, nor psychotic terrorists treating my body like some sort of pharmaceutical testing lab can keep the mail lady from her appointed rounds. . . .

It's one step ahead and two steps back, isn't it? One minute I'm feeling a little better about The Republic and our communication capabilities. The next I'm carrying the bleeding mail. That doesn't say much for our communications network, does it?

Part of me wants to go out and throw myself into the chaos surrounding The Republic to see what's going on, but another part of me wants to stay right here in good old Prefecture X, since by the time I get to the most far-flung reaches, it may turn out that the planet I'm traveling to has been conquered—but word of the fall didn't get to the ship carrying me. That kind of situation is bad for business.

## 28 June 3135

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Sometimes I'm contracted to carry the strangest things. This notice was totally unencrypted. I doubt that Ms. Haefitch is going to be particularly happy about that, as it looks like this Aaron Sanfield was in too much of a hurry to get her (or more likely Bannson's legal team) to look at this to get it encrypted.

**From:** Aaron Sanfield, Director and CEO, Sanfield Disposal Services  
**To:** Victoria Haefitch, Vice President, Bannson Enterprises, Ltd.  
**Re:** Termination of Service Notice, Nirasaki City, Nirasaki, Prefecture II

Ms. Haefitch,

Given the relationship between Sanfield Disposal Services and Bannson Enterprises, it is my duty to inform you that we are ceasing our business relationship with the municipal government of Nirasaki City until Governor Yamaguchi can assure us that our needs will be met. We have taken this action due to repeated delays in payment accompanied by increased demands on our resources and time.

Although these delays represent a significant loss of revenue—which will be sorely missed in these trying times—I believe that the present arrangement is simply not profitable or sustainable in the long term, and this suspension of service will allow us to renegotiate the contract with Governor Yamaguchi.

For your records, our list of grievances is as follows:

*Payment for services rendered has been delayed on several occasions due to supposed "cash-flow problems," periods in which Governor Yamaguchi's government has been unable to obtain the necessary funds to tender payment at appointed times.*

*Both the municipal and system governments have made repeated demands upon Sanfield Disposal Services and our personnel above and beyond those described in our contract with them—demands which have also not resulted in payments and which likely will never result in payments because they fall outside our current contract.*

*The various promises made by the municipal and system governments in exchange for the above additional services rendered by Sanfield Disposal Services, including special tax credits and the waiving of certain fees, have not been fulfilled at this date.*

In response to this blatant abuse of the goodwill of Sanfield Disposal Services by the municipal government of Nirasaki City and by Governor Yamaguchi's system government, we have informed said governments that we have ceased service to Nirasaki City and to all other settlements and facilities upon the planet of Nirasaki.

Following the protest of our actions by Governor Yamaguchi and Legate Larsen, Sanfield Disposal Services submitted an updated contract, with the following clauses added:

*All payments due to Sanfield Disposal Services are to be tendered to the Sanfield Disposal Services main office within two days of the first of each Terran month. If all necessary payments are not tendered by the aforementioned deadline, Sanfield Disposal Services will cease all services until such time as all overdue payments have been presented to the Sanfield Disposal Services main office.*

*If additional services are requested of Sanfield Disposal Services, or if current routes are modified at the request of either the municipal government of Nirasaki City or the system government, additional fees will be charged by Sanfield Disposal Services. The exact fees, a specific timetable for their payment, and specific penalties for lapses in payment shall be agreed upon by all parties involved at the time the additional route or route change is requested.*

Your thoughtful response is appreciated,

Aaron Sanfield  
 Director and CEO  
 Sanfield Disposal Services  
 "Clean Streets, Happy Cities"

## 01 July 3135

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### ***JumpShip Tradition, Prefecture X***

I've been lining up my ducks. Since the mail mission isn't exactly a brain stretcher, I've had plenty of time to think of something else, and mostly that something involves the best way to locate my friend the kidnapper.

I'll have access to plenty of resources on Terra. The only thing I won't have a lot of is time. I'll be on planet for no more than 36 hours. Naturally, I won't sleep. I've made appointments, booked times at restricted terminals (if this isn't the right time for me to call in a few favors, when is?), and otherwise plotted out every second of those 36 hours. I don't plan on processing any of the info I get while I'm there—I'll just gather. Then, when I'm back on a ship and have gotten some sleep, I'll see what I have. It better be useful.

## 05 July 3135

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Looks like things got heated on Glengarry. I wonder if anyone saw that coming?

### Glengarry Rocked by Skirmishes

*Hawkeville Post-Times*; Hawkeville, Carnwath; Prefecture IX

Citizens of Carnwath have recently been looking to the skies as word trickles through to Hawkeville of recent fighting on nearby Glengarry. Apparently some members of the governor's cabinet were displeased with the election of Jonah Levin to exarch of The Republic of the Sphere and were planning a coup to take control of the system and declare themselves independent from The Republic. The Republic Armed Forces (RAF), however, got word of the proposed treachery and dropped hot into the governor's mansion and the adjoining militia compound.

Our sources say that the fighting was quick, but that damage to the city was heavy. Evidently, although the mansion was quickly and effectively taken by armored infantry squads from the Hastatii Sentinels, the mixed force of 'Mechs and armor that stormed the adjacent militia compound were met with stiff resistance. The Allied Press is reporting that a single *Havoc* BattleMech and three modified Industrial 'Mechs faced down the *Stalking Spider* and *Crimson Hawk* 'Mechs fielded by the Sentinels, inflicting heavy damage on the RAF 'Mechs before they were disabled or destroyed and their pilots captured. In addition to the 'Mechs, several militia vehicles were deployed to fight the RAF forces, including an assault tank of an undisclosed type. Despite the weight of firepower available to the traitors, the RAF forces were able to force the rebels to break off combat and flee the city.

The squads of Hastatii Sentinels troopers in Achillius and Cavalier battle armor were able to take out the mansion without event, although one of the Governor's aides, a woman named Annette Sullivan, was able to escape before the armored infantry squads sealed all the exits.

It was only when militia units from outside the capital struck the Hastatii Sentinels the next day that Sullivan's importance was fully realized. When the initial attacks were driven off, and the new captives debriefed, they all mentioned Sullivan speaking with them and onvining them that the RAF force was there to kill the governor and legate. The commander of the RAF force immediately began organizing his meager resources to scour the city and surrounding countryside in search of the escaped traitor.

Within two days the Sentinels had combed the entire city, aided by units of the Glengarry militia still loyal to Legate Nicolette Iniku and The Republic of the Sphere. Toward the end of the second day, a squad of Sentinels found the apartment building that Sullivan was using as a bolt-hole, and they threw up a quick perimeter. More loyalist units quickly arrived on the scene to replace the Cavalier squad, allowing the armored infantry to storm Sullivan's refuge after a short standoff. One trooper was wounded, but none was killed, and Sullivan was safely taken into custody.

Knight-Errant Sanford Wilson is currently assisting Legate Iniku with repair efforts and in setting up a temporary government until a replacement for Governor Weslean arrives on Glengarry. Our own Governor Xianglo has generously offered assistance, but Knight-Errant Wilson has refused all but minor aid from Carnwath, given the proximity of the Jade Falcon incursion and the nearby activity of the secessionist faction called the Stormhammers. Our prayers go out to Knight-Errant Wilson and the people of Glengarry—may their recovery be quick.

## 06 July 3135

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### ***JumpShip Manifest Destiny, Prefecture X***

Woooooooooooo. Did I actually make it to Terra? I've got some memories of staring at screens, at talking to people in very loud and urgent tones, and imbibing liquids that were only slightly less potent than amphetamines, but the rest is a blur. I don't remember seeing the outdoors at all. I think I was on Terra, but it could have been any planet with anonymous offices and tight-lipped bureaucrats.

I've got a lot here. Intel on active terrorist groups, on new groups formed since the Senate went the way of all things mortal, on methods, on tactics, on Donder, on Blitzen. . . .

Whoops. As we can plainly see, I haven't made much time for sleep yet. Maybe a little rest would help this data make more sense. Sounds good to me!

Got a few stops in Prefecture II coming up. The Dragon's been a little unruly, so it's time for some poking around.

## 07 July 3135

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As I've said before, sometimes the strangest things find their way into my hands. Although this "Project Icicle" is evidently being tested out on Furillo in the Lyran Alliance, I'm guessing that the guy who hired me to move it was from the FedSuns.

**From:** Damean Nacht, Chief Science Officer, Project Icicle  
**To:** Leutnant-General Erich Von Bulow, Commander Project Icicle  
**RE:** Live-Fire Test

Herr General,

I have the most unpleasant duty to inform you that our first live-fire test of Project Icicle is a failure. Although the Project has worked through several simulated fire trials, and has not had a problem in 11 months in the laboratory, the system proved too complex and hazardous for true field use until significant improvements are made.

The exercise centered on a single Project vehicle—Luetnant Jaachim Von Heldenberg's *Zeus* BattleMech, "Dortmund"—and a platoon of armored infantry from the security detachment. The *Zeus* was outfitted with half the normal complement of heat sinks to facilitate testing, and had its weapons set to training levels. The security force's Fenrirs were equipped with live ammunition and fully functional weapons.

Testing began with repetitive firing of Dortmund's weaponry and a preliminary testing of the Icicle equipment. At this time, Von Heldenberg reported no problems, and the Project team likewise declared that their equipment was functioning as expected. The coolant flush was successful, and Von Heldenberg's BattleMech appeared to have recovered from all heat buildup.

We then introduced the Fenrirs into the exercise and had Von Heldenberg react as he would in a combat situation. The Fenrirs advanced, firing on Von Heldenberg's BattleMech. The Luetnant evaded the incoming fire, then returned fire, scattering the Fenrirs. Heat began to build up in Dortmund, and Von Heldenberg called on the Project vehicle to attend to his *Zeus*. The Project team reacted with admirable speed, but their cool under fire when the Fenrirs returned and began firing in their general direction proved less than ideal.

Although we have been unable to ascertain the exact sequence of events, we have been able to put together a rough estimate of what took place next. To the best of our knowledge, one of the technicians attached to the Project Icicle vehicle panicked under fire and failed to attach the input hose to the *Zeus*'s heat sinks. The removal system, however, was engaged without error. The results were nothing short of spectacular and catastrophic. The Icicle system flushed the coolant from the *Zeus*'s heat sinks but, due to the technician's error, did not replace the missing coolant, causing a complete lack of coolant in the BattleMech's heat sinks. This apparently caused the BattleMech to experience an above-critical level of heat, resulting in the catastrophic detonation of onboard munitions. The resulting explosion destroyed the Project vehicle and personnel, and prevented the retrieval of Von Heldenberg's body.

Although the test cost us expensive equipment and experienced technicians, it did gain us valuable knowledge about how the Project Icicle system works in a combat situation. The investigatory board that oversaw the inquiry has determined that the Project Icicle system must be considerably simplified to allow for easier linkage between the Icicle vehicle and the 'Mech and to minimize the possibility of accident or malfunction under duress.

We are currently working to solve the problems demonstrated by this first test, and I have every reason to believe we will be able to resolve these difficulties without any further serious problems.

Damean Nacht



## 11 July 3135

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### ***JumpShip Manifest Destiny, Prefecture II***

Sadly, my thoughts keep returning to my techie friends that I met on the *Regal*. I thought I was being so charming, so smooth. I thought I had everything under control. But that's where I met my other friend, the one who tried to rearrange the molecules of my brain to resemble lumpy porridge. Maybe I wasn't as smooth as I thought I was. Maybe I was too curious. And maybe my techie friends—my sweet, nice, cheerful techie friends—thought I was asking too many questions and decided I needed to be watched.

Or maybe it wasn't them. Someone could have eavesdropped on my talks with the techies, someone who wanted to know what they were up to as badly as I did but didn't have my social skills. This person could have heard me asking questions and then made all sorts of wrong assumptions about me, thinking I was something other than a curious courier.

Whatever the case, I think I was incautious. And it cost me. I've thought a lot about it, and the *Regal* seems to be where I stepped wrong. That's where I'm going to focus my investigation.

## 15 July 3135

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### ***JumpShip Manifest Destiny, Prefecture II***

I've been reviewing the list of passengers and crew who were on the *Regal* when I was, and trying—as much as possible—to match names to pictures that might be floating around known space. The good news is I've pretty much cleared my techies. They were really just cheerful people excited about their job. I don't think they sold me out.

The bad news is that I haven't located my other friend yet. If he wasn't an idiot—and he caught me, so clearly he wasn't—he used a fake identity to get on board. The question is, was his fake identity totally made up, in which case I should look for him among the names with no pictures, or did he steal someone else's identity, in which case I should look for him . . . well . . . just about anywhere?

Does it sound like I've worked for hours without a whole lot of progress? Yeah, it sounds that way to me, too.

Nashira's next. Hopefully some good stuff waiting there for me!

## 19 July 3135

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Happened to be digging through the endless files of a merchant data-dump from a few months back and came across this little tidbit.

### INTERSTELLAR FINANCIAL SERVICES CONSORTIUM (IFSC) Pan-Federated/Republic Markets

IFSC Pan-Federated/Republic Markets has been involved in 423 financial advisory transactions in the Pan-Federated markets between 3130 and 3135 YTD.

- \* Financial Advisory
- \* Public Takeovers
- \* Restructuring
- \* Mergers & Acquisitions
- \* Valuation & Due Diligence

Total Requests: 12 Records (1 displayed)

**Client:** GioAvanti Holdings, Unlimited  
**Advisory Type:** Divestitures  
**IFSC Role:** Joint Financial Advisor  
**Faction:** Republic of the Sphere/Federated Suns/Lyran Commonwealth  
**Sector:** Heavy Industry  
**Deals:** 3,134 ongoing  
**Fiscal:** Undisclosed

#### Advisory Description

IFSC, together with Grand Federation Bank, was appointed by The Republic of the Sphere (via the Chancellory of the Exchequer) to work, as appropriate in conjunction with the Commonwealth Reserve Bank, as liquidator of GioAvanti Holdings, Unlimited (in liquidation) to assist in the disposal of a 33 percent share in Basantapur Fine Metals, a Trans-Federation Stock and Commodities Exchange-listed company, the largest supplier of rare ores and minerals to the Federated Suns' and fourth-largest supplier of common ores.

IFSC and Grand Federation Bank (in cooperation with the Commonwealth Reserve Bank, where appropriate) prepared a detailed information memorandum relating to the business to be sold and conducted a bid/auction process that included targeting selected potential bidders and advising on proposed bids. The transaction is ongoing and expected to close in 4Q 3136.

+So?  
 :-Draco041

+man boring what my dad does all day long why you bringing that here  
 :-SteelFist17

+Because it's not as straightforward as it looks.  
 :-WetWillie

+Not the conspiracy theories again....  
 :-Chungabunga

+Just cause you guys refuse to believe. Take a look at that again. How is it, you might ask, that a Lyran Commonwealth company has such a large chunk of a major ore supplier for House Davion? More importantly, ask why The Republic of the Sphere appears to be liquidating (read, nationalizing) said Commonwealth company, and all involved are playing buddy-buddy.  
 :-WetWillie

+Who cares what megacorps do?  
 :-Draco041

+Um, isn't GioAvanti Holdings a Republican company? The ol' GioAvanti family on Skye?  
 :-XSOkay

+That's GioAvanti Holdings, Limited. Slightly different company, though I'd bet Devlin's stones they're both owned by the same family—just headquartered and traded through two separate factions to keep things nice and separated. Ever wonder why the names are so close? I have.  
 :-WetWillie

+stop boring everybody dammit. anybody hear the new gaijin2gaijin single. damn could they be more preachy? you got a message for me send it via HPG not through my headphones.  
 :-SteelFist17

+No, this is actually interesting. You got answers for us WetWillie? I'll keep listening if you got more to say.  
 :-XSOkay

+You enjoy egging him on. I'm out of here...someone ping me when you're done with this crap.  
:-Chungabunga

[Chungabunga signed off]

+I think I got some answers, yeah. Why is The Republic involved in the liquidation of a Commonwealth company with investments in a Federated company? Because GioAvanti Holdings, Unlimited's controlling shares are owned by one James Tolverson, whose food-processing empire is a wholly owned subsidiary of Bannson Universal.  
:-WetWillie

+Oh, please, WW. No wonder Chungabunga left. Why wouldn't we know about that?  
:-Draco041

+Why would we?  
:-WetWillie

+Why?  
:-WetWillie

+Why, Drake?  
:-WetWillie

+Because we WOULD, WW!  
:-Draco041

+Wow, Drake, that was so well thought out. How did I miss that, snake?  
:-WetWillie

+ MALF OFF, WW!  
:-Draco041

+ Draco. WW. You both make the board fun, but I'm going to ban you both if you don't back off each other.  
:-ModR8R13431

+boring. goin to listen to g2g single  
:-SteelFist17

[SteelFist17 signed off]

+Not necessarily, Draco. Tolverson, Limited is nontraded company, so it doesn't have to disclose things such as who it's invested in. Or who owns it....  
:-XSOkay

+Exactly. So...as I was saying, once you throw Bannson Universal into the mix, I think you get the idea. Ever since old Bannson sold out The Republic during the Liao invasion, they've been quietly getting the best revenge possible on such a corporate whore: They're nationalizing his companies. Or at least trying to when they can. The fact that both the Davions and Steiners are in on this one brings some real interesting possibilities to light, particularly when it comes to the Grand Federation Bank, which has a huge history of corporate intrigue and internal investigations. Who knows what boardroom deals were going on within The Republic, and the Davions and Steiners are playing nice to cover their tracks.  
:-WetWillie

+Wow, accusing the sainted Davions of underhanded dealings? Aren't they going to take away your fedrat card?  
:-Draco041

+Like you snakes are all high and mighty? You practically invented vendetta. HELLO, bellyslitters!  
:-WetWillie

+MALF OFF, WW!  
:-Draco041

+That's it.  
:-ModR8R13431

[WetWille and Draco041 have been kick-banned from server by ModR8R13431: I warned you—you're both off for a month this time.]

## 20 July 3135

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### ***Logan City, Nashira, Prefecture II***

Gonna be in this general area for a bit. Dragon's getting grumpy, and I'm here to stick my head in its angry, toothy mouth. Might dart around a little, but I'll need to keep checking in on these parts.

There are going to be a lot of losses. I'm pretty sure there already are a lot of losses, but the government isn't eager to get the word out. I can understand the silence on this, but it's still a little disappointing. Levin should know that we can take a little bad news. Some advisors must have gotten into his head, subverted his better instincts. I hope he'll throw them off soon. Meaning his advisors—not his better instincts.

My old buddy Max didn't send me anything other than a brief message, but it was a good one. Almost makes me wish I was headed back to Prefecture IX for a spot of fun. Oh, well.

## 25 July 3135

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### ***JumpShip Luxor, Prefecture II***

The question that keeps running through my head as the quest to discover the identity of my abductor-friend is this: Are they done with me? Obviously, they didn't get what they were looking for from me, but do they understand why they failed? Did they finally realize that I'm not who they thought I was, or did they just figure I'm a really, really tough nut to crack?

I don't expect to see my friend from the *Regal* trying to follow me again—I don't think whoever got me is either so stupid or so undermanned that they'd send the same person twice. So while I'm hopping around, I'll have to keep an eye out for any new faces looking to attach themselves to my backside. Luckily, I don't think I'll be on a single JumpShip for a long period of time like I was on the *Regal*. Too much happening everywhere to stay off the ground for long.

## 26 July 3135

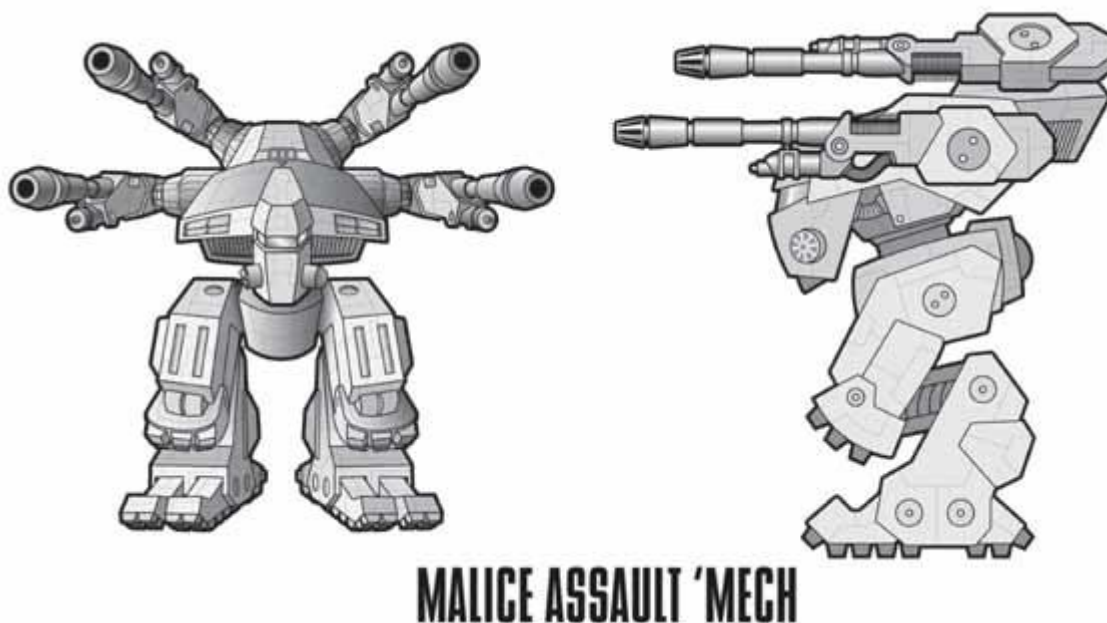
I ran into another passenger today, one of those lone gunmen mercenaries I've heard about: a "gunslinger." His name was Boris Vassilev, a really friendly guy, even if his accent made him a little hard to understand. We got to talking and before long the conversation turned to his 'Mech, which he seemed *really* fond of. I asked if we could take a peek at it, to which he replied, "You wish to see 'Blackout?' But of course! She loves the admirers!"

All I can say is something I'd never be able to repeat in any sort of company.

This thing was a monster. "A hundred tons," he said, and he called it a *Malice*. He wasn't shy about giving details, either; he even left me a well-worn copy of the manufacturer's brochure before we parted company. He said it was okay . . . he had several other copies. I thought I'd scan part of it for the info:

"In joint cooperation with Eris Enterprises Design Group, Dynamic Ordnance and Ammunition (D.O.A.) is pleased to offer what will surely become one of the most sought-after BattleMechs on the battlefield: the MAL-XP *Malice*."

The *Malice* is a monster of current battlefield technology—an assault-class BattleMech weighing in at 100 tons. Notable features of this design include an adapted double-knee design (aka D.O.A.'s 'Demon Leg' design), which ably protects otherwise vulnerable joints against frontal assaults. Though this unit may seem slow, its armor offers ample all-around protection (especially in the rear), ensuring that this unit will be around to both start and end any conflict. Double heat sinks enable the pilot to fire reliably, giving a MechWarrior the confidence he or she needs at the helm of this massive machine. The current MAL-XP design offers the following configuration:



**Mass:** 100 tons  
**Chassis:** Dynamic Endo Steel  
**Power Plant:** 400 LTA XL Fusion  
**Walking Speed:** 43.2 km/h  
**Maximum Speed:** 64.8 km/h  
**Jump Jets:** None  
**Armor Type:** Standard  
**Armament:**  
 2 LB 5-X ACs  
 2 ER Medium Lasers  
 2 LB 10-X ACs

For a mere 29,057,334 C-Bills, this unit can be yours! Also in development from D.O.A. is the slightly cheaper (28,789,334 C-Bills) MAL-XT configuration:

**Mass:** 100 tons  
**Chassis:** Endo Steel  
**Power Plant:** 400 LTV XL Fusion  
**Walking Speed:** 43.2 km/h  
**Maximum Speed:** 64.8 km/h  
**Jump Jets:** None  
**Armor Type:** Standard  
**Armament:**  
4 LB 5-X ACs  
4 ER Medium Lasers

Though the range of this version is slightly less, the damage output and diversity of its additional two extended-range medium lasers make it an exceptional value.

For information about bulk and military discounts, please contact us.”

I’ve never heard of D.O.A., but that isn’t saying much. And Eris Enterprises doesn’t sound any more familiar. The most I’ve heard mentioned is Victory Conditions Industries, a pretty decent upstart. Anyway, if I ever run into Boris again, I just hope I’m not on the wrong side of his autocannons.



## 28 July 3135

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Dear Raphael,

It was so good to connect with you once more. It has been too long. Too long. Aruthella sends her warmest regards and a wish that she might also have been able to attend the gathering. Although I assured her that you made mention of her several times, she was quite forceful in making sure that I include her regards right up front.

Ah, the vanities and impatience of youth. But she's a wonderfully bright and promising young lady. As I am sure you are well aware.

Beyond the well wishes for your continued prosperity, I will speak plainly of my ulterior motive in writing this letter; I would hope there is no need to explain why it has been hand delivered by a trusted courier.

My motives are this. Following the gathering, I began to feel as though I failed to fully convey my thoughts and feelings concerning our mutual goals. This began to trouble me to the point where sleepless nights began to follow; I could not shake these feelings that stole my slumber and began to affect my daily work. And so I find myself writing to those I trust most. No. That is not so. We have trusted each other with our names and our faces. That speaks of a powerful trust. Instead, I would say that I write to those I *respect* the most.

Under such plain words it is time to speak even more plainly.

Our forefathers' actions during the deplorable Jihad, as they tossed aside decades of planning in the hope of availing themselves of an apparent "too-good-to-be-true opportunity," resulted in disaster. (Damn Sebastian to eternal hell!) Are we not on the verge of committing the same crime? The same sin? How long have we worked toward our ultimate goal involving Corwin and Victoria? A goal that would have progressed to its next phase this Christmas. And now? Now, with the first prince apparently struck down and in a coma on far-off Terra, we would dash our plans against the rocks and rush to throw our support elsewhere? In fact, did not Alexandretta actually insinuate that we reveal ourselves to our newly chosen liege? Reveal ourselves! Has that not always proven our downfall? (The shadows will forever be ours, the light the bane that can lead only to a future sundering.) And though we rightly put her in her place, the fact that she would even utter such words is what, I feel, precipitated my lack of sleep and then led to these current letters and my actions. Although I fully believe that we have led our fractured brothers toward a reunification since the Sundering, and I take pride in what we have done to reestablish our birthrights and God-given prerogatives, I must plainly say that if we continue down this path, I must entertain the possibility of a break. Although I shall likely be harrowed unto death if I forego my oaths of loyalty to the brotherhood, I will not balk at passing the gates of hell if it means saving the brotherhood from itself.

Please. We must not run off like a star-crossed lover upon gazing into a new pair of beautiful eyes. We must keep to the plan, regardless of the apparent weakness of the coming new first prince. Through our machinations, Corwin and Victoria will achieve all that we have wished for and more. Trust. Loyalty. The plan. The foundations of all we have done. Look into your heart and I know you will find it so.

I pray for us all.

Carnelia

## 29 July 3135

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### ***Nirasaki City, Nirasaki, Prefecture II***

In the near future, I've gotta tell you about what I picked up here. Things are just getting stranger. But first, big news.

I've got a match to my friend's face. I'd sent a bunch of inquiries out to crewmembers of the *Regal*—innocuous stuff, saying I'd taken his luggage by mistake or other stupid stories—but I haven't heard anything back (not that I'd expected to yet). In a big, largely HPG-free Republic, people aren't breaking records to rapidly answer these little inquiries, assuming they've received them at all.

But I got lucky. Found the *Regal*'s purser on the DropShip I took down to Nirasaki, and her brain is an encyclopedia of nearly every passenger she's ever seen. Or at least the ones who needed extra help. Apparently my friend, being so gracious, had the purser get him a room closer to mine.

She said his name is Brad Jenkins. Probably fake, but a start.

## 03 August 3135

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### ***JumpShip Solar Dart, Prefecture II***

It's time for a little tribute to Northwind. I love Northwind. I love the fact that it excels at producing three things—fog, whiskey, and badass 'Mech pilots. I think those three things are closely related. The connection between the fog and the whiskey is easy to make—it's foggy all the time, which can crush the soul, and there's no better cure—well, maybe more of a bandage than a cure—for a crushed soul than whiskey.

The connection between the fog, the whiskey, and the 'Mech jockeys is a little less obvious, but it starts to become clearer when you see the number of people in Northwind who aren't Galaxy-class pilots. Many of them have succumbed to the spell of the place, pulled down by the torpor of fog and drink. It's a strong pull—I've given into it for a few days myself. So the people who resist the pull, who rise above it, have to be strong and determined. And those are perhaps the two best words to describe your typical Northwind jockey.

I'm definitely going to raise a toast to the entire planet while I'm there.

## 04 August 3135

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This person seems to think awfully highly of himself or herself. I have to wonder if such inflated egos are helping or hindering The Republic's efforts to survive....

**32Alpha73E4Z Transmission: Cerberus Status****FROM:** (deleted)**TO:** Alpha-Omega Paladin**ROUTING:** (deleted)

This will be my last report for some time, as I'll be going to a place where making a report will be difficult to say the least. Not that it matters.

I know. I know. Constraints. All about constraints. Crapellans, Jade Chickens, Snakes—not to mention the vermin right underfoot. But sweetness (I don't give a good damn about you telling me not to call you that after the year I've had), I'm fighting a one-man battle here. And while that's what The Republic demands of me and I freely give it up (as I have everything my entire life), to be ignored, well, just sucks. Sucks and blows. Just because the League is broken doesn't mean it won't bite your ass when you're not paying attention.

Speaking of which, I could argue I saved The Republic's ass last year. But I'm not like that. Did what I had to do. Like any of us would do. After all, it's not like we haven't used the Foxes like that before (though watch out for ovKhan Petr—nail down anything he might get close to). But just because old Anson got his head handed to him doesn't mean the Commonwealth won't be back again to try to grab Stewart . . . and this time with a lot more than just a recon force. I know, I know. You're gonna start talking about the Lyrans and how they're gonna keep Anson off our backs, but I'm not seeing it.

And don't get me started on Jessica. You know as well as I do that she's got "empire-maker" stamped all over that lovely, old face of hers. (Like we didn't know that after she lobbed Major Casson into the debacle on Wyatt: any word on the Genius?) And her hubby? Don't get me going on Phillip Hughes and the connections that get her right in our back yard. (And if you don't believe she's getting some 'Mech-sized kickbacks after the war on Irian when it came to light that IrTech still has a working production line, then I've got some sunny land around Tharkad City to sell you. And how did that tidbit get past your beautiful eyes, sweetness? A whole production line!) And my ears have been burning hot lately at some of the new rumors swirling around here. There are things afoot in the Oriente that I simply cannot ignore, regardless of whether The Republic ignores it. Fat as it is, I like my ass.

In fact, I need to hurry it off, as I've a JumpShip to catch and no clue when I might be in a position to provide a secure report again. So try to hold down the fort while I'm gone, sweetness, and I'll miss you, too.

**08 August 3135**

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***JumpShip Star Dart, Prefecture III***

I've run a worm through every network I can access from the ship. I couldn't just have it look for "Brad Jenkins"—any idea how many of them there are in The Republic? Me neither, and I don't want to find out. So I had to finesse the search a little.

I took a couple of approaches. I learned a few things about "Jenkins" from the *Regal's* purser, so I plugged them into the search. Then I made a second one based on what I know about his M.O. I've set them loose to do some limited searches here, but they'll get their real run once I'm on Northwind and can put them into some bigger networks. Then we'll see.

## 12 August 3135

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### ***Tara, Northwind, Prefecture III***

You join the natives here in enough toasts, and you can almost start to imagine that we'll win this thing.

They have no doubt. Sure, there may be temporary losses, but Northwind will stand. And they're so close to Prefecture X that, what the hell, they might as well keep all 25 of those planets for The Republic, too. Then the Highlanders, when the time is right, will push out again and defeat their enemies simply because their enemies aren't Highlanders.

It sounds ridiculous, the notion of the Highlanders taking on the entire Inner Sphere, but when you walk the hills and feel the cool mist swirling on your cheek and settling into the glass you're swirling in your hand, it makes perfect sense. How could these people *not* know what they're talking about?

## 17 August 3135

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### ***JumpShip Galaxy's Gates, Prefecture III***

Now that I'm away from Northwind and its fine, fine whiskey, perhaps I can think straight long enough to move ahead with my investigation of Mr. "Brad Jenkins."

That's right, I confirmed my suspicion that my good buddy was using an alias. It was pretty easy—Jenkins skipped out on most of his bill from the *Regal* (a kidnapper and skinflint to boot!), so the ship's corporate owners have been looking for him. They looked for him all over The Republic and finally concluded that Jenkins' ID was 100 percent fake. They seemed to give up after that, figuring they'd spend more Stones trying to find the man behind the fake ID than they'd ever recoup from him.

But I ain't giving up. I've got access to databases the poor corporate cops don't know about. And I don't want to give away too much, but I'll say this: Happily, one of my leads points me to Sheratan, where I was headed anyway. So stay tuned, campers—there's more info on the way.

## 18 August 3135

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Ordinarily I don't get much news about combat in the Prefectures, but when you end up staring into the brown eyes of the results of it, it's pretty hard to ignore.

She was sitting in one of the common areas of the ship. I'm not sure why I gave her a second look; she just had this air about her, the kind that said her dog had just died and someone kicked it over a cliff. She was looking at something from her bag and before I knew what happened, she dropped it, sobbing, and sent the contents of her bag skittering across the deck. She fell, literally, to her knees and started to grab at things before they got too far away.

No one else helped her, heartless you-know-whats.

But I did, and soon we had everything back in her bag. She seemed to be traveling pretty light, not that that was weird in and of itself, but when you factor in outbursts of sobbing there was definitely something else going on. I might not look it sometimes, but I care about my fellow men and women, so I sat with her for a while and helped her compose herself.

She'd come from Alrakis. She told me that back in March the Capellan Confederation and Dragon's Fury had suddenly become interested in her neck of the woods (though she didn't know why). I could have told her that it was probably because of Desmond Arms—a personal weapons supplier on the planet—but she needed to talk, and I needed to listen. I also knew that the Combine already had a history on that planet but like I said, I was an ear, not a mouthpiece.

The fighting had started on the continent of Skopjes, and at first the native Alrakians stayed out of it. But soon they figured they should do something, and that with their innate advantages over the invading forces (being used to the high gravity and all) they should stand a chance at getting the planet back. Well, as soon the natives involved themselves they became fair game, and before long they realized they were outgunned. Before long both sides were "recruiting" Alrakians. Sure, some of that recruitment was legitimate, but from the story she told me, some of it was questionable. You'd think the Ares Convention would have something in it about that. Heck, maybe it does, but history isn't my strong point. Anyway, eventually the Dragon's Fury kicked the Capellans' sorry selves off the planet, but the damage had already been done. When the battle had ended, her husband had been taken off-planet for basic training and she was only just now managing to go join him. She been told she'd be "taken care of" once she got there, but she had to get there first. And to get there, she had to leave a lot behind. Her mom and dad offered to keep an eye on their place, but they were getting on in years. All she wanted was for him to leave the military as soon as he could so that they could go home.

I probably shouldn't have, but I gave her my information and told her to track me down when they were ready to go back to Alrakis. I knew they couldn't possibly have enough money to make the trip on a military salary, and I know I can make some kind of arrangements. You just can't hear a story like that and *not* want to do something.

Dammit, Stone. Where the hell are you?



## 22 August 3135

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### *Pittston, Sheratan, Prefecture III*

I hate to admit it, but it might be helpful that I'm nowhere near as notorious as I like to think I am.

If I really were Big Bad Deandra Lowe, Queen of Information, then it would be only natural for every enemy of The Republic to be gunning for me. If I wanted to find out who hired Jenkins, I'd have to sort through a long list of people who are out to get me.

But the sad truth is that most of the enemies of The Republic have no idea who I am and wouldn't bother setting up a whole kidnapping scheme to get me. I'm just not important enough. Anyone who knows me would understand what a difficult admission that is for me to make.

That's what I learned from my source here. I'm just not notorious enough to draw a lot of interstellar attention. If I want to find out who nabbed me, I should be looking at who's heard of me. People in The Republic—the enemies within our own borders, within our own government—are the ones most likely to see any value in me as a target. That's who I'll be looking at.

## 23 August 3135

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### ***Inbound, Marcus, Prefecture VIII***

This poor Spirit Cat has an unfortunate trait for someone compelled to comb the galaxy for a place to call home. . . .

I hate space travel. I mean, I really, *really*, hate it.

I know that probably makes me sound like some spineless Spheroid slug, but it is better, I think, to vent about such things to my monitor and my sibkins than aloud to my fellow warriors. They know what this does to me. They know how I tremble at the horrible thought of interplanetary transit. They know, and they watch me for weakness.

To hell with them.

I have traveled far, in spite of the fear. This is not transit disorientation syndrome, no matter what the medical techs say. This is a phobia ingrained into my very cells. I feel it every time the officers speak of relocating. It drives me to yearn for the safe haven perhaps even more than our ovKhan does, Kerensky help me.

From the moment we board the DropShips, I feel the tremors. By the time I am strapped into the G-couch, I pray that I pass out. The lurching, the pressure of acceleration, the thunderous roar. It is all so deafening, and the vibration always convinces me that the multithousand-ton cocoon I have willingly climbed into, made up of far too many moving parts, is but a poorly armored bubble of life-giving air against the vast power of the cold, unforgiving Void.

But I am Clan. More, I am a warrior! Death does not frighten me.

I say the words. I will them with every fiber of my being. And yet, I feel the racing heart with every Kerensky-forsaken minute we fly heavenward. And when, in the blackness of space, I feel the weightlessness—the nauseating, free-floating weightlessness—I remember that Death embraces our bubble, waiting for the tiniest pin prick to suck me into her bosom, where I will die quickly, my body lost to Eternity, forgotten, slain not in battle, but by the thankless Void.

I am accustomed to facing a deadly enemy in battle, clad in a one-ton shell of armor and weapons. Why can I not cope with traveling aboard a bigger, thicker shell of metal that thousands trust every day in the passive depths of space?

Then comes the jump. Oh, the jump! Words do not describe it. The images, the experience. I could take a thousand vision quests, and not come close to the awe-inspiring, gut-wrenching revelations that come in the middle of a half-second's jaunt through hyperspace. Revelations lost as soon as they come, leaving me to ooze life for half an hour after returning to "reality" again.

I hate it.

Kerensky help us all; if Wyatt was not to be our sanctuary, *please* let the next world be the haven we so desperately seek! I simply cannot bear many more transits like this.

—Torrenz

## 25 August 3135

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### ***Free Trader Sudetenland (Marcus System), Prefecture VIII***

Mika Hasseldorf's been keeping an eye on the Spirit Cat migrations....

Confirming earlier reports: One *Union*-class DropShip, bearing Spirit Cat markings, returned to the Marcus System at 2217 hours, Terran Standard Time, carrying military forces apparently departing from Wyatt system late last month. Observations made by contacts in Wyatt system and acceleration analysis of inbound vessel confirm that the DropShip's bays are at least half full, carrying an estimated ten BattleMechs and assorted support assets such as armored infantry. Star Captain Cox (MechWarrior specialized in *Warhammer IIC* BattleMech), apparently survived his special mission for Galaxy Commander Kev Rosse, who has requested a final briefing in person, according to intercepted and decoded transmissions.

The Spirit Cats are agitated again. My contacts dirtside of Marcus say that there is a great sense of anticipation among the faction's supporting merchant casters, an eagerness of some kind. More buying than selling suggests a supply build-up larger than that which preceded Cox's departure. Analysis of past trends suggests that this is indicative of another large-scale move by the Clansmen in search of their so-called "safe haven," and the quantity suggests a longer haul than usual. Rosse's presence on Marcus is not to be discounted. Could the entire Spirit Cats population be preparing for this next step?

At the present time, intentions are to follow up as soon as word from regional pickets reveals the possible destinations of the outbound Cats. For now, *Sudetenland* will remain in Marcus system for weekly download and dissemination of routine feeds.

Hasseldorf out.

**26 August 3135**

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***JumpShip Mercury, Prefecture III***

Time to take control for a while. I don't do this often—doesn't look right for a courier to be setting her own agenda—but I need to do it now, at least for a few jumps. I've got word that someone I'd really like to talk to is on Tybalt. He's not going to be there for long, and he's not big on leaving forwarding addresses, so once he's off Tybalt it might take months to find him again. So I'm getting while the getting's good.

I did some shopping around for jobs and found something on New Rhodes III. Time frame's just about right. I should be able to make a quick stop or two before heading there, and no one will mind. I'll hit Tybalt first, see what I learn, and chart a course from there.

## 30 August 3135

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Another entry from Mika with some interesting bits. A courier doing double-duty? Good work if you can get it.

Well, well! This is certainly interesting news. Word is that the entire to-do about Wyatt was related to the reactivation of the local HPG—the first one to actually, honestly, come back online since the blackout began. Glad to see all my tax Stones were spent wisely. Now, can anyone explain why it took so damned long?

Apparently, the activation/deactivation was what drew the Cats there. Something about how the planet “vanished” from local starmaps in the whole mess. Of course, now that the world is back on the grid, everyone wants to know how it was pulled off, and I understand the genius involved has been shuttled off somewhere safe. Word is that lots of parties (from these Spirit Cats to some of Bannson’s cronies) are after ComStar’s new techno-wizard. That the Cats left empty handed somehow does not surprise me, though.

And guess who gets to keep watching them?

You know, Marc, sometimes I gotta tell you, observation duty is just plain dull, especially when you have to do it from the grav-deck of a JumpShip. If I had known what this Pony Express gig was gonna be like before I did it...

Okay, I still would’ve taken the job. Seeing strange new worlds. Meeting people from exotic cultures and ways of life. Going boldly from one end of The Republic to the other to collect news, mail, and gossip far and wide. And in the end, they’ll give me citizenship—and maybe even some *money*—for all my time and troubles! Wheee!

Still, it gets damned dull up here. I can do only so many laps on the G-deck and watch so many reruns of the same old pre-blackout Republican programming before I start pining away for you and the kids and eavesdropping on local comm traffic.

Six more months, though, and my “tour” is officially over. They’re going to ask me to re-up, of course—probably both of my “employers” will. But I doubt either the exarch or the archon can offer me enough to overcome the loneliness and homesickness.

Enough of this self-pity, though; time for me to get back to work. Send my love to Mutter und Vater. And, of course, love to the kids. I’ll write more in a couple days.

—Mika

**31 August 3135**

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***Valis City, Fletcher, Prefecture IV***

I don't want to get so caught up in my own problems that I forget The Republic is coming apart at the seams. I know the two sets of problems are related—I wouldn't be a target if it wasn't for all the current turmoil—but I have to remember that the situation's bigger than me. As if reality would let me forget that for long.

The faces of people watching the news are as dour as the expressions of the folks reading the news. The normal, peacetime formula for a good newscast is 3 to 5 minutes of politics and crime, then health, then entertainment, then sports—start grim, get lighter, everyone goes home happy. But now it's just war, strife, war, turmoil. The other stuff, even sports, gets bumped most nights. And no one's happy.

## 01 September 3135

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More from Torrenz on Marcus....

I did not think I could stand another hour strapped into that G-harness, brother, waiting helplessly for the end of the journey—one way or another. The turbulence coming back was bad enough, but I swear that old DropShip creaks and buckles too much for my comfort.

And what was it worth? Nothing. Wyatt was a bust...again. Our landing zone was near an old factory, destroyed by the Jihad—another radioactive pile of wreckage claimed by the Mad Ones and their honorless quest to destroy everything they saw. Not as bad as I remember seeing on Outreach when we went there, but bad nonetheless. Why do we go to dead worlds to seek our sanctuary? Why not a world teeming with life, untouched by war? Do our estranged brethren, in their distant reservations, also cling to ruins like this? What point is a sanctuary others would fight over, or one populated by the ghosts of those killed by the ambitions of others?

My cynicism is showing again, the legacy of another transit to and fro, with nothing tangible to show for it but another costly repair bill. We may be on solid ground again, but my heart still races with the thought of leaving. And because Wyatt did not pan out, I fear that indeed may be very, very soon.

## 05 September 3135

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### ***JumpShip Swift, Prefecture IV***

Getting more caught up on events around The Republic, and I guess it's a kind of good news–bad news situation. The good news is that in the future I might not have to be spending so much time on JumpShips. The bad news is that my travel will be cut back because The Republic looks like it'll be reduced to two, maybe two and a half, planets in the next few years. It'll be pretty easy shuttling back and forth between them.

I shouldn't be surprised. Really, it's a miracle that Stone and Redburn held the border as long as they did. There were just too many wolves (and I'm not just talking the Steel kind) at too many doors to hold them off forever. And what military power in history has ever been able to win a four-front (or five- or six- or however many it is now) war?

I gotta get on land and back to work. I'm thinking too much and it's making me gloomy.



## 06 September 3135

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Torrenz's saga near Marcus continues...he might not make it.

It is just as I feared. Our glorious leader has once more been "inspired" to relocate. Our destination: Addicks, Prefecture III. *Prefecture III!* We traveled all these light-years, landed on all these planets, fought all these battles, witnessed all these scars of the Jihad, experienced all these horrors of what one man can do to another—all to go back *home!*

The departure is slated for another two weeks from now, giving our supporting castes time to gather supplies and secure enough transports for departure. There is even talk of dragooning some local DropShips and JumpShips for this move, as there are more of us to move at once than our own vessels can accommodate. I even understand that the merchant caste has opened negotiations with a local JumpShip captain already, and some of us may be moving sooner, to "prepare a foothold."

And I just *know* they will call on our formation. Star Captain Cox Ludner is itching to prove himself worthy of his new Bloodname, I am certain. He will surely bid for the honor to spearhead our latest "campaign."

Naturally, he will need his infantry support, and so I will have to go.

Addicks is five jumps away, the technicians tell me. That is seven *weeks* in transit. *Forty-nine* days between launch and planetfall. Space flight to the tune of *1,176 hours*, between the safe, solid ground of Marcus to the reassuring soil of Addicks. Encased for *70,560 terrifying minutes* in a metal bubble surrounded by a cold and unforgiving void—numbers that all assume nothing goes wrong.

Brother, how did I let you talk me into this?

Oh, yes. I remember now. It began when a certain sibkin of mine *had* to hear the speeches of a "true warrior of spirit." But think no less of me, brother. Just as you did, I believed then—and I still do now—but the time is rapidly approaching when I fear all this travel and all these failures will divide our Clan if we cannot locate the haven in time.

## 08 September 3135

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Mika comes to us with a variety of security briefings....

### ***Prefecture VIII***

#### ***Free Trader Sudetenland (Marcus System)***

Per earlier requests received on 12-9 of this year, JumpShip *Sudetenland* has remained in the Marcus System, Prefecture VIII, for routine upload and transfer of information and personal messages in accordance with her JumpShip CommNet charter and requests from the office on Denebola. Since last report, the *Sudetenland* has received roughly 600 off-world communiqués from Marcus, and relayed 450 to passing JumpShips bound for destinations elsewhere in Prefectures VIII, IX, and X. Of these transmissions, 161 have been flagged for review (including “random security” analysis) after using RSN Keyword Search Algorithm Alpha-Seven Standard.

News relays to and from Marcus System have provided the local populace and surrounding worlds with a general picture of the current state of The Republic, with special emphasis on recent incidents on Wyatt—the reactivation of the local HPG being a favorite topic of discussion—and the state of Clan Jade Falcon’s incursion into Republic territory. Military traffic indicates a shifting of Republic resources to contain the Falcon threat, though requested modification of inbound reports per Classified Memorandum RSN-Echo-Oscar-3135-Gamma is restricting public dissemination of sensitive data.

Meanwhile, a report on local Spirit Cats activity continues to indicate preparations for a move, confirmed by a request to hire the *Sudetenland* for a five-jump journey to Prefecture III. No midpoint stops have been requested. *Sudetenland*’s captain is still negotiating the price for carrying two loaded military DropShips and one civilian support vessel to the destination.

Their destination appears to be Addicks, a world last known to be in pro-Republic hands. The request for additional transports over and above those already present and claimed by Spirit Cat forces suggests a massive relocation effort, possibly a military campaign. Recommend a warning to Republic troops of potential threat.

Will attempt to determine if and when Spirit Cats obtain consensus with *Sudetenland* captain for transit.

Hasseldorf out.

## 09 September 3135

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### ***JumpShip Swift, Prefecture IV***

House Davion? Are you *kidding* me? *Davion*?

Ah, hell, why not. Welcome, House Davion, to The Republic of the Sphere's "Going Out of Business" sale. Can we show you something in a Caselton?

At least that gives me a really good excuse to go out to the Tybalt area. Sure, I already had a job out there, but if Davion's going to start rattling some sabers out in those parts, there's likely something I should be looking for.

But hey, that's *de rigueur* at the moment. If I'm on any planet more than a single jump away from Terra, I should be putting my ear to the ground to see who wants that particular planet. Because every faction in existence wants a piece or five for themselves.

## 13 September 3135

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The Spirit Cats arrange their move.

### ***Prefecture VIII***

#### ***Free Trader Sudetenland (Marcus System)***

Yup. It's official, Marc. The *Sudetenland* is for sale. After spending almost three months in the area, acting as the floating media outlet for this little corner of the universe (yeah, I'm sure that having former-senator Kev Rosse and his Spirit Cats parked below us had a lot to do with it!), we have been hired for a trip to the other side of The Republic. To Addicks, to be more precise.

The Spirit Cats, you ask? You got it!

You know, I'm no expert, but I've got to say, if I were the commander of a rebel faction, the first people I'd think to hire for a ride would not be Pony Express ships of the local government, which could be filled with informers and all (wipe that smirk off your face, Marc!). But I don't think that even crossed these wannabe Clanners' minds.

So, in about three days—yup, the bloody DropShips are already en route—we'll be taking on passengers for a nice long trip across the nation. I'll send you an e-postcard from Terra if we happen to pass by.

What really worries me, though, isn't the Cats. From what I've seen, it's almost as if they're so focused on their private quest that they've barely got time to worry about the rest of us. What worries me, actually, is the government. If they decide Rosse's people are a threat, they could decide to make an interception in space, and that would mean a firefight. I'm no soldier. I'm just a girl trying to make a Stone and earn a plot of land to call my own. Oh, but this line of thinking is probably worrying you, so I'll stop for now....

The trip to Addicks is supposed to take us five jumps, so (assuming all goes well) it could be about three months before we're back in home territory again. Well, at least we'll have company for the trip. Maybe I can even chat a bit with some of these Spirit Cats, see what makes them tick. Bet the Reppie reps would love to get some more insight to analyze back home, and they might be persuaded to tack on a few more credits for my efforts. Who knows? Maybe I can even get a transfer off this K-F barge on the way, civic duties discharged and all tickets punched for the big time. Wouldn't *that* be sweet?

Time to wrap this one up and get back to work. Love to *Mutter und Vater*, as always. And to you and the kids, of course. I'll write again after our next hop.

—Mika

**14 September 3135**

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***MacBeth, Tybalt, Prefecture IV***

I got information from my source. Good information. I don't know who Jenkins is, but I've got a good idea who hired him, and that's what's important. The sad thing is, this will probably be the last time I see this particular source. Unless I go to his funeral, which likely isn't far off.

He stayed too long. I told him, why didn't you quit? As soon as Levin disbanded the Senate, your resignation should have been on Senator Colson's desk. Which is a useless thing to say. He knows that—now. But before, he had hopes of saving something, of maybe redirecting his boss to more profitable ends.

So he stayed on. And things got worse, and plans were made and armies formed, and he finally realized he wanted out, but by then he knew too much. Now, either he keeps doing his job, which becomes more reprehensible each day, or he runs, and they come after him. They don't have any official power in The Republic anymore, but they're nobility. They understand the ways of power. If they want to get him, they'll get him.

Damn shame.

## 15 September 3135

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If even our resident Fraidy Cat, jittery stomach and all, notices our little Mika, she really must be none too subtle.

**Oliver, Prefecture VIII One jump down, four to go.**

And the dry heaves took only a half-hour to subside! My body must know what is ahead and is pacing itself for the long haul. Good for me!

Our first jump out from Marcus, en route to Addicks, went off without a hitch, but for me, it has already been 10 days of dread and nerves. Our DropShip is the same *Union*-class we took with us when we journeyed to Wyatt, and Star Captain Cox has seen to it that we all made use of the acceleration and deceleration times to train and do various physical labors. Although the Republican JumpShip we are using—this *Sudetenland*—has its own grav decks, they are quite small. The *Invader*-class was never built with Elementals in mind, after all.

That and “operational security” are to be considered as well, I suppose. One never knows how many Republican informers are aboard this crew, though, for my credits, I would wager in Spheroid fashion that they are *all* spies.

One in particular screams “informer” to me, Brother. She is evidently a communications tech aboard this vessel, and her name is Mika. Blond hair, blue-gray eyes, Germanic accent. She looks and sounds like the stereotypical Steiners from any holovid you can name. Were I more naïve, I might even believe her to be a Stormhammer. But she is Republican to the core, and definitely an informer. Even distracted as I am about the icy embrace of the yawning void that surrounds us all, I know better than to let my guard down around a Spheroid female who seems entirely too eager to make acquaintance with a DropShip full of Clansmen. Even though we have lived alongside them for 50 years now, I have always known the Spheroids to shun us for our ways, our appearance. But this one is out-of-her-way nice for her role, almost as obnoxious as a Spheroid “street walker.”

Oh, yes. A spy for certain.

Were transports not still too rare for our Clan, I am certain we would not resort to dealing with *surats* like these for our transit needs, and I would feel a great deal better about spending the next 32 days latched to this vessel. Even having our resident Watchmen looming over the bridge and engineering crews’ shoulders does little to comfort me, Brother. We are moving across The Republic, through its very heart worlds, in a time of increasing tension and war. We leave one region threatened by the brutal and unforgiving Falcons, and head toward another menaced by the Dragon. I suppose if Cox truly wanted to find a battle, he could have instructed our JumpShip to take a counterclockwise route through Prefectures VII, VI, and V on our way to Addicks, just to see if we could encounter some rogue Mariks and Liaos while we are about it.

Yes, I realize that I do an awful lot of complaining, Brother. But, of late, even you must admit that there is much to complain about.

I miss solid ground already.

## 19 September 3135

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### ***MacBeth, Tybalt, Prefecture IV***

I need to be getting on to New Rhodes soon, but I decided to take advantage of an unusual gap in my schedule to actually stay on the same planet for a few days. I managed to find a few quick, on-planet jobs to keep me busy and work up some funds, but I've also had a little free time to look into my senator-friend's info.

So far, it looks like everything he said checks out. I guess that's good for me, but I didn't really want it to be true. I didn't want to believe that there are a few senators who are so far gone that they're planning the sort of things my friend said they were planning. I don't know how far they're going to go with this; all I see is that the early indicators are what my friend said they would be. It looks like if I want to stick my nose into the middle of this—and is there any doubt that's what I want?—I need to move to the other side of The Republic, to Prefecture VII, when I get a chance.

## 27 September 3135

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### ***Xerxes, New Rhodes, Prefecture IV***

Usually I try not to let the swing of planetary control affect me much, but this one was too good to pass up. In apparent "business news," Bannson's Raiders apparently got their heads handed to them on planet Yorii when Bannson tried to move in and "acquire" Yorii's mining resources. He apparently didn't plan very well for Mother Nature and her volcanic activity on Yorii. Not to mention he's striking pretty close to The Republic. I'm sure he just wanted to get some strip mining done before getting out of Dodge.

Unfortunately for him, the Spirit Cats had other ideas. Or other visions, maybe. Those wild Spirit Cats apparently had had a vision that told them to go to Yorii as well. Creepy how they manage to be in places you'd never expect to see them. Anyway, whatever the volcanoes didn't take down, the Spirit Cats finished off in a hail of laser fire.

[BEGIN TRANSMISSION]

In an apparent "hostile takeover" attempt on Yorii in Prefecture X, a substantial force of Bannson's Raiders started stripping the normally peaceful mining planet of some badly needed resources. Not long after that, a large Spirit Cats contingent was reported, followed quickly by word of the two forces clashing near a volcanic field en route to one of many mining facilities.

The ensuing conflict resulted in the remaining Bannson's Raiders forces fleeing the planet, while the Spirit Cats settled in on their haunches for future purposes known only to them.

Whether Bannson was operating under instructions from the Capellan Confederation is unknown, though reports indicate the Liao-Bannson relationship may be falling on hard times.

[END TRANSMISSION]



## 28 September 3135

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### ***Xerxes, New Rhodes, Prefecture IV***

It's both not as bad—and worse—than I thought.

There weren't really that many people who took up Sandoval on his *offer*, at least not in these parts, where it's mostly eggheads anyway. That's not surprising, because the number of people even *capable* of acting on a letter of marque is quite small, and most of those people are either too busy or too honest to take part in Sandoval's legalized piracy.

The bad part is that those who have taken up Sandoval on his offer are doing it with an awful lot of enthusiasm. They're defining the term "his Grace's enemies" as broadly as possible and seizing goods and even ships from just about anyone who strikes their fancy. A few of them seem to act on the philosophy of seizing first and working up a justification for the seizure later.

So security is increased everywhere, everyone is paranoid, and plenty of people are acting ultra-patriotic to make sure no one ever mistakes them for one of Sandoval's enemies. Quite a scene.

## 29 September 3135

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With all the upswing in combat, it's kinda nice to slide back into a simpler time of good old-fashioned 'Mech-on-'Mech bashing. Despite everything that might happen on the outside, good ol' Solaris VII just keeps plugging away, same as it ever was. What caught my eye was a short piece about Alberto DeJesus. I'd heard the name a few times, but now I had some story to put with it. The *Spectator* had a little piece on him, and he just might be the latest golden boy to start clawing his way up the ladder. I scanned the piece, 'cause you never know when you'll need information:

### SEVEN, WITH ALBERTO DEJESUS

**Solaran Spectator:** Today we've got seven with Alberto DeJesus, new up-and-comer with Hombres Stables. So, Alberto, may we call you Alberto?

**Alberto DeJesus:** I'd prefer you call me *fabulous*, but Alberto is fine, too.

**S.S.:** The competition usually has a less-than-friendly name for you, and for your 'Mech "El Diablo Rojo." Do you think the name "Chargemonkey" is warranted?

**A.D.:** Absolutely not. Jealousy over my brawling skills brings out the worst in people. Skill with a ranged weapon is easy. Skill with 80 tons of flailing steel is not.

**S.S.:** What brought you to Solaris in the first place?

**A.D.:** How could anyone shy away from the thrill of one-on-one combat? The opportunity to test yourself against other great combatants of our time? The test of pilot and machine versus other pilots and machines? Heart, faith, and steel brought me here, amigo.

**S.S.:** Some sightings place you outside Solaris VII as of late, working on your own time as a gunslinger. Any truth to that? And if so, what do you think the Lyran Alliance might have to say about that, especially in light of your Hombres House affiliation?

**A.D.:** They're all true. There's no better training ground than the battlefield, my friend. When the competition gets thin, a true athlete must continue to test himself or herself wherever possible. And as far as I know, the Alliance doesn't have anything to say. After all, I will work for them, too—for the right price.

**S.S.:** There's a lot of speculation about a possible grudge match between you and Lex Corpuz, owner of another *Neanderthal*, "Buford." Will you two be meeting in the arena anytime soon?

**A.D.:** Corpuz is a warrior of honor, much like I am. He loses himself in the red haze of combat and uses it to his advantage, but he manages to pull himself out of it in time to take advantage of a tactical mistake his opponent might make. Setting up a match is definitely in the works, and we are currently talking about going in weapons dead instead of weapons live. I look forward to adding to the dents in Buford's skull.

**S.S.:** An all-out melee brawl, you say? We'll definitely watch for that one, because we may get treated to your signature "people's shoulder" move. Will you be wielding the Battlemaster arm you unceremoniously took from "Linebacker" in your very first match?

**A.D.:** I will be wielding whatever it takes to put up a good, fair fight.

**S.S.:** Thanks for the seven, Alberto.

**A.D.:** Thank *you*.

### NTL-AG-H "EL DIABLO ROJO" NEANDERTHAL

A near maxed-out ferro-fibrous standard chassis is at the heart of this *Neanderthal* variation, and triple-strength myomer helps it get to the heart of other 'Mechs. DeJesus is known to employ M-pods to great effect.

**Pilot:** Alberto DeJesus

**Stable:** Hombres Stable

**Mass:** 75 tons

**Chassis:** Standard

**Power Plant:** 400 LTV XL Fusion

**Walking Speed:** 54.0 km/h

**Maximum Speed:** 86.4 [97.2] km/h

**Armor Type:** Ferro-Fibrous

**Armament:** 3 M-Pods

2 PPCs

1 Guardian ECM

**Manufacturer:** Tactical Advantage, LLC

**03 October 3135**

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***Xerxes, New Rhodes, Prefecture IV***

What does this mean? *What in the hell does it mean?*

I can't get my head around it. I've got a holovid of Levin delivering the speech. I've got a transcript of his words, and I still can't get my head around it. I don't want to believe this is happening.

I don't want to be alone out here.

I'm not. Of course, I'm not. There are others, stranded like me, left out, suddenly without a nation. And our enemies close in on all sides, moving faster and faster, and we have nothing left to defend. Nothing more to work for.

I can't move.

## 04 October 3135

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These letters to home often yield more information than my more surreptitious channels do. This one's from Charisse Perry, in Lindon's Folly on Styx.

Silence.

You know, it's one thing when the Dracs are bearing down on you with a couple thousand tons of stomping, flashing metal, when they're savagely mowing down civvies and soldiers alike in some glory charge to retake worlds "in the name of the Dragon" and all that rot. After a while one tends to get used to being under fire, especially after the last few months, when Sakamoto and his thugs came barreling through here.

Now the silence is just too much!

Guess we can all thank that turncoat bitch, Tormark, for that one, though. Way the rumors have it, it wasn't till she showed up at Saffel that the bloodletting stopped. Some folks say she and ol' Sakamoto duked it out and she won command of the Combine force, in true samurai—or Clanner—style. I heard that she got lucky and the man died of "suspicious" causes just minutes before she dropped on the combat zone.

Either way, seems the Dracs went into a holding pattern not soon after that. Least for now, anyway.

Oh, don't get me wrong. The Snakes ain't given up on Saffel, Nirasaki, Styx, or any of the other four worlds they've been "contesting" just yet, but with their new leader off on a junket to Black Luthien to check in with her new boss—so say some intel guys I bought a drink for last week—they just ain't showing the same thunder and bluster we got used to when Sakamoto was calling the shots.

Another thing I guess we can thank the traitor for, eh?

Either way, Jake, I'm due a patrol shift, so I'll scream at you again later. Meantime, keep your head down, okay? And send me some prayers; I've a feeling that we may be needing them sometime real soon....

Luv, Your big sister

## 06 October 3135

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More from Charisse: The one thing I didn't expect from this conflagration was cultural lessons....

I'm telling you, Jake. You just wouldn't believe it. I mean, I still don't and I was fragging *there*!

Okay, so the other day, Barbarry and I drew a dawn patrol through those jungles I was telling you about, about 30 clicks north of Lindon's Folly. You know, where last week's mudslide pretty much turned the place into a river of brown pudding? Well, sure as Hades if we didn't encounter a pair of snakes mucking about in the same sector. They were middleweights, of course, a *Centurion* and a *Ghost*. Both sported the familiar snake logos, but damned if the *Ghost* wasn't also boasting a Dragon's Fury standard, too.

Now, what happened next just floors me. We spot each other at about the same time, and I was sure the snakes must've seen the words "fresh meat" floating over our heads, what with me in my hand-me-down *Panther*, and Barbarry in his *Wasp*. But while one of the Dracs—the *Centurion* jock—did light us up with his targeting suite, his buddy in the *Ghost* simply executed a stiff bow.

Only then did we notice the *Centurion* was stuck, mired shin-deep in the muck and waiting for his bud to get his endo-steel ass out of there. They couldn't really afford a fight any more than we could!

So, Barbarry starts wetting his pants, right. He's freaking out about what we should do, while this *Centurion* shoves the muzzle of its autocannon in our general direction, when suddenly the *Ghost* just reaches out, grasps the *Centurion*'s gun-arm real gentle-like, and pulls it down. Then—get this!—the *Ghost* bows to us, just like a human being.

Barbarry, of course, concludes that the snakes have just about lost their minds, and he's blabbering incoherently about the whole thing, unable to decide whether we should blast 'em or get the heck out of Dodge. I tell him to shut up in the usual manner. You know, "Stand down and clear the lines, soldier!" I then try my best to mimic the *Ghost*'s move without doing a face-plant in the mud, and we do our best to take a real casual stroll back toward the base.

It's just crazy. A couple weeks ago, these guys would've shot first and never looked back at the corpses in their wake. Now they gotta act all civilized like.

I tell you, Jake. This war just ain't making any sense.

Luv,

Your big sister

**07 October 3135**

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***JumpShip Gemini Gleam, Prefecture IV***

One piece of good news. I found one piece of good news in this disaster. The word is that some of—all of?—the Davion movement isn't aggression. I thought they were grabbing planets for themselves in the great Republic of the Sphere fire sale, but apparently what they're doing is some version of helping. Coming and holding on to planets for us, waiting for the day when we're capable of holding them on our own. Whenever that may be. If there's ever a Republic again.

God, Levin, I *trusted* you! I cheered your election! I supported what you did to the Senate. And now . . . you took my nation away. You exiled me without warning.

I don't know if I have any trust left to extend.

## 11 October 3135

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This news report from Lindon's Folly seems to corroborate Tormark's impact on the fighting in that region.

### Fighting Renews in Gehenna Capital Region

LINDON'S FOLLY [Styx News Today] — Heavy fighting erupted again today just outside the spaceport city of Lindon's Folly, on the Gehenna continent. Attempting to breach the Republican defenses arrayed along the woodlands north of the city proper, the surprise dawn assault by a combination of DCMS and Dragon's Fury troops was finally beaten back after a three-hour battle. The Republican victory, however, came at tremendous cost.

"[The Republican forces] held the line at a region 24 kilometers north of Lindon's Folly's suburbs," said Major Simon Donnely, a Republican spokesman for the Gehenna operational field command. "However, both sides suffered serious losses in manpower and materiel."

Donnely would not speculate as to what prompted the Combine push, though he did remind reporters that the DCMS forces on Styx and elsewhere across Prefecture II remain committed to reclaiming all worlds in The Republic previously held by the Draconis Combine, citing the presence of many ethic Kuritans throughout the region as justification for their recent invasion. This offensive — launched without any official declaration of war by either side — comes despite the fact that the worlds of Prefectures I, II, III, and X were all ceded willingly by then-Coordinator Hohiro Kurita in the wake of the Word of Blake Jihad.

The rise of the breakaway faction, the Dragon's Fury, further complicated the Combine invasion, adding substance to the claims by invasion leader, Benjamin District's Warlord Mitsura Sakamoto, that elements of the Republic's own citizenry wished to return to "the Glory of the Dragon." However, in an ironic twist, the Fury — led by former Republican Prefect Duchess Katana Tormark — has reportedly clashed with Sakamoto's forces since the invasion began.

The Fury-DCMS fighting culminated, according to some reports, in a recent showdown on Saffel in which Sakamoto was deposed by Duchess Tormark. It was after that battle that Tormark allegedly left Republican space, and Fury troops were seen working in concert with DCMS regulars. According to Donnely, this change in leadership apparently had an immediate impact on the prosecution of the Combine invasion, with the attacking forces on several contested worlds — Styx included — stalled for the time being.

"Since uniting with the...[Dragon's] Fury, we have noticed a decrease in hostilities," Donnely told SNT, "but we expect this change is only temporary. Whether Combine-born or not, we must remember these people intend nothing less than the complete conquest of our homelands, in the name of an empire that long ago should have learned the lessons of war."

As the sun sets over Lindon's Folly today, the guns have once more grown silent, and technicians are hard at work repairing the damage, but the tension in the air remains even as the smoke clears. How long will this lull last?

Reporting for Skye News Today, at Lindon's Folly, I'm Sierra Ramirez.

**12 October 3135**

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***JumpShip Gemini Gleam, Prefecture IV***

I'm still heading to Prefecture VII. Specifically, to Augustine. I'm not really sure why. It seems pretty useless, pretty meaningless, now. Let's say I find what I'm looking for. To whom do I report it? Do I try to get someone arrested? Under whose authority? Because I don't have any anymore, it seems.

God, I've gotta break out of this. It's been 10 days and my head's still swimming. I need to work. I'm on a ship; there's plenty of passengers, many of them abandoned just like I was. I need to talk to them, to find out what they know. Anything to avoid being alone with my thoughts.



## 13 October 3135

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Why rely on outside reports when you can get information from the horse's mouth?

**Hidechi Welles**  
**Lindon's Folly, Styx, Prefecture II**

Tomodachi,

I am sure that some of my more true-blooded countrymen may find moments like these an opportunity to practice their skills at haiku, but unfortunately, as you know, my grasp of that art is limited (though I am sure I could belt out a few colorful limericks that my mother taught me, if properly motivated).

Right now, however, I am not motivated.

Worry not, *tomodachi*. I remain committed to the path of honor, to fulfill my duty to my rightful liege. "Always *giri* before *ninjo*"—duty before heart. For her, I gladly accepted this assignment, to serve as our official liaison to the truebloods of our nation, to fight alongside them for the glory of the Dragon. I know you feel the same as I, that sense of elation and pride, as if the moment of acceptance we have so yearned for—that feeling of *belonging*—is finally near.

But alas, *tomodachi*, I must confess the results of these first efforts have been rather disappointing. The warriors to whom I have been assigned are honorable and brave; a finer company I have never seen in the years since Stone left us. But to them, I will forever be *gaijin*, an outcast. To them, I will never *belong*.

Bah! Enough of this self-pity! You expect a report from the front lines, and so I shall give you one. Four days ago, we engaged Republican forces here to demonstrate our will and determination, to prove that, even though the Dragon has been still, it may still strike with ferocity and honor at any moment. I dare say the Republicans learned the lesson well. Their news reports claim we were beaten, but more of their dead littered the field than ours.

They were tenacious, though. A worthy foe that I still remember once calling my own, as our liege also remembers, I am certain. I take no pleasure in seeing them fall, and I will be glad when this fighting is over. But before I digress again, let me say that they nonetheless failed to prevent us from breaching their line. Were it only so ordered, we could have pushed through to the city beyond, and claimed the spaceport and this wretched, mud-soaked continent for the Dragon.

Sooner or later, I know that order is coming. But, *tomodachi*, would it be a dishonor to admit that I dread the day when our liege returns and issues such a command?

Always with you,

HW

**17 October 3135**

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***JumpShip Gemini Gleam, Prefecture IV***

Okay, I might not be quite back to normal, but I'm starting to get my old bounce back. This ship is going to keep me occupied for a while. Who cares if I've got no one to report to? Just finding out stuff is fun all on its own.

Most of us here are refugees, though not all of us know what we're running from. I've talked to people convinced that the Federated Suns are our friends, others just as convinced that the Davions are going to join everyone else in the land grab. There have also been a few dark whispers about House Davion having to deal with its own inner turmoil before it can decide what to conquer.

That last line of gossip sounds like the most interesting, but also probably the subject that no one will have any real facts about. Still, on a long flight, innuendo's as good as anything.

## 18 October 3135

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More from Charisse: Apparently at least one Drac has retained his sense of honor.

I don't believe it, Jake! It was that same *Ghost*! I'm sure of it! Had to be the only one in the field with a Dragon's Fury emblem on it. I don't know what the hell Tormark puts in her boys' sake, but whatever it is makes those guys nuttier than grandma's Christmas fruitcakes!

Okay, maybe that was a bit unfair. I know, for instance, what they teach us at the academies about the Dracs and their sense of honor. Almost as bad as Clanners sometimes. They say there are those who prefer combat on the most even footing possible, leaving the victory to the one with the most skill in battle. One-on-one dueling, face to face. No kicking below the belt. That kind of thing.

Well, they also teach us that the entire honor thing is a myth now. The Clans and the Jihad—not to mention a few centuries fighting Davies—taught the DCMS that you just can't expect fair treatment from your enemy during battle. And because the Combine's overriding goal has always been to conquer the universe (No kidding! Look it up in one of those *Touring the Stars* bits ComStar kept replaying all the time!), the instructors also teach that facing a Drac in battle is the second-worst thing that can happen (after facing a Cappie). I'm sure it'd be the *third-worst* thing if the Word of Blake were still around, but that's just an academic point.

I'm getting off-subject, though. Okay, so in case the news hasn't reached you yet, a few days back we had a major dust-up around the same place I told you that Barbarry and I ran that patrol, just north of Lindon's Folly. Well, the local Drac field commander got it in his head that it was time to shake things up a little, with or without word from his higher-ups (which Donnely swears he hasn't gotten yet). A full company of 'Mechs and tanks, plus maybe another company of supporting foot troopers—armored and otherwise—suddenly converged on our position there.

Natch, guess who's on patrol at the time in her little old Panther?

And this time, I didn't even have Barbarry there to back me up.

At the sight of the vanguard units, I opted to get the hell out of there, but I knew it was no use. *Panthers* just aren't built for speed. They're fragging expendable firepower. Sure enough, I can see in the sensor boards and the wraparound that I have two Snake 'Mechs on my tail, including that *Ghost*. I'm making evasives and jumping like all get-out to avoid these guys, using the woods to slow them some, but the *Ghost* has a top speed over twice what I can manage. We're exchanging fire the whole time, and I'm calling up support, which is already en route, but I know I'm going to be toast before the others get there, right?

That's where once again, the *Ghost* decides to cut me some slack.

I mean, it *could* have been just an accident, I suppose, but with the speed he was going, and the way he was dodging trees, I just *knew* this guy was an ace of some kind. He was in the lead, his partner in a *Cougar* struggling to keep pace just behind him and taking potshots whenever he could get a line of fire, which was strangely not that often.

But damned if the Ghost didn't suddenly trip. I mean, at close to 50 kph, the guy suddenly slides off to one side, not only topping himself and giving me a moment's breathing room, but also sending his buddy in the *Cougar* into a sprawl as they connect. I've seen a move like that only in cheap holovids.

I'm told that in the after-action, the *Ghost* still fought us like a pro, and even took a fair chunk out of Lieutenant McCabe's *Legionnaire*. (I myself managed to cripple a couple DCMS hovers and drive back some Drac Toads, thank you very much.) So I know it can't be fear of fighting that's eating him, but there's just no way I should have come out of that one alive, and knowing it all came down to whatever's ticking in that Fury guy's noggin just gave me the creeps.

Luv,

Your big sister

## 20 October 3135

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Intercepted this internal Kurita communique. I suppose there can be such a thing as too much honor....

### ISF Field Report SAST166-DAV

**To:** Dispatch

**From:** David

I am continuing my ongoing observation of the Geisha's ronin forces, with particular attention paid to the Geisha's representative among forces engaged on the Gehenna continent of Styx. Subject there is remarkably well indoctrinated into the strictures of *bushido*, and performs with exceptional skill during battle, as has proven to be the case for more of the Geisha's ronin than not. More remarkable is the subject's clearly *gaijin* birth status, not only being of The Republic, but also hailing from a combination of Davion and Rasalhaguan ancestry.

Unfortunately, the subject's indoctrination into *bushido* appears to have been too good. His commitment to *bushido* is that of an idealist, as I noted in earlier reports on the matter. When faced with an enemy in a clearly inferior position, the subject has held fire and even impeded the ability of true Dragons to carry out the task. At least one known Republican remains an active participant in local engagements as testimony to that effect.

In reviewing reports by colleagues, I have learned that all six of the Geisha's ronin here on Styx appear to demonstrate similar signs of weakness. We surmise that this is the inevitable result of their status as Republic-born *gaijin*. Clearly, a part of these ronin still feel a kinship with the very warriors they have resisted for the better part of two years. Their sense of honor when dealing with such warriors smacks of the naive manner in which the Clans have been known to do battle, creating an unnecessary restraint and a questionable commitment to the cause of reclaiming our worlds.

My recommendation, as before, is to restrict the impact of these ronin on our war effort. If we must consort with these *gaijin* the Geisha has forced upon us, then perhaps there may be a way to place them first in harm's way, to toughen up those strong enough to realize that we are not playing games with the Republicans.

Will continue observations pending further instructions. As ever, I remain but a humble servant of the Dragon.

## 21 October 3135

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### ***JumpShip Gemini Gleam, Prefecture IV***

It's time to make some friends. And this time I'm not just limiting myself to passengers—I'm doing everything I can to make the crew like me, too.

And thanks to the wonderful ways of men and the genetic bequests from my ancestors, getting about half of them to like me is not that hard. Unfasten an extra button, stare at them awkwardly, blush occasionally—and all of the sudden your presence is welcome just about anywhere.

The women can be a little tougher to crack, especially if flirting with the men makes them think you're an idiot, a bimbo, or both. But if I can pick the right ones—the ones looking to air a few gripes about their job, for instance—I'll get in. Then I'll see what kind of gossip I can carve out of them.

## 25 October 3135

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Saw this in the *Gehenna Gossip*. An actual transcript of Charisse's run-in with the honorable *Ghost*.

### ABOVE ALL, HONOR?

24 October 3135 (LINDON'S FOLLY) — Just when you thought the changing face of war couldn't get any weirder, it does in the ongoing contest for Lindon's Folly, Styx's vital spaceport city here on our very own Gehenna Isle. Astute readers keeping score may already know that, since their arrival on the scene, the armed forces of the Draconis Combine have been duking it out with the hometown Republic of the Sphere forces as part of the Snakes' ever-deeper incursion into Republican territory, with us hapless residents caught in the crossfire—as always.

Well, as the more insular among you may not be aware (you know, those of you who probably are already hiding out in bomb shelters built in case of a second Jihad), the Dracs have been much more passive since ol' Warlord Sakamoto bit the big one on the ice caps of Saffel a few weeks back. Apologists for the traitor Tormark are attributing this change of attitude to the Dragon's Fury boys and girls who signed up with the DCMS all too recently. More sensible folk are calling this merely the calm before the storm.

Either way, judging by this intercepted comm traffic picked up during yet another recent skirmish near the Folly, it seems we've got folks on both sides who still think riding around in walking avatars of steel and death somehow makes them nobler than the rest of us poor animals. God, you just gotta love that Drac taste for *bushido*, eh?

**[RotS Panther]:** "Contact! Contact! Scout Two to Heavy Alpha, I need some backup here, pronto!"

**[RotS Vulture]:** "Affirmative, Scout Two. Heavy Lance en route. Fall back to Waypoint Baker and await—"

**[RotS Panther]:** "(unpublishable)! Taking fire! Taking fire! I count four incoming hostiles, all Baker-Marys. Repeat. One full lance of Baker-Mary elements firing on my position!"

**[RotS Vulture]:** "Fall back, double-time, Scout Two. Heavy Lance ETA is 5 minutes."

**[RotS Panther]:** (sounds of weapons fire, static) "Five minutes!? You've got to be (unpublishable) me! I have a *Ghost* and a *Cougar* breathing down by neck, with a couple *Centurions* not too far behind them!"

**[RotS Vulture]:** "Charlie Flight is in the air, Scout Two. Cavalry's coming." (sounds of weapons fire; thumping rotors pass by; several explosions)

**[RotS Panther]:** "I'm hit! I'm hit!" **[RotS Vulture]:** "Scout Two, Heavy Lance ETA is two minutes. What's your status?"

**[RotS Panther]:** "Dang it, Alpha. My hip's blown, and that (unpublishable) *Ghost* has taken out my PPC. I'm (unpublishable)!"

**[RotS Vulture]:** "Heavy Alpha to all units. We have a 'Mech down at Waypoint Gamma. Scout Two reports four medium Baker-Marys on site..."

**[RotS Panther]:** (unintelligible)

**[RotS Vulture]:** "Scout Two?"

**[RotS Panther]:** (muttering) "All right, you (unpublishable). You've been stalking me all month now. Get it over with..."

**[RotS Vulture]:** "Scout Two? Respond! Heavy Lance has sensor contact with your position..."

**[RotS Panther]:** (still muttering) "What the hell?"

**[RotS Vulture]:** "Scout Two, respond!"

**[RotS Panther]:** "I don't believe it! Again?"

**[RotS Vulture]:** "Scout Tw—"

**[RotS Panther]:** "Heavy Alpha, enemy unit has fallen back. My 'Mech is crippled. Why the hell didn't that Fury *Ghost* finish me off?"

There you have it folks. Crippled Republican Panther lives by virtue of a traitor in his *Ghost*? Is this the code of *bushido*, a rare spark of compassion in a Drac wannabe? Or is it collusion between enemies, a game played between MechWarriors and paid for by the blood and taxes of the people?

You decide.

## 26 October 3135

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### ***JumpShip Gemini Gleam, Prefecture IV***

Operation “Don’t You Want To Be My Friend” is proceeding perfectly. The assistant navigator, the deputy chief of security, and the bosun are all rapidly becoming close, personal friends of the lovely and talented Deandra Lowe. And I’ve already reaped my first reward.

I was chatting up the navigator when the first mate (whom I don’t have my hooks into yet) came in for a chat. She didn’t seem to care that I was sitting right there—civilian crews are a little more relaxed about secrecy than the military is. She launched right into the navigator.

“I saw the route you planned,” she said. “Are you trying to get us killed?”

The navigator played it off like he didn’t know what she was talking about, which, in fact, he didn’t. Turns out the first mate had been looking at an old set of plans that called for passing through the Elgin jump point. And that prospect had the first mate scared white.

This’ll bear more looking into.

P.S. He’ll never see this, but I should wish my cousin Jonas a happy birthday. Happy birthday, dork.

## 27 October 3135

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Mika meets our Jump-sick Clanner. I just love it when things come full circle....

### ***Prefecture X Free Trader Sudetenland (Fomalhaut System)***

Let me just start by saying, "Clanners are freaks!" I'm serious, Marc. These guys are just the strangest, most uncouth, yet strangely noble creatures I have ever met up close, and I think the Nova Cats have to be the weirdest of them all. At least, if these Spirit Cat wannabes are any indication...

Okay, now that I got that out of my system, maybe I should explain that a bit more, but before I do, Marc, do me a favor—get the kids out of the room. This is just not a subject for young ears.

Firstly, remember that I have two jobs here and two employers to answer to. Just playing comm officer on this Jumper is the first, which is no biggie. The second job, however, is to forward anything of interest to the powers-that-be at Denebola, based on the orders they give me and the captain (the only two of us on the Denebolan office payroll, as far as I know).

Well, of course the movements of the Spirit Cats got top priority once the Denebolan PTBs noticed Rosse was part of their group. I'm guessing they told the cap'n to agree to this rental of our services for much the same reason. So, we're supposed to watch our charges, and see if we can't find out what's what, right?

Well, not soon after they docked, I met one of these guys. An Elemental. Had to be. He was about 2.1 meters of muscle on top of muscle (with a side of muscle for good measure), and covered in weird ritual tattoos (not those Enhanced Imaging implants; I asked). Anyway, this Ellie—Terrence was his name—seemed like he needed to talk. I mean, he's nervous, sweaty, and his eyes never blink. I try to talk with him, though, and you'd have thought I pulled a gun on him. Guess someone got it into his head the ship's full of Republican spies.

Okay. Fair enough. So, I figure I'll give him and his buddies more room.

Then, after the first jump, I notice this guy is real scarce. Doesn't like to mingle on the grav decks, even though some of his buddies do. When he finally does, it's like he can't get away fast enough after the minimum medically approved allotment of exercise.

Come to find out from his friends that this guy's got the worst case of travel sickness I've ever heard of. From dust-off to landing, he's an absolute nervous wreck. Medications don't take his mind off it, because he can focus only on the fact that he's on a spacecraft surrounded by vacuum.

And I thought *nothing* scared these guys! Weird, huh?

Oh, but then comes the gross part. In the course of finding out from his friends what this Terrence guy's deal is, I get propositioned to "couple" no fewer than a dozen times. I mean, these guys talk sex the way we talk about the weather—and some of them are the fugliest things you can imagine this side of a Canopian circus.

Worse, it seems that someone decides that this is the best way to get Terrence to relax his guard, because a few days after this, the monstrous tattooed Ellie himself bumps into me on the grav deck, gives out this exasperated sigh, and starts a whole conversation with, "Okay, *surat*, let us couple now and get this over with."

I mean, what the hell was *that*!?

I tell you, Marc. I can't tell the rest of this story without my skin crawling. Suffice to say, there are certain things about this second job of mine that I wish the Denebolan office had *warned* me about first!



## 31 October 3135

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### ***JumpShip Gemini Gleam, Prefecture IV***

All right. So it turns out Elgin was lucky enough to be drafted into Prefecture X when Exarch Levin dropped his curtain or erected his wall or whichever metaphor you want to use. Not everyone was clear on that at first—they thought Levin's fortress would just be Prefecture X, but it looks like, by the warnings Levin sent out, the "fortress" also includes 10 extra planets (including Northwind, which is safe, but out of my reach; I'm pleased and crushed at the same time).

Normally the *Gemini Gleam* would stop by Elgin on this particular journey, but they're not going to anymore, because they're scared stiff. I asked the navigator about it. I said, "Okay, we're not going to Elgin. But what would happen if we did?" And his eyes grew wide and he shook his head and he said, "We're not going to Elgin," and I said, "Yeah, right, I know, but what if—" and he cut me off and said "We're *not*."

What's clear is that Levin's got the means to back up his threats. I need to find out what's happening—to satisfy my curiosity, if nothing else.

## 03 November 3135

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In my quest for entertaining reading material, I managed to coax some fine Solaris 7 publications from a passenger. He had only some of the more independent tabloids, but those usually have the best info anyway. The issues were old, but any light reading is better than some of the combat news being disseminated lately. A particularly informative one had this in it:

### "VCI JOINS TACTICAL ADVANTAGE IN 'MECH OFFERS"

In an apparent response to Tactical Advantage's *Neanderthal* giveaway to Lex Corpuz ("Buford" pilot), Victory Conditions Industries (VCI), will be putting up one of their newest designs as the ante for a bet for anyone who'll take it: Correctly choose the winners in a yet-to-be announced series of battles to own the reconnaissance-oriented *Night Stalker*.

VCI has reported the basics of this design, though not all the particulars are available. Here's what we've gotten out of them so far:

**Type/Model:** *Night Stalker* NSR-K1-M

**Mass:** 40 tons

**Chassis:** Endo Steel

**Power Plant:** 320 Pitban XL Fusion

**Walking Speed:** 86.4 km/h

**Maximum Speed:** 129.6 km/h

**Jump Jets:** None

**Armor Type:** Ferro-Fibrous

**Armament:**

3 Extended-Range Medium Lasers

1 Beagle Active Probe

1 Streak SRM 6

In addition, it looks like this 'Mech's torso-mounted cockpit design also features a Beagle Active Probe and a blade fitted directly into its left hand, which is likely intended to be used in urban combat. As more details become available, we'll be sure to report them to you."

Wow. Win your own 'Mech. Once upon a time, you actually had to buy one, or hope your great great great grandparents had one to leave you. Of course, now I'm curious as to who might have won this little wager. Here's hoping I can run into another Solaris frequenter in the near future....

## 04 November 3135

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### ***JumpShip Gemini Gleam, Prefecture IV***

Ships have disappeared. Vanished. Back on Terra, they still talk about the Bermuda Triangle, this little nothing piece of ocean where ships keep going in and not going out. It's been going on for centuries, well over a thousand years, and so far no one's got a better explanation than "it's just some weird coincidence."

This is much, much bigger than the Bermuda Triangle, but at least we know anything that happens there isn't random chance. There's actual hostile intelligence in there.

Prefecture X (and its add-ons) is the point of no return. The crews have been swapping tales of ships that go in but don't come out. They're not seen again, not heard from again. What happens to them is anyone's guess, but their families probably shouldn't keep setting a place at the table for them.

That's what the crew's nervous about. That's why we're not going anywhere near Elgin.

## 08 November 3135

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**Charisse Perry**  
***Lindon's Folly, Styx, Prefecture II***

"Reports of my demise have been greatly exaggerated."

I'm not sure who said that originally. I'm told it was an early Terran author, though I'm sure some ComStar adept would say it comes from Jerome Blake.

Either way, it works for me here, Jake. By now, you may have heard there was another "incident" outside of Lindon's Folly, and yes, it's true my Panther was shot down. It's even true that I took a hit in the cockpit when she crashed (though even I don't seem to remember that part . . .).

Rest assured, however, that I'm alive and well. And so is "Shira," though the techs had an easier time fixing her busted hip, gyro, and PPC than the medics here have had fixing my busted hip and three cracked ribs. (Whatever else they tell you about the safety harnesses in a BattleMech, those five-point straps can save your life, but they aren't exactly gentle about it.) Thus, I remain on the injured reserve for a few more days, with nothing to do but help out with admin duties and in the cafeteria, while amusing myself with the local net-drek they have here.

And guess what? The whole reason I'm alive to tell you this? It's all because that damned *Ghost* saved me—again. Oh, sure, it was him who started shooting at me to begin with, and it was his pulse lasers that ripped open Shira's leg, back, and peeper, but when the moment came to make his killing shot—don't let the news fool you, Donnely's lance was still too far away to stop him, and a couple VTOLs with cluster bombs just won't hold back a whole lance of dedicated hunter-killers like the Snakes had—he hesitated again.

He just stood over me there for a whole 15 seconds (I counted!), while his buddy in the Cougar stalked around behind him. Maybe they were even talking about me, arguing over who makes the kill and how. Whatever it was all about, it held them in place long enough for Heavy lance to start opening up on their position.

And it gets weirder, still. The other day, I'm checking out the Styx Nets again (like I told you, I've been really bored here!), and I stumbled upon this haiku in the topic line of a general posts chat room:

"Lone *Ghost* stalks *Panther*.  
 Three times a kindred life spared.  
 Ronin awaits word."  
 —DFRonin7

Natch, I look into it and find out that someone going by the handle of DFRonin7 has been looking to talk to some Republicans via the Styx Nets. If that's from our friendly neighborhood *Ghost* jock, though, what could he possibly want? And wouldn't answering him be, like, consorting with the enemy? I'd ask the sergeant here, but I'm not sure I want anyone even thinking I'm a Draco-sympathizer.

I'm so confused, Jake. Right about now, I wish I was back home on Berenson with you and Molly.

Luv,

Your big sister

## 09 November 3135

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### ***JumpShip Gemini Gleam, Prefecture V***

Got a story from the first mate. Here's how it goes.

The JumpShip *Starrunner* had heard the warnings. They had no intention of going anywhere they weren't supposed to. They were at Dieron, which on any map looks like it's practically touching Altair, but in reality is nearly four light-years away from it, which gives them plenty of room to maneuver.

But there's trouble. The ship is supposedly a merchant but does some covert work for The Republic from time to time (never mind how I know that), and in this instance they happened to be sheltering a fugitive from the Draconis Combine. So some Combine ships start putting pressure on them, hemming them in, and the *Starrunner* gets word that anywhere they jump has Combine ships waiting for them.

Anywhere but one. Altair. So they figure, we're on Republic business, right? They'll understand, right?

And maybe The Republic folks did. But not a word about any of the hands aboard has made it out of Prefecture X since. Not a trace. The ship couldn't have been more thoroughly removed if it had been vaporized. And that's where things stand in Prefecture X.

## 10 November 3135

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I wonder what Marc would think about Mika's "professional contact"? Ah, the intricacies of covert work....

**Mika Hasseldorf**  
**Prefecture III**  
**Free Trader Sudetenland (Quentin System)**

Per priority requests received on 1 October of this year, I have worked to win the confidence of the Spirit Cat "guests" traveling on board the free trader Sudetenland since our departure from Marcus System (Prefecture VIII) on 7 August. In that time, I have focused my efforts on one Cat in particular, a nervous male of apparent trueborn Elemental breeding and distinguished markings of the Purifiers subgroup. Known simply as Terrenz (no Bloodname, preferred battlesuit is Gnome). Apparently afflicted with severe space flight phobias, the mark seemed reasonable enough, too distracted by his own predicament to maintain any guard against casual inquiry.

Initial contacts were less than encouraging, but over the next two jumps, his resistance wore down. Supplemental inquiries and interest expressed to Terrenz's companions—whose willingness to provide information on their comrade was directly proportional to the amount of information they *refused* to share about their current objectives—eventually led to greater understanding of the subject and eventual contact during the recharge at Fomalhaut (Prefecture X).

Intimate contact—while initially quite unpleasant—proved a catalyst to reaching the subject, who eventually discussed at length the Spirit Cat beliefs in the hopes of expressing how he came to join and embrace the values of his "Clan" and follow Kev Rosse. It appears, however, that the last few years spent in search of their "safe haven" have worn down Terrenz's faith, possibly due to his extreme transit phobias and violent TDS condition, which make all the moving around extremely distressing. Subject now dwells on what he considers to be a string of "dead ends."

It appears the move to Addicks on the part of this crew is to secure a foothold there in anticipation of the arrival of additional Spirit Cat forces, including those of Kev Rosse himself. The move is in response to the latest "inspiration" received by Rosse during his lieutenant's mission to Wyatt. Evidently, this "vision" called upon Rosse to "return to the beginning" in anticipation of an unspecified event. The nature of this event is unknown to Terrenz, who continues to regard me with intense suspicion, despite over a week of close contact.

At present, intentions are to continue focusing on Terrenz for additional information on Spirit Cat objectives, motives, and methods via casual contact for the remainder of the jump travel to Addicks. Afterward, it is my intention to sever all contact with this Spirit Cat and return to my duty post in Prefecture VIII, pending additional instruction.

Hasseldorf out.

## 15 November 3135

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Charisse finally gets to speak to her ronin.

\*\*\*CharlyP has joined the server [Timestamp: 04:17-31351112 GST]

\*\*\*CharlyP sets mode to +private, +secure, +encryptAAB11G, +invite-only

+ [Auto-Message: ModBot Moderation Disabled. Private Channel Secure-Mode Engaged. Encryption Code AAB11G Active. Channel is Invite-Only.] :- ModBot2029T8H

\*\*\*DFRonin7 has been invited to channel

\*\*\*DFRonin7 has joined channel

+Well, here we are....

:-CharlyP

+Indeed.

:-DFRonin7

+Look, don't play the strong, silent type with me in here. You know either one of our COs would hang us for even having this little chat.

:-CharlyP

+Or worse, I am certain.

:-DFRonin7

+So, want to tell me what it is with you? I mean, I have no complaints about having my life spared three times in battle, but when it's by the same enemy, I start to wonder if we've met sometime before, or if you're just tormenting me for some sick reason, and I just don't get the joke.

:-CharlyP

+I assure you that it is no joke. Though I am impressed that you have noticed my efforts. I can tell you with no dishonor that I do not know you personally. You do not owe your life to some past friendship between us.

:-DFRonin7

+Then, to what, dare I ask?

:-CharlyP

+To honor, of course. Contrary to what you may have heard of us, we are not heartless traitors and murderers.

:-DFRonin7

+By "us," do I presume you mean the Dragon's Fury, or the Combine as a whole?

:-CharlyP

+Yes. ;-)

:-DFRonin7

+Oh, very cute!

:-CharlyP

+Apologies, CharlyP. I DO mean the Fury first and foremost, but my countrymen in the Combine are likewise not the heartless killers your press and government claim us to be.

:-DFRonin7

+Forgive me if that's a bit hard to swallow while you're invading The Republic. It also doesn't answer my question. Why spare me?

:-CharlyP

+Honor. You were at an unfair disadvantage in every encounter we have had. Between the inferiority of your BattleMech and your lack of support, I could not bring myself to deliver a killing blow.

:-DFRonin7

+Yet you did so against other Republican troops without any difficulties.

:-CharlyP

+Only on an even footing. Only where skill determined the victor. I take no pleasure in killing my once-countrymen.

:-DFRonin7

+Then why do it?  
:-CharlyP

+Duty before heart. It is the way of the Dragon.  
:-DFRonin7

+But you are not of the Dragon, if you are of the Fury. You and the others like you follow Tormark, one of us.  
:-CharlyP

+A traitor, in your eyes? Perhaps, and very true. But our liege has awakened us to a future we could not have had in the Republic. Duty demands no less than to follow.  
:-DFRonin7

+Duty then also demands that we kill each other. My duty to the Republic is to defend her and her citizens against those who mean her harm. Yet you, knowing this, did not kill me. Why?  
:-CharlyP

+Duty does not always demand death. But if you wish, we may meet again on the field, with no quarter asked or given. I will honor the request of a fellow warrior, though I wish it would not be so.  
:-DFRonin7

+Nor would I, Ronin.  
:-CharlyP

+Then let us leave the future to itself, my honorable foe, and acknowledge ourselves as warriors divided only by karma. In the meantime, it has been a long while since I have conversed with another as an equal. I would like to continue, with your willingness?  
:-DFRonin7

+I think I would like that.  
:-CharlyP



## 17 November 3135

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Hand of Starling chips in on the Bounty Hunter, who seems have reappeared under the aegis of Katana Tormark.

[Text excerpt from *The Bounty Hunter: Piercing the Legend*, The Atreus Post, 27 July 3060]

[Begin Excerpt]

Who was the Bounty Hunter?

That question has perplexed many for well over a century. The lack of few hard facts has generated almost as many theories as there are individuals looking for answers.

No reputable researcher believes that there has been only one Bounty Hunter. After all, such a person would have had to have been more than 110 years old at the time of his disappearance in 3051—impossible, based on the tri-vid that does exist of the Bounty Hunter climbing out of his *Mad Cat* in 3050. But that begs the question of *who* these Bounty Hunters were, and *how* they came into possession of the signature suit they have all worn.

The most common theory is that the identity was passed down through a family of MechWarriors. At the height of the Third Succession War, when the Bounty Hunter first surfaced, the ranks of the Dispossessed far outnumbered those who still had BattleMechs. Any MechWarrior unfortunate enough to be Dispossessed would do just about anything to regain a 'Mech, which is partly why the profession of bounty hunter become so common during that time. Many have deduced that only a Dispossessed MechWarrior could hunt others with the detached vitriol evinced by the Bounty Hunter.

On the other hand, the Bounty Hunter didn't show this bloodthirsty nature until the last decade of the 30th century. Many blame this change on a "personality switch"—when the old Bounty Hunter retired and a new individual took his place.

Innumerable individuals have come forward through the years, either claiming to have been the Bounty Hunter or to know who he was. Unsurprisingly, none of those claims has ever been proved, though some appear to have led researchers closer to the truth. Though none ever came to fruition, some did produce a few corpses with indeterminate causes of death.

[End Excerpt]

Actually, that would be 194 nowadays. Take *that*, first Star League and your average human lifespan of 108 years.

But seriously, folks, the Bounty Hunter is back in the flesh and apparently working for Katana Tormark (though he seems to pull disappearing acts better than old Tommy: Now he's fake, now he's real, now he's fake...). Course, according to my sources, he first appeared on Harrow's Sun, with enough hate-on for snakes to make Hanse "The Great Satan" spin with pride like a top in his grave. Then suddenly he's on Irian, fighting for the snakes—after spending years rubbing their noses in their own blood? Doesn't jive.

But that's not really what I want to talk about. What I want to talk about is the last paragraph of the excerpt from that article. Doesn't it strike anyone as odd that after two centuries these Bounty Hunters come and go and work for just about every faction under the sun (except maybe the Clans...high and mighty sligs), and yet no one—not even a House intelligence agency—has been able to track him down? Rip off that mask he probably wears to bed? And he's in broad daylight? For heaven's sake, the Dancing Joker, possibly the greatest assassin the human race has ever known, couldn't hide in a hole deep enough to keep the snakes' ISF from sniffing him out and hanging his head at the city gates.

If you ask me, he's got help. Big-time help: House, intelligence agency, interstellar corp—pick one. But just ask yourself, "Who's got the most to gain from having a loose cannon like that lying around?"

I know where my Stones are laid.

—Hand of Starling

**18 November 3135**

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***JumpShip Gemini Gleam, Prefecture VI***

My Augustine friends are almost as good at pumping people for info as I am. Whenever we hook up with other JumpShips to exchange passengers, they scour any and all newcomers for news of Augustine. Then, like good little boys and girls, they pass the news on to me.

I was expecting word of increased militarization, but it looks like Riktofven's too clever for that. (Riktofven? Clever? That's like calling a Liao sane.) He's actually liberalized the planet. Loosened up some wartime restrictions instituted by Levin. Reduced tariffs and taxes. Done everything but skip through the streets of the capital passing out daisies. He wants the people to love him, but what he plans to do with that love when he gets it is anybody's guess.

## 22 November 3135

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### Towne Log

+So what has anyone heard about this FORTRESS REPUBLIC.  
:-WetWillie

+You mean CHICKENLITTLE REPUBLIC?  
:-Draco041

+So...been hearing some disturbing stuff. After I dug up that Interstellar Financial Services Consortium report I posted, I managed to dig up some other info as well. Seems that JumpShips heading into any system that's a part of Prefecture X aren't coming back.  
:-WetWillie

+Wow, not a conspiracy theory? Just a statement of info you've found? Nice...  
:-Chungabunga

+Oh, I've got several theories, but I'm trying to reform.  
:-WetWillie

+Right....  
:-Chungabunga

+Well, I appear to be the new guy around here, so I'll bite. How do you know? I mean, could be the JumpShips simply have had a change of route? Could be pirates (I mean, with everything going on, don't doubt even PX is having to deal with stuff like that), or could be a blown helium seal leaving them stranded, or at the very least well off schedule. I could think of several other reasons for why it might appear JumpShips are not coming back out. Unless you got some more information than that.  
:-jetjet77

+Oh, I like him. You can stick around, jj77.  
:-Chungabunga

+Oh, I thought of all those as well, but when it comes through several different reports, including an advisory to all Clan Sea Fox khanates that "until further notice, all movement through Prefecture X is suspended by order of Khan Hawker"...well, that's hard to ignore.  
:-WetWillie

+The Foxes are not as inscrutable as Nova Cats, but I wouldn't take that at face value. They tend to think on long terms and that may simply be part of a brokered deal that has nothing to do with all the vanishing Republic troops.  
:-Draco041

+Draco's got a point.  
:-jetjet77

+Oh, I know. But when worlds like Hsien are crawling with more Republic troops than a Capellan's got ticks and then they vanish and we've heard nothing about a new offensive against any House or Clan currently tearing chunks out of The Republic, and now this...has to make you wonder.  
:-WetWillie

+Ah, there's the conspiracy theories I know and love from WW.  
:-Chungabunga

+Now who's trolling? Honestly, doesn't look like a conspiracy theory at all. He's just asking questions. Got to say, that Fox report does make me wonder, combined with everything else. Come on! Foxes don't care one wit for anything going on around them, and that includes going across any borders and asking permission afterwards...with a liberal sprinkling of Stones on the side to make any belly aching go away. So for even the Foxes to be avoiding PX...  
:-XSOkay

+Exactly. All I'm saying is it's starting to look pretty weird. Especially considering...how do you close up a border like that? I mean if you've got a battlesat or a small fleet to lob at every border system jump point, that still leaves pirate points. There's a reason that even the Houses at the height of their power couldn't really protect the border worlds from almost constant objective raids.  
:-WetWillie

+Space stations do not grow on trees, and there is no way The Republic has the navy to try such a blockading tactic. I'm not sure they had it before the blackout, much less years of heavy fighting.  
:-Draco041

+Exactly. Just what I'm saying. So what's going on? Is it really happening? If so, how are they doing it? Things just don't add up.

:-WetWillie

+ ...if nobody gonna respond back can we move on. i hear G2G might release a bonus track on the upcoming Krasher holovid soundtrack.

:-SteelFist17

+Sigh...you ever get tired of talking about them, 17?

:-WetWillie

+hey just didn't want the chat to go dead s'all.

:-SteelFist17

+About like you and you're conspiracy theories, WW?

:-Draco041

+Touché.

:-WetWillie

+Wow...did anyone feel the space-time continuum hum for a moment? Did WW and Draco actually not only agree, but then pass friendly shots?

:-Chungabunga

+ Careful of the trolling, CB.

:-ModR8R13431

+;-) Sorry...

:-Chungabunga

## 23 November 3135

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### ***JumpShip Gemini Gleam, Prefecture VI***

Pissing people off—the true sign of success. We picked up a new person at our last stop, a guy named Jefferson on his way back to Augustine. He knows Lyman, one of my new friends, so he's been hanging around the group I've wormed my way into. He's been there as I've been asking my questions, and he's taken offense. Thinks I'm too nosy. I've told him I just want to learn about the planet I'm relocating to, but that doesn't sway him.

He's obviously not a spook—he's too unsubtle for that. He defends Riktofven every chance he gets; a good spy wouldn't be so loud about it and would give people who oppose the fearless leader a chance to keep talking and eventually hang themselves. But Jefferson's having none of it. I can't budge him. Now I have to worry that he'll turn the others against me, but I think I'm too charming for that.

## 24 November 3135

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Janis Nova Cat,

I have no desire to create, much less send, this communiqué. And yet I find I am honor bound to do so, before your words become actions you cannot revoke. As the *Sudetenland* is currently recharging its jump drive and there are still weeks before we make landfall on Addicks, I have made the time.

I have long watched you. Your actions within the Purifiers have been laudable, and a credit to the true-blood that flows in your veins. Actions, however, are not enough.

There is a Spheroid saying: "Actions speak louder than words." That may be enough among the duplicitous Spheroids, but in the Clans we are raised from decanting to follow orders. If, however, we feel that those orders are weak or dishonorable, we take instant action to right them through our Trials. The Clan version of that saying is "Words speak louder than actions." Clan actions can all too often be assumed. It is our words, then, that can have the power to support...or undermine.

Despite several failed Trials of Grievance, through which your actions speak of support for Kev Rosse, your words continue to decry his visions. You were not coerced into following Galaxy Commander Rosse, nor are you coerced at this time. Any who no longer believe in the Spirit Cats are free to return to their Nova Cat enclave of origin. In fact, I am confident any Nova Cat enclave, anywhere within The Republic, would accept you with open arms—your skills and blood a boon and honor.

And so, under such circumstances, I cannot understand your continued belligerence. Either you believe, or you are free to go your way. Others have, and you know full well no retribution has followed their departure. So what keeps you wedded to our cause?

Do you have another way? It is all too easy to lash out with words, and yet have no solution. To lead you must have a vision. Do you strike with charged PPCs, but with no plan of attack? Or do you follow the calls I have heard from some quarters, saying that our time in exile is done and it is time for a return to the shores of our ancestors—to become Nova Cats once more in word and deed?

You are a *ristar* for a reason; your skills on the field make you a valuable asset and potential icon for future generations. But will that reason turn to a purpose in safeguarding our future? Or to tear it down?

Think on such things as you try to find your own visions and the path forward.

Star Colonel Rikkard

## 28 November 3135

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### ***JumpShip Gemini Gleam, Prefecture VI***

Jefferson is completely immune to my charms. He's a pretty arrogant guy, and that type usually responds to humility—a little thinly disguised groveling. But he's having none of it. No matter what I do, he wants me at least 50 meters away from him at all times.

Although I'd like to say it's not me, I'm pretty sure it is. And it's not just that I'm "too nosy," as he keeps saying. There's something about me that has really put his guard up. I need to find out what it is, but he's not going to tell me. So I'll need to find some other way.

Luckily, my good friend the purser has access to every single cabin on this ship. She would never knowingly give such access to me, but what she doesn't know won't hurt her.

## 01 December 3135

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A little xenoparanoia from Hand of Starling:

Okay, people, time for another blog.

My two compatriots don't seem to want to spend much time on this, but it's driving me certifiable. Why, oh, why isn't anyone else worried about this? It's the coming apocalypse, I tell ya, and no one's paying attention!

Although the media appears to be ignoring it, I've got some inside people tossing me what they can. And let me tell ya, that's saying something, 'cause this stuff is locked up tighter than Danai's real birth date (much less her virginity).

So, HarJel. Everybody and their dog know what it is: sticky, gooey black stuff that Clan Sea Fox has a lock on tighter than a Lyran fist around a c-bill. Helps to turn Clan battle armor troopers—their Elementals—into supersoldiers: stops up wounds, helps to seal rends in armor, you get the vid. It's also used on Clan WarShips to seal hull breaches. Which is where the nut jobs on Solaris VII got the idea for BattleMech HarJel a couple of decades back. Sure, they made it work, but come on, how many battles really happen underwater? I tell ya, not enough. So the expense doesn't cut it and the bean counters say no, and it remains a hot number for the insanely rich noble brat to install on his family's heirloom, before he walks it back into the stall in their private museum.

Then out of the blue, we get the HarJel II Auto-Repair System, supposedly fully developed in some dark Republic lab and currently deploying with elite Republic troops. You can't seriously buy into that. This isn't some evolution from HarJel to HarJel II. The HJIIARS is revolutionary—light-years ahead of HarJel. From what I can dig up, it actually initiates minor 'Mech repairs on the fly.

On the fly!

People, do you understand what that means? Can you say AI?!

Anybody remember something called the First Star League? When two centuries of peace and all the efforts of humanity resulted in the semi-autonomous AI Caspar drones. Those computers were also able to enact repairs. And yet that took the combined might of the best and brightest of humanity, except it was enacted only on a WarShip-sized scale. And we've not touched it since. Sure, the toasters dabbled and came up with some unique surprises, but theirs were evolutionary movements. Got no problems with that.

This?! This is something totally different. Self-repairing 'Mechs?! Come on, people. Wake up and smell the deception. You really think The Republic cooked this up? No way; this is something else. This is AI, if not nanotechnology! And that's not coming from anywhere in the Inner Sphere, people. The technology's just too far, too much, too...different.

Only one word for it, people. One word. Aliens!

I'll fill you all in on my next blog with how aliens have infiltrated our society from top to bottom and are making us dependent on their technology; you wait, people, this "Republic" tech is gonna start appearing in other Houses and Clans before I can say "I told ya so." And in the end, that will be the Achilles heel to topple humanity in our gravest hour!

See ya next time.

—Hand of Starling



## 02 December 3135

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### ***JumpShip Gemini Gleam, Prefecture VI***

Now it starts to become clearer.

I got into Jefferson's cabin and did some rummaging. His electronic data is pretty well locked up, but I still found out a thing or two.

First of all, though he's not a spook (as far as I know), he used to be on Senator Riktofven's staff, which explains his fanatical devotion to the man. He was pretty low level—not much more than a clerk—but still, he was on the inside. And even the lowest people on the inside usually know a thing or two that people on the outside don't.

Second, he's not only ignoring me. He wrote my name down (the fake name I'm using on this journey, of course, not my real one) on a piece of paper, with a question mark after it. I imagine he sent a query out about me. I'm using one of my established identities—I didn't have time to generate a new set of papers—but it's not one I use often. With luck, he didn't find anything. But maybe he did, and that could explain his distance from me. He's discovered enough to make him think he shouldn't trust me.

He's right. He shouldn't.

**06 December 3135**

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My Dearest Frederick,

I was pleased to receive your missive. Though we met only briefly during the funeral, I felt an instant connection. As though a lost uncle had come home. Although I am most certain this will seem like unneeded flattery, it is nevertheless the truth of the matter.

As for welcoming you into our home, I'm sure I speak for Phillip when I say we would be delighted. I'm sure that Oriente cannot compare to the grandeur and wonders of Terra, but it is our home and you are welcome.

I'm sorry to say that Elis is visiting a cousin on Lesnovo, while Christopher is on an almost decadent (albeit much-deserved) holiday. He cannot get enough of skiing and is visiting several worlds that his "contacts" assure him offer an off-the-beat challenge. I was loath to allow such a dangerous trip, but Phillip persuaded me otherwise. I have predicted, however, that he will get something more than a broken thigh bone and frost bite! I informed him in no uncertain terms that he was to take every opportunity to delve into the rich tapestry of League culture. It appears to be working, as I just received a vidcard from the Musée National des Beaux-arts du Tamarind in Padaron City on Tamarind. What amazing art! It also contained a note that he was attempting to pick up falconry. Talk about decadent!

And, of course, I will pass on your warmest wishes to Nikol. Please pass on my own regards to your brother, Paladin Thaddeus.

I pray that we all find a better year than we left behind.

Jessica

**07 December 3135**

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***JumpShip Gemini Gleam, Prefecture VII***

We're finally getting close to Augustine—should be there in a little over a week. I already had an idea what I'd be looking for when I got to Augustine, and Jefferson's only sharpened my suspicions. I still can't talk to him, but I've been meeting with some of my other Augustinian friends, and a few little pieces of information have been dribbling out. Jeff's got political aspirations, so he naturally wants to stay in the good graces of the current power structure. He really admires Riktofven as much as he claims to. He sniffs out hints of treason like a pig sniffs out truffles—he's just drawn to the smell, and he can't help but get all excited when he thinks he's found something.

I think that's why he's avoiding me. He worries about treason, and he thinks that if he came close to me, he'd get the stench of sedition on him. Which means he has reason to think poorly of me, probably because information circulating around Riktofven's staff portrayed me as Very Bad News. Which also means Riktofven knows of me and doesn't like me. Which is not surprising.

## 08 December 3135

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### SOLARAN SPECTATOR

*Todd Tells All*

If I hear the words “holistic slice” or “microcosm” one more time, I’m going to be violently ill. Really, people. Are we so desperate to pander ourselves to the masses that Solarans have lost the ability to define ourselves beyond the outsider’s viewpoint?

Since that long-ago Phoenix Hawk stamped across Grayland and laid waste to Defiance’s Sentinel, Solaris has represented the tumultuous, fast-paced lifestyle, where life’s a game and good PR is more important than good armor or the latest weapon. And it stands to reason that where you find such lifestyles and the vast sums of money that go with it, you’ll find people dipping their fingers into the pot. Solaris City is the very definition of the word I refuse to write one more time. Cosmopolitan to the extreme, you can practically draw a map of the Inner Sphere based on the territories claimed by this faction or that, on the mean streets of our beloved city. And don’t get me started on the political baggage that comes along with it all.

And yet that’s just fine by me. Solaris City is the only city in the Inner Sphere that could be termed “unique,” with an atmosphere that tweaks a visitor’s tongue with endless possibilities the moment their DropShip grounds. Doesn’t matter if you’re walking down Sunnyside Drive—by All-Saints Cathedral—in the Black Hills, or cruising along Sadd Al Barani Street and the Marik Tower in Montenegro, or daring the slums of The Maze in Cathay, and even out into the suburbs of Periphery-tinged Xolara and beyond: It’s all Solaris City. And we’re Solarans.

Yet it is this very cosmopolitan atmosphere that hangs like a yoke around our necks. When the fabric of the Inner Sphere begins to unravel, all too often Solarans begin to unravel as well, as if a siren’s song from beyond grips our city in a cacophony of disaster. During the FedCom Civil War and the Jihad, rioting and wars gripped our world. And now, as The Republic finishes tearing itself apart and the sorry remnant licks its wounds and throws up a wall to hide itself from the hundreds of worlds that are now cast adrift by their leader’s incompetence, rioting erupted at last week’s Class IV Ishiyama preliminary bout.

Must we continue to reflect the chaos and stupidity of the Inner Sphere? Must we continue to adhere to the chains of false loyalties that have done nothing for us? We are Solarans! We do not go begging. The universe comes to us!

Please, for the love of all we hold sacred, remember what it means to be Solaran. Remember that the universe can likely shake itself apart without our help.

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**12 December 3135**

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***JumpShip Gemini Gleam, Prefecture VII***

I've been spending more time in my cabin, claiming I've got to get résumés and other such materials together so that I can launch into a job search when we make planetfall. In truth, I've been making sure my stockpile of goodies are ready to roll—all my bugs and microphones, my sidearm—while checking out every piece of information I can find about the capital city of Hyppo—street guides, where government centers are, where I can stay, etc. There's no substitute for actually being in a city, but I need to know this place pretty well before I land, because there's a very good chance I'll get myself in hot water in short order.

## 13 December 3135

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House Liao responds to accusations of breaking the Ares Convention. Picked this up from a trader who had just come up from what used to be Prefecture IV. He said that the Capellans are pumping the message out as fast as they can, trying to get it spread across all the planets in the area, especially those they've taken or that belonged to the Confederation before The Republic was created. Not sure if there's anything to it, but it still says quite a bit that House Liao is worried about what people think of them. The face man is Jiang-jun Sun Bin, assistant director of the Zang shu sheng, the Capellan Department of Propaganda. The speech was originally in Mandarin, but has since been translated into half a dozen languages.

[static, opening up to a hard-faced Jiang-jun behind a podium with the seal of House Liao on it]

Greetings. As you well know, the Inner Sphere has become a troubled area in the last several decades. With the resurgence of the Capellan Confederation and the resumption of governmental responsibilities on several planets within the Capellan sphere of influence, we of the Capellan Confederation have become the target of hatred and fear from other nations of the Inner Sphere. These feelings have gone so far as to cause some persons to accuse the Capellan Confederation of horrible acts, acts in breach of the Ares Convention, acts that the Capellan Confederation would never sink to perpetrating. The honored chancellor, and through him the entirety of the Capellan Confederation, soundly denies these claims as the ravings of fear and madness. The Capellan Confederation likewise denies claims that we have invaded another sovereign state of the Inner Sphere. Because The Republic of the Sphere has seen fit to throw hundreds of worlds to the winds, leaving them without any protection against marauding pirates or the depredations of other, more aggressive, nations, the Capellan Confederation has stepped in to fill the void and protect those worlds. Although there has been some combat upon these worlds, it has only been attempts by the Capellan armed forces to quell incidents of civic disturbance or to fight off invading forces. Because the brief combat on Acamar has become a rallying cry for those attempting to vilify the glorious Capellan Confederation, we have brought in independent observers from the Taurian Concordat to demonstrate that all portions of the Ares Convention have been observed. The full text of that report will follow this press conference, but suffice it to say they found no indications of any violations of the Ares Convention, and that the so-called nuclear weapon was caused by raiders concentrating fire on a damaged BattleMech to such a degree that the containment around its power plant failed and the reactor detonated. No radiation poisoning has been found on Acamar, and all other indications point to nothing more than unnecessary brutality on the part of the raiders. The Capellan Confederation vows to continue to offer safety and succor to those systems who request our assistance, and we will continue to uphold the high standards of our forefathers. Glory to House Liao! Glory to the Capellan Confederation! That is all.

[end speech]

The Taurian report that followed was nearly 200 pages of scientific mumbo jumbo prefaced with two pages of bowing and scraping to the "honored Capellan Confederation." It's pretty obvious that the Cappies have the "independent observers" deep in their pocket. I'm actually most amused by the reference to the Republican defenders of Acamar as "raiders." Sure, the Cappies are just extending their sheltering arms to hold and protect only those planets that ask for their help. And I'm the Comstar primus.

**16 December 3135**

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***Hyppo, Augustine, Prefecture VII***

Got on the ground yesterday. Had to do all the normal customs stuff, which was particularly nerve-wracking because my experience with Jefferson made me think they'd be on the lookout for me and my aliases. But I made it through, which either means I'm clear or they thought they could trap me on the planet and take care of me later.

I've looked at every picture of every Riktofen staffer I could find—no Jenkins. That doesn't mean much, as a guy like that is not the kind you put on your permanent staff. Just means he'll be a little trickier to find.

## 20 December 3135

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Rumor has it that the Rasalhague Dominion has struck into what used to be Prefecture I in an effort to restore order and protect the sovereignty of The Republic, but we all know how rumor goes. I managed to get a hold of the transcript to a pretty interesting interview with a Rasalhague Dominion soldier on Baxter. It's an opportunity to hear exactly what the Dominion is claiming they're up to. Of course, everyone knows that what someone claims and what they actually mean are often two completely different things, and the fact that the soldier being interviewed doesn't have a Bloodname says something about the weight that his words are likely to carry.

**Arianna Worthing:** Hello, my name is Arianna Worthing, and I'm here today with Erasmus Bear, a battle armor trooper with the Rasalhague Dominion forces that have begun occupying Baxter.

**Erasmus Bear:** Arianna Worthing, I would like to point out that the presence of the forces of the Rasalhague Dominion are not a sign of occupation.

**AW:** What would you call it, then, when armed forces of the Rasalhague Dominion occupy—presence—stand guard over critical points across the planet, after having fought off the military forces previously occupying the planet?

**EB:** The Rasalhague Dominion is not interested in conquest, as are the so-called "Great Houses" of the Inner Sphere and the crusaders among the Clans. The Dominion Expeditionary Force is interested only in restoring order to those regions where The Republic of the Sphere has been unable to do so.

**AW:** What about the battle that you and your fellow Rasalhaguians fought upon landing? The splinter group previously holding Baxter might not have been the rightful rulers of Baxter, but they were keeping things in line.

**EB:** Groups such as the Dragon's Fury, Swordsworn, and Stormhammers are nothing more than agents of chaos. They do not represent legitimate governments any more than the mercenary companies calling themselves Bannson's Raiders do. The Rasalhague Dominion feels a duty toward the unfortunate citizens of The Republic's Prefecture I, a duty to uphold the cause of order until The Republic of the Sphere recovers its strength and returns.

**AW:** So, you're saying that if and when the Republic Armed Forces return to Baxter, you and yours would simply lift off without a fight?

**EB:** Why should we not, Arianna Worthing? Our argument is not with The Republic of the Sphere, it is with those who seek to upset the natural order and bring death and destruction to innocents across the Inner Sphere.

**AW:** Well, that's certainly a noble sentiment, Erasmus; thank you for your time.



## 21 December 3135

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### ***Hyppo, Augustine, Prefecture VII***

Got an official visitor, which is good and bad. Good, because it means I've been stirring things up enough to be noticed. Bad, because it means my alias is probably no longer worth a hill of beans.

The woman said she was a "special agent," but didn't identify herself beyond that, but it was pretty clear she was with Riktofen. She didn't put on any show like she was trying to help me or any other nonsense. She just came in, told me I'd been noticed peering into the workings of Riktofen's staff, and that it might be best for me if I cut it out. Then she left. Short and to the point—I love doing business with people like that. Doesn't mean I'm going to stop what I'm doing, though.

## 22 December 3135

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I couldn't believe it when I picked up on this. Since then, I actually ran into Captain Ford and—after a bottle or two—she confirmed the story. Here's the transcript that I originally picked up. Some of the names were already filled in, and I added what I got from Captain Ford to complete it.

**Capt. Willa "Hopper" Ford:** Bogie coming in from point eight-five, Frankie. A heavy, probably a Mad Cat by the readings I'm getting.

**Maj. Francis "Frankie" Anderson:** Got it, Hopper. We're the only friendlies in the area, so let's light it up. Circle around to the north and try to get some shots in from there. Crash, you go 'round the south and do the same. Danny-boy, you stick with me. TAG 'em and bag 'em.

**Hopper:** Roger.

**Lt. Christina "Crash" Roberts:** You got it, boss.

**Lt. Daniel "Danny-boy" Filla:** One TAGed kitty, comin' right up.

**Frankie:** Watch it, Crash; keep those jumps low. We don't want the bandit to spot you before we're ready.

**Crash:** Sorry, boss. In position.

**Hopper:** Ready here, Frankie.

**Frankie:** Base One, this is Sigma lance, engaging enemy BattleMech, suspected Mad Cat.

**Base One:** Good hunting, Sigma lance.

**Frankie:** Enemy 'Mech coming into ambush zone now. Hit 'em, Danny-boy.

**Danny-boy:** Woo! Popped a shot at me, but didn't even scratch me. He's TAGed, but he don't look quite like a normal Mad Cat, the racks look different.

**Frankie:** Should still be a pushover for a full lance. Crash, Hopper, get 'em swiveled around and I'll finish 'em off.

**Crash:** Roger. [Static from jump-jet heat wash] Damn it! Missile launch, SRMs incoming, AMS tracking—got 'em.

**Hopper:** [jump-jet static] Rear-mounted missiles—it's a Mark IV, Frankie, don't enga—

**Frankie:** SRMs incoming, it's bringing up its lasers. [sounds of missile impacts] C'mon baby, hold together. Holy sh— [explosions, Major Anderson's feed closes]

**Danny-boy:** By Terra...did you see that? The bastard took out Frankie in one blasted shot. It wasn't a gauss, wasn't a PPC, not sure what it was.

**Crash:** AMS reset...let's see this bastard try that stupid rear-shot again.

**Hopper:** Disengage, Crash. If he can take out a Catapult in one shot, our Jackalopes don't stand a chance.

**Crash:** Like hell, Hopper. Frankie didn't even get a chance to eject; this guy's a murderer as far as I'm concerned.

**Danny-boy:** Listen to her, Crash. Hopper's got more reason to hate the bastard than any of us after what he did to Frankie, but she's right—damn it...Crash is engaging, Hopper.

**Hopper:** I see it, get her some support, Danny-boy.

**Danny-boy:** Roger.

**Crash:** [jump-jet static] Get some! Bastard's turning around— [explosions, a scream, Lieutenant Roberts' feed closes]

**Hopper:** Christ! The Mad Cat just iced Crash. Another one-shot with whatever the hell that weapon is. No way she's getting out of that landing.

**Danny-boy:** What now, boss?

**Hopper:** Damn it...this son-of-a-bitch just fragged Frankie and Crash. I want blood. I'll distract him, you see if you can't get a shot or two off. Keep moving, though, and watch out for those rear-mounted SRMs.

**Danny-boy:** You got it, Hopper. Ready when you are.

**Hopper:** [jump-jet static] Go, Danny. Hit 'em—what? [sounds of a hard landing] Nice shooting, Danny-boy...aced that weapon of his in one shot!

**Danny-boy:** I didn't even hit him, Willa. Looked like he tried to take a shot at you and his arm just blew!

**Hopper:** That's all we need, Danny, let's get the bastard.

There was more to the transcript, but that's the important part. Captain Ford and Lieutenant Filla were able to finish off the Mad Cat with help sent in from Base One, but even digging through the salvage they weren't able to figure out exactly what the weapon was that had cored Anderson's Catapult and Roberts' Jackalope, but its detonation suggests that it wasn't quite ready for battlefield use. She did mention that one piece she found had the legend "R.I.S.C." on it.

## 26 December 3135

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### ***Hyppo, Augustine, Prefecture VII***

I've lost about everything. I've got my gun, but I left most everything else at my hotel. I'm sure they've got it all by now. Plenty for them to play with.

I saw Jenkins—saw him! During one of my stakeouts of Riktofven's offices. Thing is, he isn't with Riktofven. He was part of an entourage from the Marik-Stewart Commonwealth! It wasn't a plot by the senator to kidnap me—it was a plot to get information to use against the senator. Dammit, they didn't need to kidnap me—if I had known they wanted to bring down Riktofven, I would've helped gladly! Free of charge!

But we're past that now. Jenkins saw me, too, and he knew. He knew right off who I was and what I had come for. He made a call, got the local authorities on me almost instantly, with his people close behind. So I'm on the run for now.

Maybe, when I'm done with Jenkins, I'll let them catch me. I could use the rest.

## 27 December 3135

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### **War Correspondent's Report Freedom Reigns on Laiaka**

*by Brandon Schleissberg*

LAIKA—Today was a good day for the citizens of Laiaka, as they were delivered from the faltering domination of The Republic of the Sphere and welcomed with open arms into the Lyran Commonwealth. Units of the Lyran Armed Forces landed at a spaceport deserted by retreating units of the outgunned and outnumbered planetary militia, which has been reduced to little more than pirates by the retreat of The Republic. After securing the capital, the brave soldiers of the 4th Donegal Guards saw to the welfare of the citizens, restoring public utilities and services long since abandoned.

As the men and women of the 4th Donegal mingled with the populace, handing out candy and chocolate from their rations, bursts of the House Steiner anthem broke out throughout the crowd. Women threw flowers and kisses from balconies as the Lyran troops paraded through town. I spoke with one resident, who said that her family was of Lyran descent, and she was exceptionally glad to see Laiakabrought into the Lyran Commonwealth. She mentioned that her neighbors had never treated her the same as they had one another, and she believed that it had been because of her ancestry. Now that the Donegal Guards were here, however, she was sure that they would treat her better.

It was not all joy and parades for the soldiers of the 4th Donegal Guards, however, as they were soon drawn up outside the city to face an incursion from the rogue militia units. I managed to get a moment before the attack to speak with Leutnant Joachim Stueben, a commander of a lance of armored cavalry. Leutnant Stueben, originally from Donegal himself, was proud to be serving with the Guards. He'd seen action on Skye and several other worlds, and was not particularly worried about the battle to come. He suggested that I find a nice vantage point to watch the battle, because it was sure to be over quickly.

Taking his advice, I found myself on the balcony of a high-rise hotel at the edge of the spaceport, overlooking a series of lightly wooded hills between the militia forces and the spaceport itself. Although they had declined to defend against the Donegal drop, it appeared that they were going to make an attempt to retake the spaceport now that the brave Lyran forces were arrayed and ready for battle. I thought that a rather sporting tactic of the militia commander, if not particularly sound militarily. Keeping an eye on Leutnant Stueben's lance, I watched as the Donegal Guards went out to meet them.

The lieutenant's prediction was quite accurate. The militia assault was lightning fast, and it forced the Donegal Guards backward at first, moving the battle into the warehouses just below my vantage point. I then saw Leutnant Stueben's Kinnol tank rush forward at the head of a flying column of vehicles, crashing into the militia's line and pushing it back. With mighty BattleMechs backing them up, Leutnant Stueben's lance first blunted the militia attack, and then drove it into the hills.

It was a proud day for Lyran arms, and for Leutnant Stueben and his men in particular. They were greeted with cheers once more as they entered the city, secure in the fact that they had driven the raiding militia off into the hinterlands.

## 29 December 3135

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I picked up this rot over near Oliver. I didn't actually touch down there, but it was all over the boards on several nearby planets. I'll let you read it yourself:

Citizens of Oliver and all neighboring systems: The Republic of the Sphere has abandoned you! Jonah Levin has betrayed the dream of Devlin Stone, and has fled before the unrest rocking the Inner Sphere. The Armed Forces of The Republic of the Sphere have retreated into their pathetic Fortress and will not come out to protect you.

Piracy is on the rise, with raiders striking settlements, DropShips, and even going so far as to interrupt the JumpShip traffic that is critical to planetary survival (because The Republic failed to protect the HPG grid so spectacularly). These marauding pillagers are not the only threat that The Republic has failed to protect its citizens from, however; splinter factions like the Dragon's Fury, Swordsworn, and Stormhammers have plagued The Republic, paving the way for the Great Houses of the Inner Sphere to thrust their talons deep into the faltering Republic of the Sphere.

This is a dark time to be alive, but there is hope among the stars! The Universal Brotherhood of Planets will protect those who join its ranks. The people of Oliver have overthrown their corrupt government and nobly dedicated themselves to returning space about them to a state of peace and tranquility. Join the citizens of Oliver and the Universal Brotherhood of Planets in looking out for those who really matter: the men and women living amid the turmoil and wreckage of the death of a decadent state.

For those who make their illicit living terrorizing honest people across the galaxy, be warned: The Universal Brotherhood of Planets will not stand for your war-mongering ways, and if you show yourselves within our sphere of influence, you will be destroyed.

A little while after I spotted this, I noticed the following article in a newsfax on another planet nearby—pretty funny if you ask me, but no less than the so-called Universal Brotherhood deserved.

### **UBP Put Down on Oliver**

*by Joseph Schow*

The self-proclaimed Universal Brotherhood of Planets was brought crashing down on Oliver a week ago. Despite their high-minded claims, they apparently knew little of actual government, and when city utilities started to fail across the planet, the remnants of the militia rose up against them with the support of the populace. After several sharp skirmishes, the leaders of the UBP were captured and imprisoned, and the governor and legate were returned to office. There is no word yet as to whether faltering public services have been reinstated.

**30 December 3135**

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***Hyppo, Augustine, Prefecture VII***

It wasn't . . . satisfying. It was necessary, I guess. But it didn't feel good. Didn't set things right.

I'll get off for it. I saw to that quickly. Once I knew Riktofen's people weren't the ones after me, I let them know what I knew and told them what I was willing to do for them. They're not the most scrupulous people in the Inner Sphere, so they didn't have a problem with my plan. Plus, I finally pulled some rank. The Republic may not be much anymore, but being a knight still carries weight. We worked out a deal.

Maybe I should have drawn it out more. Maybe that would have been more satisfying. I don't know. But he was expecting that, probably, guarding against it. That sort of move—taking him to torture him like he tortured me—is easier to defend. A bullet to the heart from half a kilometer away is tougher. I hope he held on for a few seconds after I got him. I hope he held on long enough to know.

**19 January 3135**

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Well, I guess I should start with the basics. I'm Evan Kaiple, MechWarrior in the Republican Armed Forces. You might think it's a glamorous job, but really it's not much different from driving a LoaderMech—I should know, I used to do that, too. Captain Pozzi sent a communique down through the ranks that talked about what can and can't be written in a personal journal; I didn't even know we could have journals. I'm not much of a writer, but what the hell: I might as well try my hand at it.



## 21 January 3135

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### ***Pittston, Sheratan, Prefecture IV***

Why won't these bleeding protestors calm down? It's over. The winners have won, the losers have lost; they should all just go on with their lives. Every day it's the same thing, pounding up and down the streets in formation, heads turning with our every move, and the looks they're giving us are becoming more and more hostile. Sometimes I think they're finally going to break down and heave something at us, but mostly I think they're just going to sulk for the rest of their lives.

I wish I could get away with a little misstep, a little trip. You know, stumble for a second, regain my balance, then oops – find a squashed protestor under my big metal foot. That would be great.

## 25 January 3135

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### *Valis City, Fletcher, Prefecture IV*

I was watching some old Solaris VII reruns when they broke in for this nonsense. Honestly, what is the Republic coming to?

Transcript of Channel 34 Emergency News Broadcast:

**Katie Smith:** We interrupt this broadcast of the 3024 Solaris VII Championships with this breaking news; riots have broken out in the streets of Valis City as citizens react to a rumor apparently started at the spaceport that Capellan DropShips had been detected entering the system. Channel 34 News has thus far been unable to find anyone who can confirm or deny the validity of this rumor, but we are currently working on getting you that information. For a look at the situation on the street, April O'Shaughn is live in downtown Valis City.

**April O'Shaughn:** Thank you Katie. Valis City is in flames tonight, under a leaden sky and despite the steady drizzle attempting to smother the fires. The VCPD has been completely overwhelmed, and the riots continue unabated.

**KS:** There have been reports that Legate Fouche intends to declare martial law to regain control of the city. Have you seen any evidence that he may have mobilized the militia, April?

**AO:** Not yet, Katie. Right now the only law in Valis City is the strong take from the weak.

**KS:** [KS looks off screen.] April, I've just been informed that Legate Fouche has indeed declared martial law, and that Battle Armored militia have been sighted in the city.

**AO:** I haven't seen any indications of Battle Armor—wait, I believe that there is a squad of Fenrir Battle Armor at Woodruff and 3rd. Yes, that is Fenrir Battle Armor, and they are moving up 3rd towards a concentration of rioters. [camera pans, showing 5 Fenrir suits, the suits fire their machine guns] They're firing, Katie! The militia appears to be firing over the heads of the rioters. [The camera feed ends.]

**KS:** April? Are you there April? [KS looks off screen] I've just been informed that April O'Shaughn has been forced to relocate to another portion of the city. Neither she nor her camerawoman were harmed. Our own Brian Fosse is live in the control tower at the Legate Worley Memorial Spaceport just outside Valis City. Brian...

**Brian Fosse:** I'm here Katie.

**KS:** Brian, we've heard that the riots now raging in the streets of Valis City were sparked by rumors that there is a force of Capellan Confederation DropShips planet-bound, have you heard anything more about this?

**BF:** No Katie, we haven't heard anything further yet. To recap: we have been told that one or more JumpShips recently entered the system, and several DropShips have started towards Fletcher. When she was unable to contact the DropShips, one of the techs mentioned that she thought the DropShips might match the signatures of Capellan Confederation Union-class DropShips. Apparently, another tech contacted family in Valis City, worried that the Capellans might use nuclear weapons as they apparently did on Acamar only a short time— [unintelligible voice from off-camera] just a moment Katie... [BF turns to the window, the camera follows] I believe that something is moving at the spaceport gate. Could the Capellan Confederation have somehow landed forces on Fletcher without our systems spotting them?

**KS:** Brian, what is it that you see?

**BF:** Katie, given the blackout conditions, it is hard to be sure, but it looks as if a column of armored vehicles is approaching the spaceport's main gate. They're coming closer now... [unintelligible voices off-camera] I can see their insignia now, and I've just been told that this is a force of the Fletcher Militia, sent by Legate Fouche to ensure that the spaceport is not harmed by the rioters.

**KS:** That's certainly good news, Brian. We're now getting a live feed from the Legate's office.

**Legate David Fouche:** Citizens of Fletcher. Let me assure you that the DropShips now approaching Fletcher are not Capellan Confederation forces. We have just received radio communication from the DropShips, and they are the scheduled re-supply convoy coming in from New Home, arriving a day earlier than expected. There is no Capellan invasion force, and there is no threat. Governor Wolfe and I have declared martial law until these riots have ceased, but once they have been stopped, Valis City will return to normal operation.

**KS:** What a relief. We now return you to the exciting 3024 Solaris VII Championships, but we'll be sure to break in with further news updates.

**28 January 3135**

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***Pittston, Sheratan, Prefecture IV***

I had a thought. Maybe they're not going away. Maybe this isn't just the usual whining of the losers – these people seem really upset about something, and it's more than just who holds what office.

And I don't think they're really mad about Exarch-elect Levin. No one seems to really dislike him. But they're all just – mad. Really, really mad. About something. And I think they're going to keep being mad for a while, and I think each time they're going to see me they're going to forget about whatever it is they're mad about and think they're mad at me.

They don't want to get mad at me. I'm bigger than they are – at least, my Dasher is. They may be meaner, but I'm bigger.

## 31 January 3135

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### ***Pittston, Sheratan, Prefecture IV***

It's as bad as I thought. Worse, even. They're still there, and they're not just milling around anymore. They're getting organized. They're planning something, and none of us has any doubt who they're planning it against.

I thought maybe it's a good time to find out just who they are. I asked around, but either no one knows or no one's saying. Capt. Pozzi's given his "It's not your place to ask questions" speech so many times that he just has to give the first two words and most of us shut up. But I don't think he knows, either. He seems just as confused as we are about why they're out there every day and what they want.

We're going to find out soon.

## 02 February 3135

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### ***Pittston, Sheratan, Prefecture IV***

It finally got bad. I can't write too much here – Capt. Pozzi's paranoia about secure communications extends even to personal journals (and if they're as insecure as he thinks they are, that little crack will have me up for disciplinary action pretty quickly).

Even if I was allowed to, though, I could barely say what's going on. The smoke, the rioting, the shouting – it's all too confusing. I try to piece it together, but the memories drift apart in my head.

But one thing is clear, the thing that keeps pushing the other images away: The boom of their artillery, the shells slamming into concrete and metal. They're awfully heavy. They're beyond anything a simple group of dissidents could get.

These aren't just dissidents. Someone's behind them, someone's arming them, and whoever it is has deep pockets and access to some damn good arms dealers.

## 07 February 3135

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### *Jaynesville, Sheratan, Prefecture IV*

These days, it seems that even the fiction is against us. Case in point:

#### ***Striking the Sword: State-Sponsored Propaganda or Just Wishful Thinking?***

*by Eugene Snyder*

*Striking the Sword's* complex plotline and attention to detail almost disguise the rabidly pro-Marik propaganda in this holovid out of the Oriente Protectorate. Set in 3056, *Striking the Sword* ostensibly explores the joint action by the Free Worlds League and the Capellan Confederation against the Davion half of the Federated Commonwealth. In reality, however, this government-sponsored film does everything short of call for another alliance between the remnants of House Marik and the Capellan Confederation, this time against The Republic of the Sphere.

Although the action of the movie itself takes place long before The Republic came into being, *Striking the Sword* clearly connects The Republic with the old Federated Commonwealth in its opening narration: "Long before The Republic of the Sphere stood astride ancient Terra and the center of the Inner Sphere, another power held humanity's home world in its iron grasp: the Federated Commonwealth, under the control of the late Victor Steiner-Davion." No one ever said that propaganda had to be subtle.

After associating The Republic with the FedCom, *Striking the Sword* then goes on to vilify the Commonwealth, painting then-Prince-Archon Victory Steiner-Davion as an evil man concerned with nothing more than continuing his personal vendetta against the Clans, and portraying the AFFS as brutal conquerors with no thought to human decency. At the same time, *Striking the Sword* provides a most flattering picture of Chancellor Sun-Tzu Liao of the Capellan Confederation, ignoring his fits of madness entirely and showing him as a well-loved and benevolent ruler. Beyond these inaccuracies, the real thrust of the holovid is the power and majesty of House Marik and the old Free Worlds League.

Although each member of House Marik to grace the screen is always righteous, always respected, and always resolute in his or her desire to see honor done, Captain-General Thomas Marik is portrayed as especially sanctified. *Striking the Sword* does everything possible to canonize the Captain-General, pointing toward his rule of the Free Worlds League as a golden era in the history of the region. The scions of noble houses are the not only people the creators of *Striking the Sword* shower with acclaim; the members of the Free Worlds League and Capellan Confederation Armed Forces who merit holo-time are shown as courageous, honorable, and skilled combatants who triumph against incredible odds time and again.

Although the battle scenes shown in *Striking the Sword* are certainly well done, it is in the arena of political intrigue that the holovid's writers really shine. The unlikely alliance between the free-thinking people of the Free Worlds League and the tradition-bound Capellan Confederation is shown as both plausible and logical. The tagline of the movie, "In times of great strife, even the most unlikely allies must stand together," speaks to this, while simultaneously suggesting that perhaps it is again time for an alliance between House Liao and House Marik.

Given the content and message of *Striking the Sword*, it is not surprising that the film is getting little exposure in The Republic of the Sphere, but extremely wide and aggressive distribution in the Capellan Confederation and the former Free Worlds League. Although I thought that the holovid itself was well written and produced, I couldn't help feeling like I was being fed a revisionist history designed only to ram home a political message.

2 out of 4 stars

**09 February 3135**

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***Pittston, Sheratan, Prefecture IV***

Those rats are on the run.

Okay, okay, that's harsh. Maybe they've got a real beef, maybe someone, somewhere, screwed them over really bad, so that's why they're lashing out. But to be honest, I don't care. I didn't do anything to them, so I don't feel like having much sympathy when they try to bring me down. So what I'm saying is, I guess it's possible that they may not really be rats, but I'm going to keep thinking of them as rats as long as I'm on this stupid planet.

Anyway, without writing anything that'll get Capt. Pozzi's shorts in a knot, I don't think they'll be able to mount any kind of organized strike for a while. Their morale, along with a number of their bones, is broken. Things should be calm here for a little.

Which means, of course, that the powers that be are probably already looking to ship me somewhere else.

**14 February 3135**

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***Republic JumpShip Stone's Arm  
Prefecture IV***

It was a joke! I swear!

I guess this is what I get. I toss off a stupid joke about shipping out of Sheratan last time I sat down in front of this thing, and what do you know, my orders to leave come the next day.

I don't know our destination yet. COs treat information like parents treat candy. Don't tell the grunts too much! They'll just get all hyper with knowledge! Best to keep 'em ignorant and calm!

There's guesses, though, mainly from people catching a glimpse at navigating computers. Looks like Prefecture V. I'm hoping something on the border—I'd much prefer intimidating some Cappies to fighting with people who are supposed to be fellow citizens.



## 18 February 3135

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### ***Prefecture V***

#### ***Republic JumpShip Stone's Arm***

Three fist fights today, plus five yelling matches where the parties involved were separated before things got worse. I swear, transit can be way more dangerous than combat—at least when I'm on the ground, I've got a few tons of metal surrounding me. Here, someone decides to take a pop at me, there's nothing between my jaw and their fist to stop them.

I've kept a low profile so far, so no one's picked any fights with me. We should be on planet in a few days (though we still don't know what planet it'll be), then maybe we can focus on beating bad guys instead of each other.

Which bad guys will we be beating on? Dunno. But I'm sure we'll find some—Republic's full of 'em these days.

## 22 February 3135

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Why do I get mail that isn't meant for me? Emil? Evan? How hard is it?

Contact Report

February 22, 3135

Emil,

I've exhausted my resources looking for Tucker Harwell. He has literally vanished. ComStar went to considerable expense to make it so.

What concerns me the most is not so much that Tucker disappeared, but how he disappeared. A new Aurora-class DropShip appeared over us on Wyatt and dropped brand-new 'Mechs, including a design I'd never seen before.

Com Guards for Christ's sake. They supposedly died out in the Jihad's final days or disbanded. This is a very startling development for The Republic. A damnable one at that, if you don't mind me saying.

Should they decide to move against us on Terra, we'd be hard pressed to stop them. You need to make sure the exarch changes the locks; you know they may well have the keys.

As I stated earlier, my options had run out; that is, until I received a strange message via HPG today. I have no clue as to where the message originated or who sent it. Here is the message in its entirety:

Transmission Code: Alpha Level; Receipt Required  
Date: January 28, 3136  
To: Reo Jones  
From: The Maestro Music Company  
RE: Music

Reo,

Your May 22, 3135, order has been shipped from Wyatt. The shipping of harmonious chants has experienced unanticipated delays during transit, so we apologize that we have no estimated time of arrival.

To compensate you for this inconvenience, please accept these two paid reservations for dinner at Schuler's restaurant in Kinross.

As soon as we know when your shipment will arrive, we will let you know.

Sincerely,

Thomas Heisenberg  
MMC Customer Service Director

This message makes no sense to me. I didn't order any music while on Wyatt, especially harmonious chants. Wait...that's it!

I had never heard of chants of this nature until I met Tucker Harwell. We had dinner a few times a week at Schuler's after he'd gotten off work. It was almost like clockwork.

The date proves that I didn't order anything. I was fighting north of Kinross with Knight-Errant Alexi Holt at the Crater Lakes mining facility.

It was him. I don't know where Tucker sent the message from; only he would've known about the harmonic chants and the restaurant. But this message must be his way of telling me he is doing fine and will get in touch with me soon.

Tucker is a very important young man with special talents. I will double my efforts to locate him. He alone holds the key to reactivating the HPGs.

ComStar placed him in protective custody – more like kidnapped him – and has refused to release where he's being "guarded." You may want to ask the exarch to pressure the primus into revealing where he is.

Respectfully,

Reo Jones

## 23 February 3135

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### ***Lorelei, Styk, Prefecture V***

I do not question my orders. I'm a good soldier. An efficient military depends on all its parts working together, responding instantly to orders. We do not question orders.

Ah, screw it.

WHAT AM I DOING ON STYK?

If I made a list of all the planets in The Republic, ordered by which most needs troops, I think maybe I'd rank Styk number 243. It's not a real trouble spot. It's got a 'Mech factory, sure, but it's not like Defiance or anything. That planet got the crap kicked out of it during the Jihad and never recovered. And for some reason, I'm being assigned to protect Styk, specifically Tao MechWorks. FROM WHAT?

Oops, sorry – a good soldier doesn't question orders. . .

## 28 February 3135

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### *Lorelei, Styk, Prefecture V*

I've calmed down a little. I had some time to catch up on the local news and found out we may have a purpose here after all. We might not be in the thick of things, but we're not far off. At least, not as far off as I thought.

Some reporter named Jacquie Blitzer on New Aragon wrote about some problems there, and her report got picked up on Styk. She's got people talking. She tries to play things off like they're not that big of a deal, but then she says there's a couple of paladins over there. And you don't get one of them, let alone more than one, unless something serious is happening.

I don't know much, but I know this: when bad stuff's happening, keep a close eye on your weapons. So we're watching the factory here in case things take a wrong turn there. Makes sense, and I kind of feel bad about getting mad. Of course, if the brass would just tell us stuff once in a while . . .

## 01 March 3135

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### ***Valis City, Fletcher, Prefecture III***

And now this. What have we come to?

Ares Conventions Abandoned on Acamar?

Information coming out of the Capellan-held world of Acamar suggests that perhaps the Capellan Confederation has abandoned the long-standing Ares Conventions in its latest thrusts against The Republic of the Sphere. Though the details are sketchy at this point, sources indicate that House Liao military forces may have used a nuclear weapon in the taking of Acamar. Not since the devastation created by the World of Blake Jihad have such terrible weapons of mass destruction been used. First-hand accounts of the incident have been filed by the passengers and crew of the DropShip *Junebug*, which lifted from Acamar during the invasion and caught the last JumpShip out of the system.

*Junebug's* captain, Marcus Freeman, told authorities here on Fletcher that he saw a "bright flash" light up the sky over Acamar's capital city, and that the shock wave from the explosion "knocked the [*Junebug*] around somethin' fierce even 50 clicks up." Several of the bridge crew of the *Junebug* reported seeing a "towering cloud" rise over the city and a flare of heat splash across the icy landscape as the DropShip sped toward the outer atmosphere. None of the crew had ever witnessed a nuclear explosion, but the progression of events seemed to match historical accounts of such explosions.

Chian Le-Sing was at the communications console on the *Junebug* when the alleged nuclear blast occurred. He had been monitoring radio traffic from the forces fighting around the spaceport as the *Junebug* prepped for launch and lifted out of the spaceport. Le-Sing told the Valis City Sentinel that reports stated that a Capellan push toward the gates of the spaceport had just been halted by the courageous militia defenders, and that a House Liao *Phoenix Hawk* had just fallen in front of the gates when the defenders reported a small truck racing from the Capellan lines toward the gate as the rest of the defeated assault force fell back. In the next instant, Le-Sing said, his communications console exploded in a flood of static and his fellow crewmembers reported seeing the fireball on the ship's screens.

While many would, of course, claim that the explosion was merely the containment field protecting the *Phoenix Hawk's* fusion reactor failing, there is evidence to the contrary. Not only is there the vehicle rushing toward the gate immediately prior to the explosion to consider, but those readings that could be recovered from the damaged sensors of the *Junebug* indicate that the detonation was of a higher magnitude that would be expected from the destruction of a medium BattleMech such as a *Phoenix Hawk*.

Since the forces of House Liao have taken Acamar and blocked direct traffic to and from the planet, further information has been unavailable. It seems likely, however, that the Capellans have chosen to disregard the Ares Conventions and have shown themselves willing to use nuclear weapons. What does this incident mean for the future of The Republic's struggle against the Capellan Confederation? If the CapCon was willing to use a nuclear weapon to assure their control of Acamar, it is only a matter of time before they break the Ares Conventions again to further their drive toward the heart of The Republic of the Sphere—most likely directly through Fletcher, despite Legate Fouche's insistence that there is no danger.

**04 March 3135**

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***Lorelei, Styk, Prefecture V***

No new word from New Aragon, no new activity here. Brass tries to keep us occupied through constant drills, because nothing keeps the troops happier or more alert than doing the same stuff over and over.

I've been lobbying for a chance to go on a wide patrol, get a chance to put the Dasher into a full run. Her legs need a good stretch, a good workout. I can feel it. Her guns need some exercise, too, but so far unfriendlies are keeping their distance. They probably heard I'm here and wanna stay away from me. Who would blame 'em?

Ah, that's why I need to get into battle—tough to build a fearsome reputation when you're sitting on the sidelines. I've found myself longing for the chance to stomp on some Sheratan dissidents again. Good times.

**09 March 3135**

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***Lorelei, Styk, Prefecture V***

It's the military life. You sit around not doing much, you get antsy for action, and then when the prospect of action raises its murderous head, you say "Um . . . maybe sitting around isn't so bad."

I was right: Things in this Prefecture aren't quite as minor as Blitzzer thought. She's got another report out, and not only do things on New Aragon look dicey, but there are some questions about what's happening on St. Andre, which is even closer to Styk than New Aragon is. Looks like the Cappies are lining up plenty of troops, mercs, and even Canopians. You can bet your life they're not gathering them so that they can sit around. They're going to move, and it won't take them long to think about coming here: 'Mech factories have a way of drawing attention.

## 10 March 3135

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Here's the editorial by Jacquie Blitzer that I mentioned yesterday.

### **The Sad State of New Aragon by Jacquie Blitzer**

February 15, 3135 (New Aragon) – Today I walked through the desolation left behind by attacking Capellan forces – through what was once the industrial sector of Jahrman, the second-largest city in Tandoh province.

The fires were out, but I still felt the residual heat trapped in the cracked pavement and the cinderblock walls of a nearby transit station. Black ash drifted against the sides of burned-out buildings like an unnatural snow, and it scattered away from each footstep. The taste of scorched metal in the air was acrid and bitter, and it proved to be a constant companion each time I licked my lips, which was often.

It's a nervous gesture, I admit. One which tempted me to take Captain Cliff Montgomery (of the Fifth Triarii Protectors) up on his offer of a military-issue breathing mask. His unarmored infantry, which patrolled the recent battlefield, were kind enough to monitor but not crowd me as I availed myself of my press credentials. Their hoverjeep trailed at a respectful distance, kicking out dark plumes of ash and a halo of debris, their weapons pointed skyward. It was if they alone warded off the return of the Capellan military. But the Confederation soldiers would not be back: There was nothing left for them here.

By all reports (because I missed the actual battle), it took an armored column of McCarron's Armored Cavalry and a company from the Fifth Triarii only 24 hours to reduce Jahrman's industrial center to this husk. It took the local civilian authority two additional days to extinguish the fires. Another half-day before outside press was allowed on the scene. Most of my colleagues took one look at the destruction and went quickly on their way. "The next stop on our 'tour,'" they said. But I stayed. As I walked the fire-blistered streets, a single, selfish thought kept rearing its head:

Today my personal circulation dropped by 20 percent.

This might seem a petty thing to worry about, with the Capellan war machine hammering at New Aragon and many of the surrounding worlds in Prefecture V. With the Liao system fallen and dark. With tidings from Terra looking as bleak as we've seen since the loss of Devlin Stone.

Twenty percent fewer stations, fewer zines, and fewer e-sites running this editorial.

Except that it's not petty. It's a sign of New Aragon's deepening, sad state.

The New Aragon News Hour (NANH) was the first media outlet to quit returning phone calls, which was not a large surprise. NANH was also the first to adopt a pro-Capellan format, putting a political spin on the latest war news such as might have come from Sian itself, straight from the offices of the Maskirovka. Somehow, I don't think they'll be covering the destruction I visited today.

But it's more than that. More than NANH leading a charge of anti-Republican news agencies and catering to the mob mentality of hard-line Capellan sentiment. You can see those same divisive lines with the rise of Dynasty Party leader Lord Hu Kahn Sei, who leads the call for a no-confidence vote regarding World Governor Marilou Grogan. With the way Legate Camilo Gutierrez has come under political attack by Paladins Anders Kessel and David McKinnon (possibly the first time those two men have been on the same side of any issue in their professional lives).

So while the news agencies engage in polarization, preaching to the choir the one side of the conflict it wants to hear, expect to see Governor Grogan relieve our recalcitrant legate of all responsibility – a political act likely to be her last. Expect martial law to be handed down by Exarch Levin, placing the Paladins in local control of New Aragon. Expect that no other agency will bother to report on the destruction of Jahrman's industry, or on the total cost of this ongoing conflict.

I can still taste the ash on my lips. And, yes, I'm nervous. Nervous that when historians get around to us in the next decade, their judgment, based on reports such as this one, will bear out my own fear. That, like Nero, our politicians and paladins merely fiddled around.

While The Republic burned.



**14 March 3135**

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***Lorelei, Styk, Prefecture V***

A little weapons fire today, but I don't know who the target was. I got 'em good, but so did a couple of other guys running security with me. Two PPC rounds and a laser hit the hovercar at the same time, so there wasn't much to sift through once the smoke cleared.

We don't have any idea who they were, what they were up to, or even if they were armed. They crossed a line they shouldn't have, and it ended badly for 'em. They didn't respond to any of our warnings – they just kept motoring toward the factory.

They're gone. And if they really were up to something, I figure we either intimidated the people they were working with or made 'em madder than ever. I'm sure we'll find out which pretty soon.

## 15 March 3135

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### ***Procyon, Prefecture X***

*Posts to the Mercenary Posting electronic board*

**Thread:** The Clans/Rumor Mill/Clan Snow Raven Reactivating WarShips

**Poster:** Coldest\_Raven\_432 I just got word that Clan Snow Raven has begun taking its WarShip fleet out of the mothballs. I can't tell you who my source is, but I can tell you that the tip-off's solid. The Raven Alliance is far enough away that they probably aren't heading for Terra, but it's certain that they're rearming and refitting all the WarShips that they decommissioned at the end of the Jihad. Not sure what they might be heading for, but if Snow Raven's picking up where they left off, you can bet that some of the other Clans are, too.

**Poster:** Lancer\_Jockey I gotta say you're crying Wolf on this one. Snow Raven's thinking has changed from a Clan-oriented one to a more diplomatic, Machiavellian one. If they were going to redeploy their WarShip fleet, they'd make dang sure that no one knew about it until they were ready to strike.

**Poster:** FistOfSkye But what if making a big deal out of recommissioning these WarShips is the means to an end? Khan McKenna could make a pretty big splash just by announcing she was taking her WarShips out of storage. What would the FedCom do if they knew that there was a whole fleet of WarShips sitting just outside their borders? Imagine the FedCom hemmed in on four sides by The Republic, the Cappies, the Snakes, and the biggest fleet of WarShips since the Star League days. It sends shivers down my spine just thinking about the Davion bastards stuck in a spot like that.

**Poster:** victorlives i have to agree with lj on this one. there's no way mckenna'd want to set herself up as such a huge target for the fedcom. if this info is legit (sorry cr432, can't take anything for granted anymore), then there's got to be some angle that mckenna's working. that lady's way too twisty to put up such flags. and you better be watching out, fos, some of us on the board happen to be fedcom.

**Poster:** FistOfSkye I'm so scared, victorlives. Someone who can't even bother themselves to use capitals is going to be mad at me for insulting the sun-blind idiots of the Federated Commonwealth?

**Poster:** Coldest\_Raven\_432 I can assure you that my info's solid, victorlives. My data's as straight from the horse's mouth as it gets without going nose-to-nose with Khan McKenna, and this pal o' mine's never been wrong about anything like this before. Either McKenna's finally slipped up, or she's planning something much bigger than anyone could guess. As for threats, just remember FistOfSkye, just because victorlives can't type, doesn't mean he can't fight.

**Poster:** CrAzYmAn So what's McKenna's move gonna be, Coldest? Is she gonna go after the FedCom, or is she gonna jump somewhere else? Way I see it, she's gotta be crazy to take on the FedCom, even if it ain't quite what it used to be. Even with the honkin' Snow Raven fleet, the Raven Alliance couldn't take mucha the FedCom. They just don't have enough ground pounders, even with their ProtoMechs.

**Poster:** Coldest\_Raven\_432 Can't say that I know, Crazy. All I know is that work could get a little bit more interesting out by the Raven Alliance real soon, especially if your company's got serious aerospace assets.

**18 March 3135**

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***DropShip Heart of Stone, Prefecture V***

On the move again. Not that anything's really been settled on Styk, but it sounds like there's going to be more noise in other places first. Blitzer's filed another report, and New Aragon's looking like it's deeper and deeper in it every day. I hope that's where we're going, but right now we could pick just about any planet in The Republic and find a reason to be there. I think command's just trying to stay one step ahead of the game, anticipating trouble spots and getting troops there before anything happens, instead of just reacting and running after things have already blown up.

It's an easier strategy when you've got only one, or maybe two, opponents to deal with. When you've got as many as we have – damn, it makes your head buzz.

## 23 March 3135

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### *JumpShip Hercules X, Prefecture VI*

More Jacquie Blitzer, dated last week. (Yeah, I read her a lot. So what? If she can tell me who's going to be trying to decapitate me tomorrow, more power to her.) She's got guts, no question, but I don't think she's being smart. It's like seeing a hungry wolf or two wandering in the woods and thinking, "Wolves, huh? Better find out where all the rest of the wolves are," and then go running toward their cave.

It's okay to root out the wolves when you're in the warm embrace of your favorite 'Mech, but going in unarmed isn't smart unless you're really eager to find out what it feels like to be eaten.

Anyway, I've had time to think about this because we're not anywhere yet. But Captain Pozzi's pacing all over the ship, looking antsy. I think that when we land, we won't be waiting for something to happen, like on Styk. Whatever it is will happen fast.

## 28 March 3135

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### ***DropShip Liberty, Prefecture VI***

I don't like this. At all. I've spent some extra time on the cyberterminal during this transit, and I'm starting to understand why so many commanders like to limit cyberterminal access. I don't like what I'm finding out. I don't like it at all.

Oh, wait. I just said that.

I'm still piecing this all together, but here's the first thing that really jumped out at me: We shipped off Styk on March 17 – the day after some news outlets started reporting rumors that Jacob Bannson had married a high-ranking Cappie. Kind of blows his supposed neutrality to hell, doesn't it? Is there a tie between this news and our departure? Is Bannson going to buy Tao and put it back into operation for the Cappies?

I don't know. It could just be baseless speculation. But the fact that I know enough to even ask these questions bothers me to no end.

**30 March 3135**

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***Outside Hearth, Elnath, Prefecture VI***

This is not a joke. Okay? I don't care what the date is. This is not a joke.

No more waiting for action to find us. We landed right on it. Dropped down firing, lasers from our aerial support darting among us as we fell. Never done that before. Never understood how you can feel so powerful and so vulnerable at the same time. It's great to rain hell down on the enemy until you remember that you can't move side to side, so you've gotta fire even more to keep anyone from drawing a bead on you, and at least you can get away with it because you're not building up any heat through movement. So you just let loose with everything you have, but then you land, and all the bad guys aren't dead, and you're already low on ammo. And the battle's just beginning. That's no good.

But we survived the day, and we're getting some shut-eye while we can. The wind never stops howling over the ice. We'll fight again in the morning—maybe sooner.

**01 April 3135**

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***Outside Hearth, Elnath, Prefecture VI***

Ice cap? Solid ground? Crunches. Crunches beneath our feet. But no one breaks through . . . yet. At least, I haven't seen anyone break through. One of them, the bad guys, should break through. Fall away.

Think it's an ice cap. How deep? How deep does it go? How deep?

Deep. Deep deep deep deep. They keep coming. Cappies, mercs, yeah. Local militia? Dunno. Maybe. Always liked Cappies here. But whomever, they've got lots. Keep throwing them at us. Keep throwing.

Gotta go. Sleep? I laugh at sleep. I mean they laugh at sleep. What I mean is, no one lets me have any.

## 05 April 3135

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In an effort to keep this particular conflict from consuming my entire existence, I've been scoping out some of the most recent news, this time from the Associated Stellar Press.

### Open Debate on Poznan

Yesterday afternoon, three Poznan senators called for an open debate to discuss the merits of the [possible] return of House Liao and the Capellan Confederation.

"The time has come," Senator Walt Russ said, "to speak of many things. Of Capellan birth and unity. And the benefits Liao can bring." He went on for nearly 20 minutes before yielding to Senator Kay Pentar, who detailed the many advantages to be gained by declaring a temporary independence—much as nearby Styk did—in order to avoid becoming the latest battlefield.

Although many senators have long backed pan-Capellan-unity reforms, such as recognizing holidays and events that support the Asian heritage of so many Poznan residents, their proposals to date have fallen far short of such a dramatic—some would say treasonous—solution.

"I can't believe Russ and Pentar would even think to instigate such a discussion," Senator Clayton Poole said. Known as a staunch conservative and a pro-Republic senator, Poole led the rebuttal. "It is politics by the sword, trying to mollify a few, violent protestors who make splashy headlines by breaking the laws of The Republic, and taking political advantage of a serious, complicated issue."

Senators Russ and Pentar were quick to point out that a majority of Poznan's population are only residents, not citizens, by The Republic's strict definition. And more than two-thirds of those citizens are Republicans, meaning that many people to whom all senators are supposedly responsible are rendered voiceless. They charged Poole and his supporters with "de facto racism."

Other senators, walking a political tightrope, were quick to distance themselves from Poole's position, but they fell far short of supporting Russ and Pentar.

Senator Jillian Hap Su said, "I would like to think that the floor is always open to honest debate, whether it is started by citizen or resident. Somewhere between Senators Russ and Poole, I am certain we will find a diplomatic solution that benefits all of Poznan."

Poznan has many things to recommend it to both The Republic and the Capellan Confederation. It has recharge stations at the Zenith and Nadir jump points; it is known as a stabilizing world among local space commerce; and it possesses a strong agricultural base that can be tapped to support military needs. Daoshen Liao's military, however, has so far avoided Poznan, seemingly content to allow it to determine its own destiny. Meanwhile, there can be no doubt that its government and military Republican majorities are clamping down to avoid the same political upheaval that shook Styk and Gan Singh.

Senator Russ, however, is firmly set to embrace such a change. "Too many worlds are content to stick their heads in the sand, to hope the storm blows by. It will not. We see no assistance from Terra, which has its hands full controlling the local nobility. Do I see an advantage in Capellan stewardship? Perhaps. But I also see far greater need, at the moment, to prepare ourselves for what is becoming, day by day, a statistical probability. The Confederation has come back. House Liao rises once again, tugging at our people like the moon pulls at the ocean. And such a tide cannot be swept aside with a simple broom."



**08 April 3135**

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***Outside Hearth, Elnath, Prefecture VI***

I've been running. Running, running, running to get this thing to warm up. Can't fire weapons. Can't. Give position away. Running doesn't seem much better, so loud, leaving long tracks in the snow. But everything is so cold. Fingers would stick to controls if I didn't wear gloves. Cold lick of the metal still touches my hand, but at least they come free.

Don't know the extent of the damage. I can still move, though. That's what I know. That's what will save me. I hope. I'll keep moving. Not sleep. Keep moving. Eventually I'll find something. Someone. Hopefully, it'll be the right someones. But even if they're not, they'll be warm. God bless them, they'll be warm.

**13 April 3135**

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***Outside Hearth, Elnath, Prefecture VI***

I'm going to sleep for 24 hours if they'll let me. I can't believe I found someone. It's not my unit—they don't know if my unit still exists—but it's someone, and they don't want to kill me. And they have a place I can get warm while they work on "Yeti."

That's what I've named her. After more than a week wandering alone in the icy wastes of this damn planet, she's earned the nickname.

I'll try to get some of the story of the past 10 days in here when I can. When my mind clears. All I can really remember now is how it started—the wedge charge of the enemy that split me off from my unit. I kept trying to rejoin them, but they had to keep moving. And I kept losing contact with them, as, I assume, they kept being lost.

I hope to find them soon. I hope at least some of them are still alive.

## 19 April 3135

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These days, it's easier just to post letters, rather than send them. Kids can be so innocent. When does it start to go wrong?

Dear Mom,

I am writing this because I just have to tell somebody. Now, before you get too excited, I have not switched tracks. No, I am still working on getting my Hydraulics Specialist certification, but Academician Draeger says he might want me to double into Weapons Systems, which is so exciting, because if I cannot fire the guns, at least I can get close to them anyway!

But even with the double-up, for which Draeger is doing all the paperwork, our tracks are being sped up. Remember Gary? He was with me in Intermediate Mechanical, the one who took me out to dinner a few times. He went off to do Internal Combustion, but now he is in my new Electricals classes. We are working as study partners because he is the only other person I know in the class. I now study from 08:00 hours straight through to 22:00. And that does not include our Physical Conditioning sessions every morning. So I barely have time to eat breakfast and lunch. I never really ate dinner, so I am not worried.

So now we are in class for 12 hours, and we get only half a day free now instead of a full day out of every seven. Homework is very different now, too. I do not do much book study anymore, and that helps me greatly, but now we work on the kinds of things that I thought they were holding for finals. I actually got to work on a Cardinal Transport! It is big, Mom, bigger than I thought. You can never tell these things until you actually see them. The schematics always have the scale written on them, but that means nothing until you stand there, looking at the machine face-to-face.

You remember how you and Dad thought it would be a better idea for me to go into the science track at school? I knew you were wrong then, and I definitely know you were wrong now. This is amazing work. These machines are beautiful, and though I am not sure why we are being accelerated (I do not know if anyone else is being accelerated), something big is in the air. Even our commanding officers at the academy look different. Like they have stopped being angry about something. I would never say that these men and women are happy, but they seem more focused now than I have ever seen them.

The feeling is contagious. Even my three roommates, who used to complain about waking up early in the morning for Physical Conditioning, are getting into this new spirit. I really hope Draeger gets the paperwork approved. Hydraulics are useful and very important to many of the pieces of equipment we use, but Weapons Systems would be the very best. It makes me think of Granddad's sword, and how proud you were when Nicky went for training.

I am sorry I disappointed you, but I will be far more useful to the Clan where I am. I am looking into asking for a transfer into the Research and Development sections once I graduate. I have spoken with Draeger on several occasions, telling him I want to pass with honors and that I have started working on a thesis project for that purpose. He tells me that it is two years before I can declare my intent, but he seemed pleased I was thinking of these things so far in advance.

It is already 02:00 hours! I must get some sleep. I will learn the results of my midterm exams as early as tomorrow afternoon. I will, of course, post a letter to let you know how I am doing.

Forever yours,

Teresa

## 20 April 3135

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### ***Outside Hearth, Elnath, Prefecture VI***

Hell of a way to be caught up to speed. "Well, Kaiple, half of your unit's dead; most of the living are incapacitated; we're outnumbered; we can't get off planet; and, oh, by the way, the Exarch dissolved the Senate about two weeks ago."

My head's still reeling, and not just from post-concussion syndrome. I'm not (thank God) the Exarch, I don't know why he did what he did, but this feels like the end of The Republic. Not as a nation, not as a political body—we're still holding on—but as an ideal. The thing Stone set up to bring us out of the dark ages? Whatever we are now, we're not *that thing* anymore. I can't help feeling that's a terrible loss.

Not much time to ponder it, though. The Cappies have numbers, they probably know it, and they're not going to let us sit still to contemplate the state of the universe.

## 21 April 3135

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More juicy bits of “information” and innuendo flying around; I can’t tell how old some of it is. Even if it’s not all true, at least people aren’t shoving their heads into the sand.

Hey there, fair reader. If this is your first time glancing over my scattered electrons in the sky, I’m just a gal trying to make sense of the world—and to make sure that the kind of stuff that usually falls through the INN’s cracks ends up in your hot little hands anyway. Information wants to be free, sez I. So if you ever have a line into something astoundingly cool, strange, outrageous, impossible, or just plain astounding, don’t hesitate to drop me a line.

—*Rilke Spess, concerned citizen of the Republic of the Sphere*

### SCOOP-O-RAMA

The following is a supposed internal address to the Jade Falcons, attributed to Malvina Hazen. It was disseminated to us peons LONG after some talented information officer collected it, so take with a grain of salt. And no, I’m not telling you how I got my grubby little hands on it. What can I say? I got me connections.

“When I ask you where we are going, what might you answer? Terra? The Inner Sphere? Toward destiny? All reasonable answers, but very—very—shortsighted.

“We travel not to a mere place. We travel to a specific moment in history. We travel to right a grievous wrong. So close and yet so far we were those many decades ago, so close to claiming what was rightfully ours from the very start.

“Of all the Clans, we are the ones who hold closest to Kerensky’s vision, even moreso than the Wolves. We are the only ones strong enough to do so, with the resolve and the tenacity to follow through on what we believe in, however impossible it may seem. Of all the Clans, we are that scarred warrior, proof of our courage and relentlessness written in our very history.

“In adversity we find strength, the fires to forge our souls. Do we seek truce to gain victory? No! Do we suffer the conquered to harry us with what little resistance they have left? No! Our leaders are called Khans for a reason! Ours is the way of overwhelming destruction. Blood calls for blood! Too long we have been denied what is rightfully ours. Green worlds, jewels of The Republic, lie in the hands of the soft and the weak.

“Like the Mongol hordes of long ago, we are unstoppable! Our way is the only way, and all shall be ours! There will be no compromise, no mercy. Victory—total, complete, and uncompromising victory—can be our only end. Together we will burn a path of utter destruction on our way to our final destination, where history will finally be set right.

“Tukayyid! Honor! Glory! Victory!”

### Comments

#### The Basselope

**Number of posts:** 133

Gawd, sounds like overblown tripe. The scary thing is, they can back it up. Heard anything recently? I’ve read some stuff from people who heard it from a friend who heard it from a friend, etc. that the Commonwealth is taking it pretty hard. Any truth to that, you with your connections?

#### Rilke Spess, Mod

**Number of posts:** 3982

I’ve also heard the Commonwealth is feeling the wrath of the mighty talon. But since I don’t have some nice, shiny, hard evidence (oh, like a hardcopy—I’m pretty easy that way), I can’t really say. But I can say that I’m praying really hard. *Every* night.

## 25 April 3135

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### ***Outside Hearth, Elnath, Prefecture VI***

They came in hard. We got some warning, barely. We moved, and they blasted the ground behind us. The first leg was terrible. Any mechanical failure, even something minor like stumbling in the snow or slipping on ice, and you were doomed. We lost half a dozen 'Mechs and I don't know how many vehicles in just 10 minutes. We had no strategy beyond just running, but at least we had a seam to squeeze through. That was the price they paid for coming at us; they couldn't keep us totally surrounded. We had one chance, and hopefully it'll be enough.

We still haven't stopped. It's just been constant running for a while, but the fire from behind has died down. I'm pretty sure we didn't lose them; they're just conserving ammo. The result is that I'm getting bored. I'm in a battle—piloting a 'Mech and running for my life—and I'm bored. Nice universe we live in.

## 29 April 3135

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### ***DropShip Unvanquished, Prefecture VI***

We're off planet. It's not secured. We were defeated. Routed.

I don't know if they have the whole planet. I don't know if they'll try to hold it or move on. But they beat us. And then there's word from my last posting, on Styk, a leaked memo saying Tao is cranking out 'Mech after 'Mech for the Cappies. So that sounds like a failure in my book.

We're losing. There's no way around it. We have too many enemies, and the latest move by the Exarch just seems to be creating more.

I have no idea what the future of The Republic is. But I don't like losing. I don't like running away. I don't know where we're going next. I don't know what our assignment is going to be. But wherever it is, I'm going to stand. I'm not giving up anymore ground.

**04 May 3135**

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***JumpShip Heart of Stone, Prefecture VI***

I want a clear enemy. I don't want to fight my own people. I don't want to deal with stealth attacks that sneak in and out before you know they're there. I don't want to sit around waiting for a battle. I want an army across the field from me, and I want them to be the bad guys, and I want enough of a force behind me to allow me to advance on them and rip their heads off.

I'd take the Cappies as the bad guys. They'd work. They could put me back on Elnath as long as I had a good force with me. I'd love it.

But do you know who I really want? The bastards who carved a hole in The Republic, with their smugness and their visions and all that crap. I'll give them visions—the kind you get from a series of sharp blows to the head. *Then* they can tell me what their damned destiny is.

I want Jade Falcons. And judging from rumors, I just might get them.



## 09 May 3135

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### ***JumpShip Heart of Stone, Prefecture VII***

We've been in the simulators almost constantly. I've been trying to get a hint of where we're going by evaluating who I'm paired against, but it's tough to come to any conclusions. We've fought with and against simulated Steel Wolves and Stormhammers—and against Jade Falcons (never, of course, *with* them). I'm not sure if they really think we might face those other two, or if they're just giving us a look at them from all sides in case we're on the field together.

It doesn't feel like The Republic has any allies left. And with the senators demoted from power, there are more people than ever wanting to undermine us, never mind defend us. So I guess it's wise that we prepare to fight everybody, because that's what happening.

We should probably be running simulations against local militias, too.

## 10 May 3135

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As part of getting us up to speed on our myriad opponents, we're being shown skirmish-analysis footage. If this weren't all so dire, I might actually be entertained.

**Briefing room, Swordsworn Battalion Headquarters**  
**City of Vanders on the continent of Chimera**  
**Halloran V, Prefecture V**  
**The Republic of the Sphere**

The ground erupted violently in a cloud of expanding fire and smoke, showering the *Yu Huang* with earthen debris.

The 'Mech emerged through the incendiary curtain like a specter through solid wall. Wisps of smoke trailed after it like ribbons of charcoal-gray cloth.

"Freeze," ordered a deep voice in the darkness. The voice activated holo-player responded immediately.

"This is what I call ineffectual fire from our artillery," continued the faceless voice. "You cannot expect to take down an assault 'Mech with one or two rounds. You have to saturate the area."

"Yes, Lieutenant Colonel Brekeman," answered the young captain at the lectern.

"So tell me, Captain Emerson, why didn't Major Smithson order his artillery to fire for effect?"

"I don't have a firm answer for you, sir. However, I believe the events will show that he did not have time to do so. What follows includes voiceovers from intercepted enemy comms we later decoded."

"Continue," Brekeman ordered.

<Yu Huang pilot> "Sao-wei Shin, move your Regulators and Pegasus up and prepare to sweep toward the Swordsmen's right flank."

"Freeze. Who is that pilot?" asked Brekeman.

"Sang-wei Dalton 'Dakota' Doles, sir, commander of. . . ." Emerson shuffled some papers. ". . . Ying Long company, also known as the Shadow Dragons."

"Continue," Brekeman ordered less harshly.

"Roger that."

"Fire support: counterbattery fire now. I want that artillery silenced."

"On the way."

"Pause," order Emerson, "Sir, it is here that our mobile long toms were eliminated by counterbattery fire from Arrow IVs."

"Damn, I told Smithson to place those tubes further back," Brekemen said. "Okay, so we know that their missile batteries are good. What about this Sang-wei Doles? What can you tell me about him?"

"He's the grandson of Senior Colonel Warner Doles," answered Emerson.

"Is that the former Free Capellan commander who saved Sun-Tzu Liao on Sian during the Jihad?" asked Brekeman.

"One in the same, sir. Dakota is every bit like his grandfather, except that he exhibits some strange quirks—unlike his grandfather."

"Like what?"

"He talks to himself while in the cockpit."

"So, I talk to myself when I'm engaged, Captain. What does that have to do with anything?" demanded Brekeman.

"He carries on a conversation with himself, sir. Matter of fact, we were able to record such a conversation broadcast during the battle."

"Continue, Captain."

A fine mess you've got yourself into, Dakota. Now if the Swordsmen cooperate, we can push them back. Grandpa Doles would be proud to see me here in his old "Desert Dragon." I think he faced similar circumstances leading the Blackwind Lancers before they were destroyed during the Blakists' temper tantrum.

"Pause. See what I mean, sir?"

"Yeah. So we have a Cappie who likes to talk to himself while piloting his grandpappy's 'Mech," Brekeman said. "Okay, we've been at this for a while. Let's take a 10-minute smoke break, and then you can tell me how he blew through the Ghost Legionnaires." "Yes, sir. Lights."

## 12 May 3135

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Here's the rest of that Swordsworn debriefing—and it's not comforting.

**Briefing room, Swordsworn Battalion Headquarters**  
**City of Vanders on the continent of Chimera**  
**Halloran V, Prefecture V**  
**The Republic of the Sphere**

"Sir, Doles' company is a specialized, reinforced, combined-arms unit. From what intel has gathered, he has five augmented lances mixed with armor, battle armor, and of course, BattleMechs," Emerson said. "The 4th Confederation's Bravo Battalion supported Doles' attack with most, if not all, of its mobile Arrow IVs. The counterbattery fire you just saw not only took out our three mobile long toms, but it also destroyed the main ammo dump."

"Sweet mother of God," someone muttered.

"I knew it happened as soon as I felt the ground rumble from the aftershock," Brekeman said.

"The following sequence will show you just how effective Doles' unit truly is, sir."

"What the hell was that?"

"Looks like we just took out their munitions depot. Nice shooting, Fire Support."

"We promise to deliver nothing but the best, Sang-wei."

"Yes, you do."

"Company, prepare to advance. Delta armor lance, swing wide and draw their attention. Alpha lance, on me—we take the center. Bravo platoon, press and hold the left, Charlie lance to support."

"Roger."

"Shadow Dragons . . . attack!" The 90-ton *Yu Huang* lumbered into a run accompanied by a 65-ton *Shen Yi* and *Ti Ts'ang* and a 75-ton *Tiang-Zong*.

"Pause. It is here that Doles acquires Major Smithson's *Thor* and engages him, sir."

"Ah, there it is. A *Thor*—just what the doctor ordered."

The *Yu Huang* throttled up to maximum speed. Doles raised both of its arms as it advanced, bringing to bear its dual KaliYama Big Bore Ultra AC/20s.

"Bring it on, Crappellan. I've got something for you."

Twin ruby beams of focused energy speared toward the charging 'Mech. One of the beams sliced the lower left leg of Dakota's 'Mech, causing armor to spray in an explosive plume of vaporized metal. The second passed high and to the right of the cockpit. The *Yu Huang* seemed to flinch down and to the left, away from the crimson beam. Although it missed, the laser strike threw a hitch into the behemoth's gait, enough to affect its targeting. Twelve-centimeter depleted uranium rounds vomited from the wide-mouthed barrels of the *Yu Huang*'s arms.

"Oh, hell!"

One volley hit the ground near the *Thor*'s feet, showering the area with flaming debris. The other slammed into its right torso, shattering armor and pitching the Clan avatar violently to the right.

*Thor*>

The *Thor* looked as though it were going to pitch over and crash to the ground. The pilot, however, was able to keep it upright through sheer force of will.

"Damnit, he stripped my armor!"

The *Yu Huang*'s arms again erupted with fire, this time spitting out twice the normal rate of autocannon fire. They struck the Clan 'Mech at its core. Its torso armor shattered and rained ceramic shards upon the ground, and its back armor exploded outwardly from secondary explosions; the metal beast shuddered.

"Oh, my Gawd, NO!"

Suddenly, the *Thor* was consumed by an expanding, golden corona of heat: Its fusion engine had overwhelmed its containment field. The resulting explosion shattered the remains of the 'Mech, which rained down upon the unprotected infantry, immolating them. Two Condor tanks exploded when chunks of burning armor cut through them like anti-tank rounds.

"Pause. It was the destruction of Smithson's Thor and his death that broke the troops' morale, sir."

"I concur, Captain. Smithson died a fool's death by not having better positioned his forces. Go ahead, Captain; play it to the end."

"Yes, sir."

"Good shooting, Sang-wei."

"Thanks."

"Good job, Shadow Dragons. Let's not give them a chance to regroup. Push forward and drive them back to the DropPort."

"Once more into the breach."

"Lights. That's it, sir."

"Thank you, Emerson. Good briefing. What's the final tally?"

"We lost three long toms, three 'Mechs—including Smithson's Thor—five armored vehicles, and nearly four platoons of infantry."

Brekeman shook his head.

"Let's be about it then. Gentleman, see to your companies. Like the esteemed sang-wei said, 'Once more into the breach.'"

**13 May 3135**

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***JumpShip Heart of Stone, Prefecture VII***

There's nothing like a good fistfight to clarify your feelings about a few things. First, I'm not the best-looking guy in the world, but having a swollen and bruised nose actually enhances my appearance. Second, I may not be as mad at the Exarch as I thought I was.

It was Shackleton who started it. I never really liked him. He had an air of privilege even when he was a private, and once he got a promotion, he walked all over anyone with a lower rank whenever he could. So when he started talking about the Exarch being a tyrant, trying to rule with absolute power—well, I didn't like it. So I argued back. I made points I didn't know I believed.

Maybe I don't believe them—maybe I just wanted to argue with Shackleton. But I got a broken nose defending Levin, so that seems like the path I'll probably continue down.

## 17 May 3135

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Tried to find some information about what's going on with the Cappies, and I found more than I bargained for.

### PLEX Search Engine Results

*Found: 766 titles/entries matching criteria\_Styk+war; Styk+Capellan; New Aragon+Capellan; New Aragon+Styk; Liao+Capellan; New Aragon+Paladins; New BattleMech Designs (all); Liao+Bannson+(\$ et al); Liao+Styk...*

#### 1. New Aragon Declares All Lost, Welcomes Capellan Intervention New Aragon, 12 May 3135

In a bold and dangerous political gambit, three of New Aragon's strongest public leaders arranged a joint press conference today to declare the situation on-world "hopelessly lost." Leading the charge was self-avowed populist leader (and head of the Dynasty Party) Hu Khan Sei. Joining him was Governor's Aide Ursa Pochemkin and New Aragon's (former) Legate Camilo Gutierrez, recently relieved of all duties and responsibilities.

"We see now that Chancellor Liao and the Capellan Confederation have held back from visiting widespread destruction against us because we are in no position to resist over time. Terra has abandoned us. A few paladins can do nothing more than delay the inevitable, and only at the cost of hundreds more lives paid by New Aragon's sons and daughters, and the 1.6 million in adjusted bills that the nonstop defense adds on every week. At this point, we should welcome Capellan intervention to save lives and preserve what little sanity...[more?]

#### 2. New BattleMechs Being Sold to House Davion Genoa, 14 May 3135

Accompanying rumors of a new peace accord—possibly an outright alliance—with House Davion and the Federated Suns, comes mixed news of new BattleMechs appearing in the ranks of border guard regiments and even in Swordsworn units operating inside The Republic. Unsubstantiated claims also put a regiment of the Davion Guard on Terra itself to take possession of their latest new machines and to conduct joint training operations with the local garrison forces.

Reactions to these reports are mixed, as there is no official word from the office of the Exarch or from any paladins. An official statement by Swordsworn officers who have joined the fight in Prefecture V calls this a wonderful development. "House Davion has always policed the Inner Sphere with honor and integrity," said Captain Jerome Montgomery. "If The Republic can use some help, kicking Liao right in the teeth, who better to call upon?" [more?]

#### 3. Styk Will Not Assist Capellan War Machine Styk, 7 May 3135

"Styk and Gan Singh have long sought the means to live at peace with neighboring worlds and to follow their own calling among citizens and residents of Capellan and non-Capellan origins. We welcomed the Confederation's return, not as a means by which to strike out at The Republic, but as a way to stave off the destruction and desolation sure to follow an invasion we were ill prepared to meet."

In the latter half of her address to Styk's new Parliament, Countess Jiu Soon Lah also explained her own position with regards to working with the military director put in charge of Styk. "I will work toward a full and final exchange of power so that Styk may once again be self-ruling. I want to assure everyone that we have no desire to bolster the Capellan war machine, as it works to liberate worlds from The Republic of the Sphere. We must all do more in the name of peace." [more?]

#### 4. Liao Slow to Capitalize on Recent Capellan Gains Genoa, 13 May 3135

Perhaps owing to his state visit to Terra, where he paid final respects to the legendary Paladin (and former prince of the Federated Suns) Victor Steiner-Davion, analysts claim that Daoshen Liao has been slow—almost reluctant—to press on his recent advantages. Certainly the political upheaval seen recently on a number of worlds, including New Aragon and Poznan, would argue that momentum has shifted again in the Confederation's favor—even in the absence of fresh military victories.

But Republican representatives on Genoa are hardly surprised that Daoshen would hold off on any major offensive during this risky time during which he has delivered himself to Terra. They point out the recent strengthening of the Capellan "stranglehold" on the world of Liao as proof that the Chancellor has no desire to end the conflict. Vague reports of military buildup, of supplies and troops being funneled through nonstandard jump points, continue to pour in despite the blockade enforced around that system. Of course, it could be that the Confederation simply wishes to consolidate its gains, and that by appeasing the Chancellor's... [more?]

## 18 May 3135

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### *JumpShip Intrepid, Prefecture VIII*

How do you fight a four-front war? What if a fifth opens up? We all know that fighting on just two fronts is asking for trouble. Fighting on more than that....

I've spent a lot of time thinking about this, staring at maps until my eyes can't focus anymore. My best idea so far is to stop thinking about it as a multifront war—really, it's a siege. We're the castle, they're the surrounding barbarians. It doesn't matter how many tribes the barbarians come from—just that they're there, and they're after you. You can treat them as a single enemy.

I keep getting stuck on two problems, though. First, our castle is too big. We don't have enough troops to guard the entire border (our losses make that clear enough), so our walls will continue to be breached. Second, of course, is that we have enemies within our borders. The aristocracy isn't going down without a fight, and that makes defending your walls that much tougher.

And that's all I've got. Hope Levin's managed to come up with more than I have.



## 19 May 3135

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Pulled the following from the holo-Web log of Jonathan Chekov, planet Sadalbari, Prefecture III:

I got an e-message from a pal of mine on Prosperina yesterday. I'm not going to say his name, and you'll figure out why pretty quick. My pal's part of a gang down in the capital city, and he and his mates are always coming up with ways to get themselves in trouble. The most recent was breaking into one of the old factory complexes that the Dragon's Fury reactivated after taking the place over. Not exactly the best idea, sure, but you know the type—the more of these guys you get together and talking, the dumber the ideas get.

So my friend and his pals wander around the area for a while before picking the factory they want to try. The complex was a huge, sprawling thing, with giant doors easily 30 meters wide and just as tall set in the front of the main building. The chain-link fence didn't even slow my pal and his friends down; I guess wire clippers really are a vandal's best friend.

Apparently, they should have watched the factory a while longer, because although they waited for one patrol of guards to go past, they weren't expecting the second. The bunch of them scattered to hide, and when the patrol was gone, my buddy couldn't find any of the rest of the crazies that had snuck in with him. He figured that if he showed up back at their hangout without having seen anything inside the factory, he'd never hear the end of it, though, so he kept sneaking in. They always say that fortune favors the wise, but in this case, Lady Luck was definitely watching over a pretty big fool.

My pal went deeper into the factory complex, and found himself a spot up on a roof of an out-building, where he could look into the main manufacturing building. What he saw there, you wouldn't believe if you'd seen it yourself. We've all heard reports that the Dracs are getting pushy around the rim of The Republic, and that they're using these new 'Mechs that look like something out of an old samurai holo-vid, but this thing was way beyond any of them. He got some pictures with a camera-phone, and although I can't post them here, I'll do my best to describe the beast of a 'Mech my buddy saw.

He was real clear that it was another one of those 'Mechs that looks like a samurai, but that have legs like a goat, bent backwards and with cloven hooves. He said there was some sort of big gun built into the right shoulder, and heavy armor built into the left, and that there were a couple of lasers built into the back of the left hand, and some big nasty double-bladed weapon in the right. Definitely nasty, especially with a head like an old samurai helmet, complete with a half-moon crest.

Well, after he got his proof, my friend lifted out of there; and let me tell you, he didn't have any easier time getting in than he did getting out. He told me that he had to dodge three different patrols on his way out, and he made it past the last one only because of some big hullabaloo off on the other side of the complex, probably one of his buddies getting busted. These guys aren't Death Commandos by any stretch of the imagination, but they certainly have practice getting into places they shouldn't be...and when my friend got back to their rendezvous point, he was the only one of eight who had made it out.

## 23 May 3135

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### *JumpShip Intrepid, Prefecture VIII*

The nose is finally getting better. The swelling is negligible. The strange crook in it, however, will never be getting back to normal. It's my new face.

I'm pretty sure I'll tell people I got the nose on Elnath, when I was alone and on the run. Then I'll get to tell that whole story, and I'll look a whole lot more heroic and dignified than I would if I told people I got this fighting with another soldier during transit because I thought he was a jerk.

Funny thing is, Shackleton's not much of a jerk anymore. He's been decent to me since the fight, and I haven't heard any anti-Levin, pro-Senate nonsense from him. It just goes to show: Some people need a good talking-to in order to straighten them out, but others need a few solid wallops to the head.

24 May 3135

It's probably a good thing I wasn't invited to participate in this panel....

### **GLENGARRY ROUND TABLE WITH CYRUS BECKINSDALE**

**Cyrus Beckinsdale (CB):** Good morning and welcome to Glengarry Round Table with Cyrus Beckinsdale. Today's topic is the job that former Paladin Jonah Levin has done since taking up the mantle of Exarch of The Republic of the Sphere. With me today is Retired Republican Armed Forces Colonel Samuel Kearny; Annette Sullivan, an aide to Governor Sean Weslean; and political consultant Vera Murray. Now, let's get talking! First off, Colonel Kearny, what is your opinion of Levin as a commander?

**Samuel Kearny (SK):** Well, from all reports, Cyrus, Exarch Levin is certainly a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield—

**Vera Murray (VM):** Colonel, even I could be a force to be reckoned with in that big black Atlas of his. The man loves to stomp around like a god, smashing people beneath his feet. He isn't a fit successor to Daemian Redburn.

**SK:** Ms. Murray, I certainly would not characterize the Exarch as a tyrant just because he is a MechWarrior. Perhaps a proven field-commander like Jonah Levin is just what The Republic needs right now. Devlin Stone, for example—

**VM:** With all due respect, Colonel, I just said that Levin wasn't *Redburn's* equal. It's absolutely ridiculous to compare him to the great Devlin Stone.

**SK:** You are missing my point—

**CB:** All right, I guess we'll have to agree to disagree on that issue. Ms. Murray, would you give us your opinion on the actions Jonah Levin has taken since he became Exarch?

**VM:** The man is an obvious brute, Cyrus. The Paladins were foolish to elect such a militaristic martinet to the office of Exarch in such dangerous times. I think it is much more likely that Levin led a military coup to depose Redburn and take over the reins of government, then hushed it up by pressuring his fellow Paladins.

**CB:** I see. Colonel, your opinion?

**SK:** Patently ridiculous, Ms. Murray. Exarch Levin is a sworn protector of The Republic, not the kind of man who would overthrow the duly elected Exarch and take power for himself.

**CB:** A noble sympathy, Colonel. And how about you, Ms. Sullivan? You've been very quiet thus far.

**Annette Sullivan (AS):** Both Colonel Kearny and Ms. Murray make good points, Cyrus. Jonah Levin's service record certainly doesn't show that he's the type of person prone to rash action, but then again, neither did the Black Paladin Ezekiel Crow's—and we all know what he did on Northwind.

**VM:** Annette, you've got it exactly right. Now, I don't want to go right out and say that you can't trust any of the Paladins—Blake only knows where we'd end up if we started questioning the whole political structure of The Republic—but really, for all their talk, the Paladins really are just a bunch of military men and women running the government.

**SK:** I cannot believe I am sitting here listening to this. The Council of Paladins and the Exarch's rule are cornerstones of Devlin Stone's dream!

**AS:** We all know that, Colonel Kearny. But the fact is that dreams change, and sometimes they become nightmares. It seems quite likely, from the information at hand, that Jonah Levin unlawfully usurped control of The Republic, and that Devlin Stone's dream is dead.

[long pause]

**CB:** Well then . . . is this Governor Weslean's official position, Ms. Sullivan, or is it your own opinion as a private citizen?

**AS:** As of now, it is just the opinion of a private citizen, Cyrus. But I can tell you that I've been spending some time talking with [Governor] Sean [Weslean], and I can tell you that there will probably be a statement from the governor's office within the next couple of weeks.

## 26 May 3135

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Apparently this is being pretty widely distributed, and for a pittance. If Sandoval is going so far as to issue open letters of marque within The Republic, Prefecture IV—or the Tikonov March, as he calls it—is in for a rough ride:

The Right Honorable Duke Aaron Sandoval, Lord Commander of the Swordsworn, Lord Governor of the Tikonov March of the Federated Suns, and Liege-man to the First Prince of the Federated Suns, being credibly informed that some of his most loving faithful subjects have in their possession the means to intercept interstellar traffic, and are desirous to prepare and equip ships and fighters at their own costs and take to the stars for the annoyance of the Duke's enemies, so as they might obtain His most gracious license in that behalf, has, of the clemency, tender love, and zeal that he bears toward his subjects, by the advice of his most honorable council resolved and determined as follows:

First, his Honor is pleased, and by the authority hereof gives full power and license to his subjects that they may, at their liberty, without incurring any loss, danger, forfeiture, or penalty, and without putting in of any bonds or recognizance before the Council, and without suing forth of any other license, from any council, court, or place, within this system, or any other systems over which the Duke holds power, prepare and equip such ships and fighters furnished for war as they shall think convenient for their advantage and the annoyance of his Grace's enemies. And his Honor is further pleased, and by this grants to said subjects all such ships, vessels, munitions, merchandise, wares, victuals, and goods of what nature and quality so ever it be, which they shall take from any of his Grace's enemies, without making account in any court of this system or any system within the Tikonov March for the same, and without paying any part or share to the Minister of the Tikonov March Revenue Service, the Commandant of any spaceport within the Tikonov March, or any other officer or minister of the Duke's Government. And his Grace is further pleased that all of his said subjects which upon the publication of this proclamation will sue for a duplicate of the same under the great seal of the Tikonov March, shall have the requested duplicate, paying only the petty fees to the officers for official copy of the same.

And, seeing now that it hath pleased the Duke, of his most gracious goodness, to grant unto all his subjects this great liberty, his Grace desires all Spaceport Commandants, Planetary Legates, Systemic Governors, Captains of space-going vessels, and all other of his Grace's faithful officers, ministers, and subjects of this and every other system within the Tikonov March, and especially those who inhabit those cities and other places near spaceports, to show themselves worthy of such liberty, and to help one another, in such sort as their doing hereupon may be substantial, and bring forth that effect that shall redound to his Grace's honor, their own sureties, and the annoyance of his enemies.

This letter of marque is provided only that no man or woman who takes to the stars under it shall presume to take anything from any his Grace's subjects, or from any man having his Honor's safe conduct, upon the pain of prosecution.

Francisco Areyand DeGrazia, Assistant Minister of Commerce, by order of His Grace, Duke Aaron Sandoval.

## 27 May 3135

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### *JumpShip Kerensky's Dream, Prefecture IX*

We're getting close to something. The pace of training has picked up, and our CO is suddenly demanding stricter adherence to protocol.

It's easy to get sloppy when you spend too long in transit. Not much reason to maintain discipline when there's no chance of imminent action. Sure, someone could try to board us, but that doesn't seem to be our enemies' strategy right now—they want our land, not our JumpShips. Any CO trying to keep up a strict protocol on such a long trip is going to soon find himself desperately trying to figure out how to inhale in a vacuum.

So we've been pretty loose for a while (which is one of the reasons I found time to fight with Shackleton). But no more. Free time's cut down. Callisthenic time is up. Simulator time is up.

Oh, and speaking of the simulator—guess who they've got us facing more than anyone else? Good old Jade Falcon. Picture me rubbing my hands together in anticipation.

## 01 June 3135

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### ***DropShip Blaze of Glory, Prefecture IX***

We're going in and going in hard — I can hardly wait.

The good news is that we're going to Skye. The bad news is that it's an extraction mission. We're not trying to take the planet back. Not yet. But at least we're not sneaking around, trying to get in and out before the Falcons notice us. No, we're going to let 'em know we're coming. They've got half a regiment or so stationed at an old base a couple hundred kilometers from New London. We're going down pretty much on their heads, and then we're going to get them out of the way so that we can do our job.

Been studying the 'Mechs I expect to run into to make sure I know their capabilities backward and forward. *Mongoose*s, *Ursas*, the *Hatchetman* with that mean-looking blade of a left hand, and so on. And, just in case I get really unlucky (or, who knows, maybe lucky!) the *Gyrfalcon*. You never know when the big boys are going to show up.

## 02 June 3135

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*More from Teresa. It's hard balancing my loathing for the Falcon with the eternally springing hope I have for youth. And what is this idea she keeps talking about? If it's a weapon, my balancing act might become a whole lot easier...*

Dear Mom:

Academician Draeger says I am steadily improving. He got a promotion halfway through the semester, just after midterms! He was so honored! Star Captain Ananda came in herself to tell him of the news, just after I left after discussing my course selections for next year. I know I should not have stayed to listen, but I could not help it! I have never seen Star Captain Ananda smile, and she was smiling when she walked in. It was a wonderful day.

Now, a confession: I know you were very concerned about caffeine and how it affects the human system, but I ignored your advice. You may now safely say "I told you so." In the beginning it was all right, but after a little while I needed it to stay awake, but I could never focus. I did not want to say this at the time, but I believe that coffee, as well as poor study habits (Acadm. Draeger helped me out with this, too. He has offered to be my advisor for my thesis—he is confident I will easily make it past my first year.), caused me to score so low on my midterms. Acadm. Draeger was shocked. He yelled at me for days! He was so mad, and rightly so. To make up for my error, I began working on research for my thesis project. I know it is still very early, but I believe my idea has a lot of merit, and I would be honored beyond imagination if the Clan could find even a little use for my idea.

Acadm. Draeger is guardedly optimistic about my idea. He tries not to show his enthusiasm, but he cannot help it when we start talking about specifics. I have seen him take meticulous notes, and sometimes he will tell me of things he has thought about in-between conversations.

Gary has offered to help me with my data analysis! At first I was reluctant. I remember what happened to Father, though the Trial set everything to rights again. I am still nervous, but he is a good student and an excellent mathematician—far better than I. I have asked him to tutor me for next semester's calculus courses, because I cannot afford to score lower than a 9 in everything. I must pass with honors so that I can present my thesis!

We had two days in a row off last week. We all needed it badly. I was able to leave campus for the evening, which was a great relief. But I felt like I had missed a million years! The city is full of people now. The sounds of ships arriving at the spaceport is deafening, but I think I was studying so hard I never paid attention. The 'Mech factory is running around the clock, or at least it seems like it is. The lights are always on, and the smokestacks belch smoke at all hours of the day and night.

There are rumors that Star Captain Ananda will be cutting our summer break short by a full week. I do not know if I will be able to visit home, though the increased traffic at the port may mean I can get a cheap fare, or perhaps I will be able to hitch a ride on a military vessel. I should know by the beginning of the week after next. If you can, please tell Nicky I miss him and am very proud of him! Maybe one day we will serve together on the battlefield. What a pair we would be!

Yours forever,

Teresa

## 06 June 3135

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### ***Base Shetland, Skye, Prefecture IX***

Someday someone better write the full account of what's going on here. I wish I could, but I can only see what's going on in front of me. Here's what I know.

I didn't get to be part of the wave that landed right on the Falcons. I hit the ground to the west and then moved on to the base. My squad was supposed to clear out any patrols between our landing spot and the base, and then give support to the first wave.

We didn't run into anyone, and when we got to the base, it was quiet. No sign of our first wave.

We stepped very carefully until we found them, safe and sound, without a scratch on them. They hadn't seen anyone. Our expected foes had bugged out.

We didn't have time to wonder where they went. They came from the north, some of them buried in the ground waiting for us, others streaking at us at top speeds. Aero units fired first, followed by long-range ground fire. We had to scatter.

Ooops. Order just came to mount up. More later.



## 09 June 3135

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### **Falcons Contained, but Doubts Linger**

*Lyndon Staffeur for the Donegal Broadcasting Company*

30 May 3135 (THARKAD CITY) — Six months after pro-Lyran forces liberated Chaffee from the fragmenting Republic of the Sphere, Clan Jade Falcon again withdrew from Lyran space. But its invasion of several Republican worlds, precipitated by attacks against Commonwealth planets between its Occupation Zone and Republican space, has cast caused many to doubt that the LCAF High Command and the Archon have the resolve and the strength to maintain the status quo, or for that matter, to maintain the security of the realm at all.

"The Falcons have been our deadliest neighbor since they appeared in the Inner Sphere back in 3050," said Baron Barrett Hasseldorf, Estates general representative from Kaumberg. "Their society lives to make war; it is simply foolhardy to presume they can ever be contained by treaties and agreements."

Baron Hasseldorf, like many others in the Estates, believes that part of the problem lies with the Commonwealth's decades-old policy of negotiation and compromise with the Falcons, a policy he believes runs counter to the "more aggressive" nature of Commonwealth relations on the border with the former Free Worlds League.

"Diplomacy has its place, but it is not with the Falcons," Hasseldorf told DBC reporters at a press conference last week. "I am not advocating war, but the fact of the matter is that Jade Falcon has taken advantage of our better nature, and thousands have died as a result."

Last year, a small task force of Jade Falcons, escorted by the *Emerald Talon*, one of the few Falcon WarShips to survive the Jihad, launched an attack against the Republic of the Sphere after traveling first through Commonwealth space. The task force, ostensibly aimed at destroying what the Falcons termed the "false wolves," pledged not to attack the Lyran state, but then landed attack forces on Porrima and Chaffee. Chaffee, a world with a population half a billion strong, was completely overrun last year, and it was there that Falcon forces slaughtered 50,000 inhabitants in the city of Hamilton — a savage and heavy-handed action that has outraged billions across the Inner Sphere and prompted calls for war against Jade Falcon.

The Hamilton Massacre came to light soon after the liberation of Chaffee by the Stormhammers, a pro-Commonwealth faction within The Republic of the Sphere, who acted in conjunction with the Steel Wolves to rout Jade Falcon there last November. Whether the successful campaign was accomplished with the direct support of the Commonwealth government remains unclear at this time, but it has become a rallying cry for many who feel the current administration is failing to deal with the more immediate threat Jade Falcon represents, even as tensions mount on Republican and League borders.

"It is a ridiculous situation, to say the least," remarked Graf Tomas Ratselvogel von Gretchenwald of Summit. "The Republic and the Free Worlds are no threat to our sovereignty and security, but the Jade Falcon butchers are. They sacked Porrima. They savagely murdered thousands as part of this new 'Mongol philosophy' of theirs. And they even now hold Skye, a founding member of our Commonwealth now bereft of Republican support and left to the tender mercies of cold-blooded killers! It does not matter how many Falcon Galaxies are 'trapped' now in their new Republican 'Occupation Zone.' The Falcon cancer cannot be allowed to fester. We owe it to our allies — to ourselves — to put an end to this menace once and for all."

Archon Melissa Steiner did not herself immediately comment on the charges made by Ratselvogel and Hasseldorf, but one of her aides told DBC that the Commonwealth "remains dedicated to the path of peace in these difficult times," and that military action, although "not ruled out completely," is the last of a "long list of options" available to the administration.

## 10 June 3135

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### ***Base Shetland, Skye, Prefecture IX***

Let me pick up right where I left off.

We scattered, my squad—most of it—heading back west. Drew some pursuit, some arty, some infantry, couple of 'Mechs—an *Ursa*, a *Koshi*, and yes, a menacing *Hatchetman*. We had more 'Mechs, they had more support. Call it even.

We took to the hills and divided into two groups of two; I joined up with Breverman to make a wide circle. Caught a perfect valley and followed it around. The arty caught us on their scanners, but they couldn't get the right angle on the shots. They peppered the ground around us but never really threatened us. A nice jump up and over a small hill brought us in range, and we hammered them. Breverman caught a few shells, but I went in clean and decided to use the lasers, completely blowing them off the hill. It felt good.

But the three Falcon 'Mechs all went after the other two from our squad. We haven't heard from them. Next job is to track them down.

## 14 June 3135

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This transcript I found really puts a face on the reports I've heard about what happened on Chaffee.

### Transcription of global network radio broadcast, Skye.

C1  
Hi, we're interrupting—

C2  
It's on other channels, too, Charles, listen.  
[voice, too low to understand]

C1  
If you're just tuning in, or if you've just turned on your receiver, we—I have no way of describing this—

C2  
A Falcon JumpShip is broadcasting—I mean, listen to this—

C1  
Maybe we should just shut up and listen to this.  
[volume rises on voice]

JumpShip  
...on the 15th of May, forces arrived on Chaffee. There was little resistance in the beginning, which was as it should have been. But there were some who chose to defy us. At what cost? Hamilton is no more. This is no mere rhetoric; the city no longer stands. Its inhabitants are reduced to dust; there is nothing to bury.  
[volume lowers, moment of dead air]

C2  
Do we have any verification of this? I mean, are they beaming vid?

C1  
Yeah, Vai? Can you get us anything? Vai is our engineer. She makes sure we're on the air in...in times like this, really.

C2  
I've got family in Hamilton....

C1  
Oh, God. Amir, I'm so sorry.

C2  
We don't know anything yet.

C1  
It's true. It could just be terrorist tactics.

C2  
And with that being said, we want to remind everyone not to panic. I mean, I know that's just an impossible thing to say, impossible to do, but we have to keep calm. We're not going to help ourselves any if we lose control.

C1  
Vai? You've got something? You—  
[choked comment, unintelligible]

C1  
L...ladies and gentlemen. If you have a vid receiver nearby, you...on the other hand, maybe not. Maybe you shouldn't. Oh, God, Amir. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry.

C2  
[whispered] This is hell.

C1  
Ladies and gentlemen, if you're calling in, we're going to ask that you don't. Not at the moment. I just—we don't know any more than you do right now. Do we have any word from the Duke? The Legate? Nothing? This is—I can't believe this.

[volume up on JumpShip broadcast]

JumpShip

...we will brook no resistance. This must be understood. On Ryde, which we conquered just as easily, we took steps to ensure compliance before insurgency even had a chance to surface. Perhaps you are aware of the term "decimate?" It was an ancient Roman practice of executing one out of every 10 soldiers in mutinous legions. An effective deterrent then that is equally effective today. Death awaits every one of us; however, with some common sense, you can delay yours until a far later date. Learn from your countrymen. We will not be denied. Comply now and be spared. [volume down]

C2

[muffled]

I can't—I can't—

C1

If, if what the Falcons are broadcasting is true and accurate...that's...that's 68 million people.

[door opens, closes; several seconds of dead air]

C1

Ladies and gentlemen, you're listening to QZ538, News and Information. I, uh...we still have nothing coming from the Duke or the Legate, but—Vai, what? Ah, we've got word that Pollock Square's full of demonstrators—so if you're moving around in the city, take an alternative route, stay out of the square—stay out of the downtown area. If you're at home, stay there. If you have a long way to get home, see if you can stay with someone who's nearby. What? [listens] I'm sorry, I'm talking about Pollock Square in Westphalia. That's Pollock Square in Westphalia.

[door opens, closes]

C2

There's a crowd outside.

C1

Outside the building?

C2

All out on the street. It's not pretty.

C1

You okay, man? Take as much time as you need.

C2

I'm better off here. Thanks.

[end transcription]

## 15 June 3135

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### ***Outside Base Shetland, Skye, Prefecture IX***

Found 'em today. Breverman and I figured the other two were probably still heading west, so that's where we went. Once we were on the right course, trailing the Falcon 'Mechs was easy—they left muddy prints on the wet, grassy hills.

We got them on the scanners—and knew we were on theirs. We stayed out of range, but now we had the advantage—three of them pinned between four of us. We didn't even have to talk to the other members of our squad—we all knew what to do. We spread out a little and then made a beeline for the *Hatchetman* in the middle. The other two Falcons moved in to protect it.

Then we all veered toward the *Koshi*. He didn't adjust in time, couldn't decide on how best to orient himself before we were on him. We took him out at long range. The other two Falcons got off some shots, practically blasting Vyer's right arm off, but that's it. Then we turned on them, four on two, and they ran.

Satisfying. Quite satisfying.

## 20 June 3135

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### ***Outside Base Shetland, Skye, Prefecture IX***

It's me and Breverman right now. Communication has been confused; one minute, we're sure Shetland is in our hands, and the next it sounds like every Republican force within three kilometers of the base has been wiped out.

We managed to settle down a little bit a few days ago, right after we took out those three Falcons. Everyone regrouped and took a breather. We were supposed to have the base under control by now, but the damn Falcons are stubborn. Still, we made some headway, and we thought a big push would finally put the thing in our hands. So we regrouped and repaired, and then we pushed.

And it may be in our hands. All I know is Breverman and I have circled the thing about three times looking for a way in, only to meet a Falcon 'Mech or a couple battle armor squads or something else that kept us from rejoining everyone else. And when we try to coordinate with the rest of the troops, they're always on the opposite side of the base from us. Ain't that always the way?

## 24 June 3135

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### ***Outside Base Shetland, Skye, Prefecture IX***

I'm recording this on the march. Is it the smartest thing I've ever done? Maybe not, but I don't feel too distracted.

Me and Breverman had Slantsky with us yesterday, but he got orders to head north, so it's just the two of us again. We've been staying in motion today, just like each of the last two days, waiting for an opening. We see Falcons here and there, but we feint and they dodge (or vice-versa), and nothing happens.

We're pretty sure the base is ours now, but it's pretty well surrounded. We need to—

What in hell was that? Brever—Brever, did you see that? Three o' clock!

Yeah, yeah, I see them. Only two of them, even numbers. I like those odds. Let's go.

Spread out a little. That's good. Okay, be patient. Wait for it. . . .

Look out! Look out! Incoming, from the air! Ten o' clock. Back, back, back!

No, not 'Mechs. There's too many of them! Turn around and move back!

Brever! Brever, do you read?

Dammit, Brever—oh, hell—stop recording. Stop—

## 29 June 3135

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### ***Base Shetland, Skye, Prefecture IX***

My damn fault. We were careless. We'd been loping around for days, barely firing a shot, and I guess we thought the Falcons weren't taking things seriously. Like they'd just harass us until we found an opening, and we'd skip through to the base without a problem.

But the Falcons weren't just goofing around. Of course they weren't—whenver have they? They wanted to keep us isolated until they could launch a serious assault. And did they ever.

The battle armor may have jumped from an aero unit, they came from so high. They focused on Brever, not worrying that I was pummeling them. Took off almost all of Brever's right side. His arm hung useless, and he was practically hopping as he tried to get closer to me so that I could cover him. But the Falcon 'Mechs were ready. He was so slow. They reduced him to rubble.

All I could do was run. They came after me, melting away every last bit of armor on my backside before I gained the base. But I'm here. And because I was pretty much asleep at the switch, Breverman isn't.



## 30 June 3135

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We're getting our asses handed to us everywhere, it seems. If we don't start doing a better job keeping our wits about us—myself included—The Republic isn't going to be around much longer.

After-Action Report by Lieutenant Francis Forbes, Fusilliers Lance, A Company, 3rd Battalion, First Kearny Regiment, Republic Armed Forces, regarding an engagement on Planet Scheat, Prefecture III

We were on a routine patrol through the warehouse district when the attack came. Captain Withers was leading the lance in his *Centurion*; I was next in my *Panther*; and then Lieutenant McMillan in her *Arbalest*, with Lieutenant Sannel in his modified AgroMech bringing up the rear. We were traveling single-file because this was—we thought—the only street in the area capable of supporting BattleMechs.

We found out we were wrong when McMillan called out a thermal contact to our right, and then we got a bunch of blooms all around. They must have been hiding with their reactors powered down to keep us from spotting them before they ambushed us. The first rounds slapped into Sannel's right shoulder, cutting the ammo feed to his AC5 and knocking his AgroMod clear over on its side. Then the building in front of the captain just disintegrated, collapsing across the street. It was classic—cutting off the front and the rear of a column before hitting the trapped units themselves.

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The warehouses were supposed to be cleared out of civvies, so the captain ordered weapons hot right away. Captain Withers cut loose with his LRM pack, but I never saw any secondaries, so he either missed or just hit armor. It was just after McMillan started blasting that I spotted the first of our attackers. It was a 'Mech I hadn't seen before, and my computer couldn't ID it, but it was certainly a Snake. It had legs like the new *Shiro* the Snakes have been using and a head like a samurai helmet, complete with a half-moon crest. I didn't get much time to look, though, because this thing was blazing away with a pair of pulse lasers at the captain's *Centurion*, melting a nasty gash in his torso. The Kurita 'Mech followed up with the autocannon mounted up in its right shoulder like on a *Shockwave*. Damn Snake hit the exact same hole that his lasers had made, and by the secondary explosions, I knew the captain was done for.

I brought up my PPC and gave it a blast, but I just glanced the reinforced armor on its left shoulder. From the sound of things, McMillan was giving something hell behind me. She had to be racking up some major heat the way she was ripple-firing her LRMs and cutting loose with her lasers. The 'Mech in front of me stepped past Captain Withers and brought up the strange double-bladed weapon in its right hand to carve me open. I couldn't step back, because McMillan was right there, and I didn't feel like bumping 'Mechs with her, so I had nowhere to go.

Just before the Snake got to me, Sannel's AgroMod appeared right between me and the big red Kurita 'Mech. Sannel brought up his 'Mech's harvesting blades and started fencing with the thing. I turned around, shuffling in my *Panther* to keep from smashing into anything in the close quarters. As I got part-way around, I saw McMillan's 'Mech fall, one leg chopped clean off by another one of those new Snake 'Mechs. At the same moment, I heard a shout on my comm, and I looked back to see Sannel go down too.

I admit it: I didn't stay around to see if any of them were alive. I knew my *Panther* wasn't up to taking even two of these things, and I was pretty sure there were more around. I popped off both my SRM pods and a shot from my PPC into one of the 'Mechs, and then I stepped down hard on my jump jets and got out of there.

## 04 July 3135

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### ***Base Shetland, Skye, Prefecture IX***

Been drawing patrol duty lately. In a borrowed unit, no less, since my poor *Dasher* is still in the shop. There's not much to see as we walk around. The Falcons held on for a while, but they finally seem to have recognized that we've got a good foothold here. They've ceded this small corner of the planet to us so that they can get ready to take us on somewhere else.

Did see one thing on patrol—Breverman. Or the melted, fused head of his 'Mech, with whatever remains he left behind crushed inside. I couldn't stop when I saw him, of course, but I sent the coordinates back to base. They brought him in and gave him a proper burial—still inside the head of his 'Mech, because he couldn't be separated from it. I guess that's the way to go out in this business.

## 08 July 3135

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### ***DropShip Unvanquished, Prefecture IX***

I'm leaving, but for once it's not with my tail between my legs. We got some reinforcements—troops led by a knight of the Sphere whose parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and on and on all lived on Skye. Once we took Shetland, the guy most likely annoyed the paladins day and night in order to get the chance to safeguard a little piece of his homeland, and they relented. So he comes in with a body of fresh troops, and we go out. Fair enough. I came, I saw, I blasted a few Falcons to pieces, and we won a battle. We didn't save The Republic—or even planet Skye—but, for once, we made the right kind of progress.

Now it's time to put a picture of all of The Republic's enemies on a dartboard (if you can find one big enough) and guess which one we're going after next.

**13 July 3135**

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***JumpShip Indomitable, Prefecture IX***

Three days. Three lousy days.

I'm taking this guy's name, Knight Castor Hobbes, and writing it down in my book. Don't know what I'm going to do with it, but it makes me feel better to put him on the list. The list of Galactic Idiots Who I Hate.

He begged, he pleaded, he whined to go to Skye, he got sent to Skye, and he promptly got his sorry behind kicked off Skye. In three days. Everything we did there wiped out, just like that. Breverman's grave is back in Jade Falcon territory.

I'm no tactical expert, but I'm pretty sure continually throwing troops into battle, losing some of them, and realizing absolutely no gain at all is a pretty quick way road to extinction. And that's the path we're on. Battling our way to extinction. Grab a piece of The Republic now, folks—it's going fast! Supplies are limited! This offer won't last long!

Damn him.

**18 July 3135**

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***JumpShip Indomitable, Prefecture IX***

It feels like our final destination changes with every leap. I have no way of knowing this—the proud tradition of not telling the grunts anything continues—but that’s sure the way it looks to me. I traced a path based on our first jumps and guessed that we were heading toward the border of Prefecture II or III. But now we seem to have changed course, bent back a little, like our trajectory was being pulled in by the strong gravity of Prefecture X. Best I can figure is that we’re headed to the same Prefecture we were originally destined for, just not the border.

Or at least, not the old border. There’s a good chance that it is collapsing. On all sides. Until the center of The Republic becomes a black hole.

## 22 July 3135

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### ***JumpShip Indomitable, Prefecture I***

The universe has indeed turned upside-down: We've been let in on the plans of the Powers That Be. Next up: Maybe we'll get caught up on our back pay!

Naw, things haven't gone *that* screwy.

But back to the point: We know where we're going. Shinonoi. The Matsuda continent, not far from the capital. Thousands of kilometers of farmland. Enough harvest to feed several planets. Not something we want to lose.

The trick, of course, is that farmland usually provides little-to-no cover. That's why they're telling us our destination now. They need ideas. We need to plan. We need to figure out how to use the land to our advantage. We need to win.

## 27 July 3135

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### ***JumpShip Indomitable, Prefecture I***

I came up with a really neat plan involving some of the shorter 'Mechs, like the Locust maybe, sneaking through the cornfields unseen. And it would have worked if corn actually grew as high as 8 meters. Because corn never makes it to even half that height (as far as I know, but I didn't ever hang out around corn much), it turns out my plan is pretty much a bunch of fertilizer.

But then, there's more to a battlefield than 'Mechs. If we can hide some arty, infantry, or even some battle armor in the fields, and then use the 'Mechs to herd the enemy into traps we can set up, we may yet find an advantage.

## 01 August 3135

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### *JumpShip Indomitable, Prefecture I*

I've refined my plan a little. I mean, it's all fine and good to push the enemy in one direction or another, and I feel really good about ambushes as long as they're happening to someone else, but I'm a 'Mech pilot. My job isn't to shove people around so that *other* people can blow them up—my job is to do the exploding. So I'm trying to get the ambushes to act like a wall. We'll drive the enemy into them, they'll spring up, the enemy will bounce off, and we 'Mech pilots will perform our true duty of blowing the enemy into little pieces.

Of course, because I don't have control of any infantry or arty (I barely get to decide what to do with my own machine), this plan has a good chance of coming to nothing. But I'll pass it around and see if anyone likes it.

Not that they'd tell me that they were going to use it. I think they're still upset that they told us where we're going, so the upper ranks have gotten even more closed-mouthed than normal.



## 02 August 3135

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### ***JumpShip Indomitable, Prefecture II***

Ever since we lost the HPG, getting news about other conflicts throughout the Prefectures has been a pain in the @\$\$\$. Not exactly a good situation when you're trying to decipher just which planets you can rely on for help. News has been coming in, though, slowly but surely, so we know where we might be welcome and where we won't be. The latest news says Alya in Prefecture I has fallen to the Stormhammers, who've taken it on behalf of the Lyrans Alliance.

Intelligence says that Alya doesn't have much strategic value now that I.C.E. 'Mechs have fallen out of use thanks to all the BattleMech factories being tooled up again, but when you check how close it is to Lambrecht, well . . . they might be trying for another grab in the future. I hope the higher ups will catch wise and get reinforcements out there before anything can go bad.

So, yeah, taking the planet isn't all that out of place. The weirder thing is who they reportedly fought for it in the first place—Clan Jade Falcon. Ever since the green turkeys made their huge push toward Terra, they've been perched pretty quietly. Probably recovering their supplies and sorting through all the new toys they've gotten in their big push. But now it looks like they're starting up again. Seems kind of soon for them to be gearing up again, if you ask me. Makes me wonder if they're getting help from someone else.

## 05 August 3135

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### ***JumpShip Indomitable, Prefecture II***

To all interstellar travelers who come after me, especially soldiers:

I have traveled long, and I have traveled far, and I have suffered the same things you are suffering. So, since I'm a nice, helpful guy, here are some tips to make interstellar travel a little more interesting:

- 1) In any large troop transport there's a guy who knows all the codes to make the simulator do all sorts of stuff, including letting you play 'Mech football. Find this guy. Befriend him.
- 2) Either get married before the journey or take lots of cold showers en route. The onboard romances always end in tears. And the occasional demotion.
- 3) Always, always, always take more underwear than you think you need. Never mind why.
- 4) By the second week, the shipboard exercise facilities will be a stinking mess. Learn to love jogging around the ship and exercising in your quarters.

Whoops, drill time. More tips later.

## 09 August 3135

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### ***JumpShip Indomitable, Prefecture II***

Whoever this is, I like him (or her).

HPG/Netdress: Terra #2E27-B277B-1-4E

How can I be expected to take *Republic Edge* seriously after an article like "How the Paladins Stole the Dream: the Scorpion Jar"? There's no other 'zine worth reading nowadays, with so many in the government's pockets or some noble or another. As such, I eagerly await the each issue, ready to devour the no-holds-barred, straight-shooting articles and commentary from your 'zine.

But that single article has jarred years of enjoyment and left me wondering if you haven't all suddenly found off-world bank account numbers with your names on them. In the future, I would strongly suggest that you have a second (and third) party verify Halley Aslom's "facts" before you publish another one of her articles. After all, Halley claims it was the paladins who instigated the Nobility Rebellion. Come off it!

Do some research, Halley! If nothing else, simply take a look at what is currently going on around the rest of the Sphere. Just because we don't have rapid communications anymore doesn't mean you can't download the latest dump of info from a passing merchant ship and dig for kernels of truth. Even the most meager of basic research will show that the paladins had nothing to do with it. It's the nobility. After all, it's the nobility who ran off-world following their defeat, to continue their treachery elsewhere. If you insist on publishing such error-filled, obviously anti-government drek, I'm going to have to drop my subscription.

Anonymous

## 10 August 3135

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### ***JumpShip Indomitable, Prefecture II***

Let's get right back to the list of Evan Kaiple's helpful tips for the interstellar traveler:

- 5) After the first week in space, avoid any fish-based food like the plague it is. Science has yet to discover a good way of keeping it fresh.
- 6) In space, you can get away with picking a fight with people up to 25 percent bigger than the normal range of people you like to mix it up with, as long as you keep in shape. Travel has a way of making lots of people soft.
- 7) Keep the brass on your side as much as possible. You've got nowhere to hide from them.
- 8) Security gets a little lax after the first week. You don't want to sneak into places you don't belong, but if you just start talking to people in restricted areas, you'd be surprised at how many of them will eventually invite you into restricted areas and show you some fairly cool tech.

And there you have it. Eight steps to a happier you. You're welcome.

## 11 August 3135

Got a transmission from "home" today, with some intelligence on one of the new Combine units that we've seen here and there. Looks like the Federated Suns was able to get some time with some salvage:

"Intelligence posted on Shitara in Prefecture III reports that even though the Federated Suns failed in their bid to take the planet, they were able to salvage one of the Combine's latest designs and perform a basic analysis before being overtaken by Combine forces. Our agent forwarded the following excerpt from a FedSun report before contact was lost. The transmission appears to be incomplete, and authorities are unsure if it was transmitted to Davion forces before the makeshift analysis facility was overrun.

\*BEGIN TRANSMISSION\*

Valiant efforts on the battlefield by Swordsworn forces have resulted in the acquisition of the upper torso of one of the new Draconis Combine designs. Combine forces continue to advance on our position, so our time with the salvage is limited, but we have been able to glean some information.

The salvaged unit appears to be one of the *Shiro* variants seen lately in the back lines of Combine forces, known for providing cover fire with its LRM 10 racks before having to close with opposing forces after exhausting its ammo. Though we are unable to extrapolate the amount of ammunition carried by this unit, we have determined that it carries four LRM 10 racks, two in both the left and right torsos. The ballistic weapon on its left arm has finally been identified as a LongBow 2-X autocannon, which helps explain the "stray" shots that were striking forces that should have been out of range. Furthermore, we located a damaged Guardian ECM unit in the torso. We were unable to determine whether its original location was the left or center torso. In addition to the ECM unit, we have identified an unfamiliar gyro system, apparently responsible for the unit's ability to maintain balance on its horse-like legs, which seem to be prevalent in the Combine's new designs. We are in the process of attempting to extract the gyro for shipment back for further study.

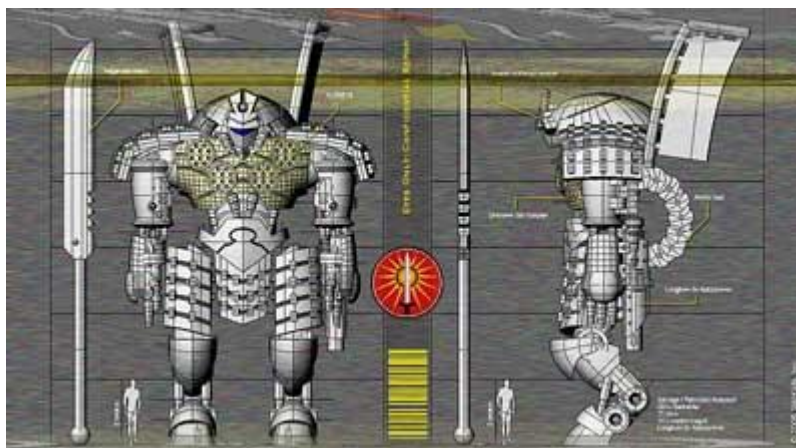
From our extrapolations, the weight of this unit should be approximately 75 tons, making it a heavy-class BattleMech. There seem to be no jump jets or locations for possible jump jets, though without the lower portion of this unit it is not possible to say with certainty. The power plant seems to be a 375 extra-light fusion engine, putting the walking speed of this unit at 54.0 km/h. Its running speed should therefore be approximately 75.6 km/h. The chassis is endo steel in construction, and from what armor remains seems to be a form of hardened armor.

What we were most puzzled by was the apparent lack of a Command/Control/Communications (C3) computer system. The Draconis Combine has been almost notorious in their use of the system, though it's entirely possible that it was completely destroyed in this

\*END TRANSMISSION\*

This report suggests that the *Shiro* units are intended to provide cover fire for other units on the battlefield, resorting to use of the large *naginata* only if forced to or after expending all ammunition. Further, there seems to be no mention of C.A.S.E. (Cellular Ammunition Storage Equipment) in what we have of the report, despite the technicians having identified the extensive use of LRM racks in this BattleMech. This suggests a absence of such technology, making the torso of this unit a prime target for heavy weapons fire if friendly forces can manage to dodge the faster *Rokurokubi* units and Tokugawa Heavy Tanks. All friendly forces are hereby advised of this information and should make use of it accordingly. Victoria Exarcho."

They sent some images, too, but it looks like they got garbled somehow. You can see the profile of the unit, but I can't make out any of the technical information. That's okay though. Any knowledge is power.



## 15 August 3135

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### ***JumpShip Indomitable, Prefecture II***

It's almost time. I've been talking to some of the other troops, listening to their ideas about fighting down on the farm, and I'm encouraged. We've got quite the range of brains here, and between the geniuses and the loonies, I think we're going to come up with something workable.

Here are some of the more interesting ideas I've heard:

- \* Get the enemy in the tallest, ripest fields we can find, and then use jump-equipped 'Mechs to spring back and forth all around them while they're caught in the thick growth.
- \* Don't spend much time on the ground. Get dropped, do some damage, find a nice empty field, get picked up, and look for a new place to be dropped. And so on.
- \* Hide our 'Mech forces as long as we can. Harass them with the short, more concealable troops, do some damage, make them think they don't have to worry about 'Mechs. Then, when they drop their guard, come at them hard.

We should learn the first steps of the actual plan in just a day or two.

## 16 August 3135

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### ***JumpShip Indomitable, Prefecture II***

What are those Nova Cats up to? Better question is who those Nova Cats are up to? A predator in every corner....

#### **Olive Drab Corner**

*by Joshua Franks*

So there I was. Sun jumping above the jagged, basalt horizon, as though eager to boil my flesh on the outskirts of Tara, at the Northwind Military Academy. Unseasonably warm this time of year, at this latitude on Northwind, I sprayed another fine mist of tepid water onto skin already wincing from the coming sunburn. I indulged a quick spray to soothe a rapidly drying mouth, holstered the small sprayer, then jumped into the back of a BFFL "Buffalo" hover cargo truck. But not before its fans hammered my ear drums and splattered my face with detritus; I licked grit from my teeth for half the ride across the tarmac.

Gave a nod to the other 'porters already aboard, then a broad grin to Sergeant McConnel, whose return grin split his face in half and made me wonder if he might be some strange Clan offshoot that genetically bred for more teeth. The sergeant yammered about this and about that—heightened security, more troops on-planet then ever before, press badges plainly visible, yadda, yadda—while I blissfully smiled, ignored him, and wondered what new toy they were going to show us. Just hoped it wasn't like last time. Don't care how fancy the new snake battle armor is, when all they show us is a large piece of melted carapace.

We passed a picket of light 'Mechs sporting colors of some unit I didn't recognize. Brain started to mull over McConnel's words and I'm suddenly perking up, trying to decipher the unit logo, as I'd not gotten a wiff of this. More units on-world? What the....

But then the truck's pulling through giant corrugated doors into a hangar, and we're being led out, and jaws are dropping at a new 'Mech sporting a burned Nova Cat logo. And I'm thinking "so the rumors are true!" And they're calling it a *Wendigo* and talking about this gun here and that gun there and I'm ignoring it all, 'cause I'm not buying what they're saying about it being taken by Republican forces. 'Cause it's just not damaged enough for that and I'm starting to wonder if rumors of Spirit Cat collusions with the Nova Cats are more real than what we thought. And more importantly, the *other* rumors of perhaps the Spirit Cats and Nova Cats not being as tight as long-lost brothers...after all, usually long-lost brothers were lost for a reason, right?

So whatever new weapons platform the *Wendigo* might be, I see it more a herald of dark things coming. After all, can we trust the Nova Cat-Spirit Cat enclaves on our worlds now? Can we trust that even if they stay neutral, the "true" Nova Cats won't come a-gunning, spilling war across even more worlds?

I for one am going to check on my two-year supply and then find a way to put more distance between myself and any Nova Cat I know.

## 19 August 3135

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### *South of Rising Sun, Shinonoi*

Well, they didn't go with the "keep the 'Mechs in reserve" plan, that's for sure.

We came down this morning, and I think every 'Mech in working condition is on the ground. We didn't directly engage the enemy, though; instead, we made planetfall in a big alfalfa field (a short crop, real easy to stomp on and maneuver through).

Best estimates put the nearest enemy about 250 km to the north. We're setting up Base Camp Alfalfa here, and then we'll move out. I'm in a new platoon, led by Captain Michelle Cane, who's about as aloof a platoon leader as I've ever seen. I hope that when it comes time to deliver orders, she'll deign to talk to me. Or at least find a servant to run across the battlefield and tell me what's up.



## 24 August 3135

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### ***Near Rising Sun, Shinoinoi***

Finally have some time to record a few thoughts.

Been exhausting. Straight 250 km march would've been nothing. But a winding march, wading through the ripe fields, is a little tougher. Then throw in the fact that enemy fire came in every time we made a move forward, so we had to fall back and look for another way to press ahead. . . .

Still, that's just driving over distance. Not too tough. But then you throw in the skirmishes. Patrols of light 'Mechs, two or three in a group, springing out of bleeding nowhere. Where could they be hiding? There's no cover *anywhere*. But one minute nothing, the next minute they're skittering around. We outnumbered and outweighed them each time, so the fights weren't difficult, but they were annoying and tiring.

Finally, today, we got to a position we thought we'd obtain three days ago. Which means we're in position for the *real* fighting—now that we're already exhausted.

**29 August 3135**

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***Near Rising Sun, Shinoioi***

Don't have much time.

They're pressing us south. Have been for two days. Knew we were in position, wanted to get us before we could attack on our own.

Combined assault—'Mechs, infantry, aerial. It's like being in an earthquake that doesn't end. The ground shakes and shakes and shakes.

I haven't taken too many shots. Mostly been ordered to take a new position, and then abandon it. We can't get settled. More of them than we thought.

The planet will be lost. I know it. But how long we hold them here may determine how many other worlds we lose.

We'll keep our feet on the ground as long as we can.

## 02 September 3135

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### *South of Rising Sun, Shinoioi*

It was a good day.

They were hammering us before dawn, a charge of spotlights and flashes of orange, red, and gold. They didn't surprise us as much as they'd hoped, but we still had to fall back under the onslaught. But we didn't go far.

We got to a river that coursed through a 15-meter-deep ravine. Slopes were gentle enough to let us walk down easily, but steep enough that we could quickly disappear from view. We went down, and Captain Cane gave the order immediately—move to their left flank. We ran, breaking away from the main force, which stayed the course to draw their fire. Then we came out of the ravine hard.

As with us, they weren't entirely surprised, but they weren't expecting us to come on so fast. Their left gave a little, and the whole front rippled. The timing was perfect: The bulk of our force turned right there and hit them while they were confused. They fell back, and we chased them all day.

Quick stop for minor repairs and a little food, and then we'll go after them again. Keep the pressure on, all night if we can.

## 07 September 3135

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### ***South of Rising Sun, Shinoinoi, Prefecture II***

Good little duel today. Caught up to a *Rokurokubi* that got separated from its squad and took it on. It was bigger than me, so I got some lasers in quick, shook up the pilot a little while draining off some armor, then dashed around and lobbed a few shells in front of him.

He wheeled to my right to try to engage on my flank and make any shots at him trickier. But he kept his speed too constant, and after a few misses I led him just right and got a few shells into his chest.

He turned again, and I was ready to lead him again when he surprised me—came to a dead stop and got some lasers off, scoring a few hits. I cursed myself for standing too still, and then went after him. He got a little damage in on me, but stopping was his fatal mistake. He couldn't get going again before my autocannon got him in the knees. Hobbled, he staggered ahead, and I closed in fast. After that it was just a matter of time.

## 12 September 3135

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### ***Near Rising Sun, Shinoinoi, Prefecture II***

I can see the city. We've seen traces of it at night—the purple light bouncing off the bottom of the clouds—for the past few days, but now we can see the city itself. The outlying areas, at least the ones we're going through, have been abandoned, and the path toward the spires of downtown seems clear enough.

They'll be there, waiting. Murton keeps saying maybe they've taken off, leaving the whole city for us, but I don't think he really believes it. Why leave the towers of the city, with all their hiding places, for the flat ground of the rest of the area? No, they're still there, and they'll be waiting for us.

I'm ready.

## 16 September 3135

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### ***Rising Sun, Shinoinoi, Prefecture II***

Block-to-block doesn't work, dammit! I keep telling Captain Cane this, but she won't listen. Slow and methodical, she keeps saying. Take a small step forward, secure the block you're on, and then get ready for the next small step. Eventually, she claims, we'll hem them in.

But that works only if they don't have a way of getting vertical and going over our heads. But they do. They've got jump jets, don't they? So what's to keep them from jumping over our heads and getting behind us into a block we thought was clear, then coming into our backs? Nothing. We don't have enough people to watch each block, or to keep anyone from sneaking by us. This fight shouldn't be about *territory*, it should be about *bodies*—going and getting the enemy, not securing bloody city blocks that probably won't stay secure.

But that's just me talking. For now, I get to keep Cane's plodding pace and wait for the snakes to sneak in from behind and bite us in the ass.

## 20 September 3135

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### ***Rising Sun, Shinoinoi, Prefecture II***

Ironically, the more tight-lipped the higher-ups get, the more they let on. We just heard about a huge recruitment drive for Republic forces back in Prefecture X. They took any and all able-bodied fighters they could get their hands on. Not that they weren't doing this already, but this one . . . well, this one was reportedly on a *massive* scale. They went to some of the schools, imported volunteers from all over the Prefectures—a huge effort. Now don't get me wrong; I'm not complaining. We all know we could use some more forces out here to try to keep the peace. But the thing is . . .

. . . we're not seeing any of them.

We just had a huge drive, but no cavalry is on the way, no reinforcements to start kicking these upstarts out of Republic space: nothing. But I've also heard that several BattleMech factories have started kicking up production. So now we've got recruits and 'Mechs somewhere in Prefecture X.

So, where are they? And what are they doing?

Or maybe the more important question is what are you doing with a bunch of trained recruits if you're not sending them out into combat?

## 21 September 3135

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### ***Rising Sun, Shinoinoi, Prefecture II***

They came from behind this morning, a few days later than I expected. The first wave charged our flank and had us reeling pretty quickly, but that was nothing compared to the second wave, the one that dropped from above. They lost most of their units in that wave—they were smaller, lightly armored—but they messed us up. We were scrambling, out of formation. Lasers darted through the dust rising from crumbled walls, shells slammed into buildings and shattered windows, and everyone was yelling over the comm at once. I don't know what our total losses are, and my unit still hasn't reformed. We're lost on unfamiliar streets that, suddenly, are filled with enemies waiting for an ambush.

We should have just reduced every single block to rubble the first time we walked by.



## 22 September 3135

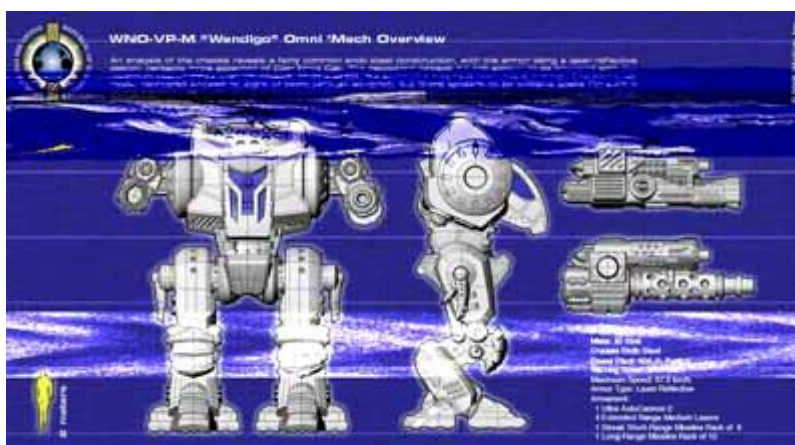
### *Rising Sun, Shinoi, Prefecture II*

Got more intelligence today on one of the 'Mechs I read about earlier, the *Wendigo*, supposedly a Nova Cat design we "captured." I guess they finally got around to dissecting the thing. The report doesn't mention anything more about how we got it, though you have to wonder if maybe a Spirit Cats benefactor was involved. Or maybe we just let someone else do our dirty work for us again; we seem to love letting the Fed Sun guys take a hit for us when it's convenient.

"Analysis of the acquired *Wendigo* salvage is nearly complete. The salvage tells us primarily that the Nova Cats have certainly not decided to abandon the OmniMech technology model. The *Wendigo* shares the same weight class as the *Shadow Cat*, explaining why our forces can never seem to take them out of commission for long. We also suspect that there may be a third OmniMech of this weight class, though we are unable to confirm its existence at this time.

"The *Wendigo* itself has a torso-mounted cockpit, apparently to make room for a long-range missile (LRM) rack of 10 in the head. Curiously, we also discovered cellular ammunition storage equipment (CASE) in the head location as well as in the left and right torsos. From most of the intelligence discovered so far, the Nova Cats share the Spirit Cats' affinity for energy-based weapons, but it would seem that they intend to expand their horizons. We suspect this is being accomplished with assistance from the Draconis Combine.

An analysis of the chassis reveals a fairly common endo-steel construction, with the armor being a laser-reflective design—certainly more than expected of Clan Nova Cat. The recovered salvage did not appear to be equipped with the maximum load of armor that the chassis could tolerate, but some of it may have been lost in combat. This particular model showed no signs of jump jets, but there appears to be available space for such equipment. We also discovered some additional double heat sinks to try to accommodate the laser weapon loadout of this unit. Here is our breakdown of the armament and particulars of the *Wendigo*:



**Mass:** 50 tons

**Chassis:** Endo Steel

**Power Plant:** 300 XL Fusion

**Walking Speed:** 64.8 km/h

**Maximum Speed:** 97.2 km/h

**Armor Type:** Laser Reflective

**Armament:**

1 Ultra AutoCannon 2

4 Extended-Range Medium Lasers

1 Streak Short-Range Missiles Rack of 6

1 Long-Range Missiles Rack of 10

From this analysis, there appears to be no glaring weakness of this model. As an OmniMech design, stripping it of its arm-mounted weapons is useless, as they can be replaced quite readily in the field. CASE offers solid protection for this model's ammunition, and additional heat sinks help ensure that even a provoked pilot will be able to maintain an appropriate heat level. Our only recommendations at this time include attempting to disrupt the head-mounted LRM rack, repeated shots at the unit's torso to eliminate the pilot, or repeated assault of the unit's legs to render it immobile."

Great. So our course of action is to shoot it until it stops moving. I wonder about this outfit sometimes. And when did the Nova Cats get so smart about ballistic weaponry?

## 23 September 3135

### *Rising Sun, Shinoi, Prefecture II*

More intelligence today, this time on an “older” ‘Mech we spotted. This one looks like a Jade Falcon design at first glance, but every variation seen of it so far hasn’t had a lick of Falcon paint. There are reports of two gunslingers—of all people—being in possession of the unit—one Celina Santos and one Aiko Ryohara. How they got their hands on Clan tech so quick is a mystery. Or, at least it was:

[BEGIN TRANSMISSION]

After several months, intelligence has finally been able to trace the origin of the *Jade Hawk* back to its source: Clan Jade Falcon space. Starting at the known source, Dynamic Ordnance and Ammunition, our operatives were able to get a foothold in the company and investigate the *Jade Hawk* project. They discovered that the plans for the *Jade Hawk* were not developed in-house, but were instead purchased from an outside (and unnamed) party. Our first suspicions led us to Eris Enterprises, a relatively new design firm, but in the process of investigating them, an operative back at D.O.A. managed to locate an obscure piece of correspondence that pointed to the true culprit: Clan Sea Fox.

The Sea Fox merchant Clan has always been an enigma, and as they are purveyors of a wide variety of goods, the sale of proprietary documents did not seem out of place. But because of the *Jade Hawk*’s distinctive heat-dissipating wing design, we were fairly confident that the original source of the design had to be Clan Jade Falcon itself. Additional legwork finally led to a meeting with a member of Clan Sea Fox, who was only too happy to broker information (as well as goods and services).

The *Jade Hawk* project undertaken by the technician caste was unusual because a prototype design was being assembled even as the development plans were taking place. Whether this is a standard practice in Clan society is unknown, though we presume not. We were informed by the Sea Fox source that not all Jade Falcon members embrace the “total war” philosophy that Galaxy Commander Malvina Hazen supports, perhaps even to the point of a possible civil war brewing within the Clan. Quite simply, a member of the *Jade Hawk* development team was apparently excessively upset by Hazen’s rumblings, and in an act of protest made off with the *Jade Hawk* plans.

The whereabouts of the technician are currently unknown; whether he or she would have chosen to abandon and defect from the Clan or remain to fight as part of a resistance force (should it get to that point) is unclear, and even our Sea Fox contact could not confirm his or her location. The plans apparently made it to Clan Sea Fox via a third party. The original procurer of the plans specified only that they not fall into another Clan’s hands; the shame would be greater for the designs to show up in the hands of the Inner Sphere. True to their word, Clan Sea Fox sold the plans to an Inner Sphere company, and D.O.A. has begun very limited production of the design as they attempt to reverse engineer parts of it.

Operatives at D.O.A. say that the intricate wing design appears to be specific to each ‘Mech; there currently seems to be no way to alter the design and apply it to other units. Because of the lack of some Clan parts, the technicians at D.O.A. did alter part of the design to create a mix of technologies. As such, we are aware of the following basic details of this design:

**Type/Model:** *Jade Hawk* JHK-03-H

**Mass:** 75 tons

**Chassis:** Endo Steel

**Power Plant:** 375 XL Fusion with Supercharger

**Walking Speed:** 54.0 km/h

**Maximum Speed:** 86.4 [108.0] km/h

**Jump Jets:** 3 Standard Jump Jets

**Jump Capacity:** 90 m

**Armor Type:** Ferro-Fibrous

**Myomer:** Triple Strength

**Weapons and Equipment:**

4 Extended-Range Small Lasers

4 SRM 6s

2 Claws

3 Standard Jump Jets

The altered plans may explain the seemingly inefficient use of tonnage in the design, though the ‘Mech seems to carry the maximum amount of armor that the chassis can tolerate. Our operatives are continuing to search for the original Clan Jade Falcon design.

[END TRANSMISSION]

## 26 September 3135

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### ***Rising Sun, Shinoinoi, Prefecture II***

We still haven't reformed. The snakes refuse to fully engage. They know this city too well, so they find a hiding place, wait, take a few potshots when they can, and then move on to a new hiding place.

I've been hit a few times. Nothing serious, but each time it came from someone leaping out from an unexpected place. I'm starting to flinch with each step, waiting for the next surprise. That's no way to fight a battle. With a little more support at my side, I'd feel better about just charging ahead and taking all comers. But I don't have that support, and I'm getting worn down. A few more lucky sniper shots and I could really be slowed. We've got to stomp them *now*.

## 30 September 3135

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### ***Rising Sun, Shinoinoi, Prefecture II***

Still ambushing us. Still sniping. Come at night a lot. Don't give me much time to sleep. Hour here, hour there, then jump up, try to suit up, go after whoever it is. Sleep in the 'Mech a lot.

Quiet's worse than the firing. The whole time it's quiet, you wonder when they're going to fire again. When the guns sound, you know—they're firing *now*. You can do something. Chase them, take a few random shots. Whatever. Get them to shut up. So you can sleep and wait.

The point is that *doing* beats *waiting* every time. Except when you die when doing.

**05 October 3135**

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***Rising Sun, Shinoinoi, Prefecture II***

We're leaving. Again. Beat back. Again. What kind of army did I put myself into? We can't hold our own bleedin' jock straps, let alone a planet.

We've been retreating for a few days, trying to pull what's left of the forces together. I've been sitting around, catching up on the news, or as much as I can—the military censors seem especially active at the moment. Found an account of fighting on Scheat that I should pass along. We should be off the ground tomorrow. Then we'll see how far we retreat.

I should mention that there's something wrong with the officers. They all have this terrible, haunted look in their eyes. I have no idea why, and they all deny there's anything wrong. But they seem a little . . . I don't know, aimless. Adrift. And they're not telling us why.

**10 October 3135**

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***JumpShip Stonewall, Prefecture II***

We're at the jump point, the ship seems to be charged, and we're not going anywhere. I've never seen anything like this. It's pretty common for the grunts to joke about how clueless the brass is, but we've never seen them this *lost*. Most of them don't even seem capable of completing a sentence. They speak two words at a time, and then stop. I was talking to Captain Cane, asking her when we might actually get somewhere, and this is what she said: "Well, there's . . . maybe in . . . I'm not . . . just wait."

I swear that's an exact transcript of what she said. And it's not just her. It's all of them. It's like one of those horror movies in which people have their brains sucked out and become useless zombies in human form. And the useless zombies are in charge.

**14 October 3135**

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***JumpShip Stonewall, Prefecture II***

I know now. They told us. They knew they couldn't keep it a secret forever. So they made a general announcement, and then had individual commanders give us more detailed briefings.

It boils down to this—we're on our own. The command structure has, for all intents and purposes, removed itself from the Inner Sphere. Prefecture X is a fortress, and for those of us who aren't there—well, like I said, we're on our own.

We're not going to hold on to everyone. Some people are going to go home first chance they get. Others are going to go mercenary, figuring they don't have a country anymore so they probably don't have a paycheck.

I can't say I blame those who are leaving, but I'm staying. Some circumstances have changed, but the big picture hasn't. There's still a Republic—no matter how remote it is now—and it still has enemies. So I'll fight them. Just tell me where.

**19 October 3135**

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***JumpShip Stonewall, Prefecture II***

Something strange today. I got a verigraphed message, my eyes only. Usually the only way I get messages is when my CO barks them at me—so this was odd. And what it said only made it weirder: There is a meeting in the enlisted quarters of Company Bravo at 2300 hours tomorrow. First of all, who has meetings in enlisted quarters? Second of all, who in that first group has ever talked about something so important they need to send out verigraphed invitations?

So, of course, I'm going. They aroused my curiosity, and because we still have a few weeks before we reach our destination, that's worth something.



**24 October 3135**

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***JumpShip Stonewall, Prefecture II***

I made a mistake.

I shouldn't have gone to the meeting. I knew it sounded strange, and I should've used that as an excuse to stay away. Instead, I stepped forward and put my foot right in it.

It was a recruitment meeting. They didn't say what they were recruiting for, but I've got a few good guesses what they're all about. They looked like they had two types of people there: those sympathetic to their cause (easy to identify because they complained about the brass every other sentence) and those they think they can control.

I'm in the second group. They've got surveillance footage of my dust-up last May with Shackleton (who, by the way, is in this up to his nose), and they say I don't come off too well. If I remember right, I threw the first punch. I think the second, third, and fourth were mine, too.

The thing is, Shackleton and I both played it stupid after the fact, and no one got in trouble for anything. But if they come out with this, the army could start up a court martial if they wanted to. They think they have my ass in a sling.

We'll see.

## 28 October 3135

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### ***JumpShip Stonewall, Prefecture II***

They're putting firmer pressure on now. They've got a simple part for me, one that won't compromise me. I said "Compromise me? Why would anything you want me to do compromise me?" And they clam up, as if they could hide what they're planning. As if I didn't know they're thinking mutiny.

I knew we'd lose a few troops once the government abandoned us, but the plotters want to take the whole ship and all hands aboard. They want to take us somewhere safe and opt out of the endless losing streak this war has become. I don't know why they don't just leave on their own—why they want to drag the whole ship with them—but that's what they want. And they want me in.

I'm supposed to volunteer for overnight duty in Security Post 3 in two weeks (MechWarriors in transit don't have much else to do besides ride the simulators, so they try to keep us occupied by making us volunteer for menial work). It's that, or they try to get me court martialed.

I'm not fond of either option.

## 01 November 3135

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### *JumpShip Stonewall, Prefecture II*

This finally trickled through...too little, too late:

"Your regiment may be seeing a new light BattleMech join its ranks in the near future, the *Havoc*. Complete details on the deployment of this unit are still being processed. Further information will be disseminated as it becomes available. Details of this BattleMech follow. All regiment commanders should begin developing plans as though this unit were joining their ranks.

**Type/Model:** *Havoc* HVC-P6-L

**Mass:** 35 tons

**Chassis:** Endo Steel

**Power Plant:** 280 XL Fusion

**Walking Speed:** 86.4 km/h

**Maximum Speed:** 129.6 km/h

**Jump Capacity:** 150 meters

**Armor Type:** Ferro-Fibrous

**Manufacturer:** Adam Tech Ind.

**Armament:**

2 Extended-Range Medium Lasers	RA
2 Extended-Range Medium Lasers	LA
1 SRM 4	CT
(Ammo SRM4 50)	LT
CASE II Equipment	LT

Commanders will develop their own uses for this unit, though it is recommended that it be used primarily to soften up targets for heavier-hitting units."

For the sake of mental exercise, I'm actually taking the time to analyze this piece. Looking at the rest of the specs, it doesn't seem to be a bad design. It's packed incredibly tight; there's no unused tonnage on this thing anywhere. And from what I can see it has 97% of the armor it could have. It does, however, look like it would run hot for an aggressive pilot. I wonder if they held back on the heat sinks? The jump jets are a little limited at 150 meters, but with the armor it's got, it should be fairly survivable.

Too bad we're on our own and not likely to see any of these anytime soon. Besides, I've got my own problems....

## 02 November 3135

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### ***JumpShip Stonewall, Prefecture II***

I did it. I haven't told Shackleton and his cronies yet, but I did it. I asked for volunteer duty, overnight, Security Post 3. There's no harm in doing that. I still haven't decided if I'm in their plan or not. I could opt out and still do the guard shift—hell, that might help me foil whatever they're up to. But at least I have the position squared away, so I can take my time, decide at the last minute, and still be able to do what they want me to do.

I don't want to be court martialed. I don't want to lose my 'Mech for even a second. When we hit the ground, I want to walk out in my *Dasher* and take care of business. That's what I can't stop thinking about.

**07 November 3135**

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***JumpShip Stonewall, Prefecture II***

Shackleton's steered clear of me. He and his whole gang. They know if they talk to me, I'll be pressing them for info, trying to find out what's going to happen on the 11th, what it is they want me to do. And because they don't want me to know anything more than they've already told me, they figure the best way to keep me in the dark is to stay away from me entirely.

That leaves me to guess. It could be that I'm just supposed to turn a blind eye to whatever they may want to do that day, but I don't think that's it. They've got pretty good leverage on me, and I think they want to use it to get me to do more than just close my eyes and not see a few things.

Whatever it is, I'll be ready.

**11 November 3135**

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***JumpShip Stonewall, Prefecture II***

I shouldn't . . . shouldn't be talking. I should just stay here. Hide. Until it all goes away.

There aren't enough places to hide. I need to move. Been here too long. They'll look here. They'll hear my voice. I shouldn't talk.

But I've been here for hours. My third hiding place. Been in hiding since Shackleton burst into Station 3, asking for codes. I wouldn't hand them over. I decked him, made a break, outraced him. Went into ducts, closets, anyplace out of view.

I can't feel my legs anymore. Too cramped. Brain running in endless circles. Need something. So I'm recording.

Footsteps coming. Quiet now.

**16 November 3135**

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***JumpShip Stonewall, Prefecture II***

I'm in a slightly bigger room now. They ran out of space in the ship's brig, and so they threw a few people into utility closets, which are where most of the ringleaders are: They figured it would be better to keep a full-time guard on all the real troublemakers instead of the lackeys. I'm judged as a lackey—right now—so I get to be in the brig.

I haven't even said who's holding me yet, or what happened, have I? Sorry. Been a difficult few days. I'm under arrest by the ship's brass, accused of conspiring to mutiny. As far as I know, they've got everyone, and I don't know how the trials are going to go. It's not like we can just wait for direction from Prefecture X.

I hope I get to explain myself soon. So they know what I did to—

Door's opening. Gotta go.

## 21 November 3135

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### ***JumpShip Stonewall, Prefecture II***

Don't they know? Don't they *remember*? They're the ones who taught us how to resist interrogation, how never to give away anything, no matter what techniques are thrown at us. So when they question us, shouldn't they be *proud* when they can't get what they want out of us? Shows all their hard work is paying off.

Their tactics are particularly useless on me, as I'm already telling them the truth. They just don't want to believe it. They want me to be a conspirator; they want my volunteering for guard duty to look incriminating instead of what it was—a good chance to get someone against the mutiny in a position to screw the thing up.

And I did. I broke Shackleton's jaw before I had to run from his other goons. I'm just having trouble convincing them of that. They knew someone broke his jaw, but there are so many people who wanted to hit him that it's tough to convince them that I'm the one who actually did it. Especially because they want to believe I'm a bad guy.



## 25 November 3135

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### ***Lindon's Folly, Styx, Prefecture II***

I'm on the ground but still in the brig. We hit Styx, linking up with units already fighting the Dracs here. I guess that combined with our reinforcements, the brass already on the ground will be able to put together a decent court and get me tried. Whether we'll ever get organized enough to do some damage to the *enemy* is another question.

The good news is that the possible charge against me due to my earlier beating of Shackleton is gone. No one cares about that now. The only thing they'd punish me for now is not permanently disabling him back then so that he couldn't survive to cause trouble now.

The bad news is that the charges I'm up against are much, much more serious.

## 30 November 3135

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### ***Lindon's Folly, Styx, Prefecture II***

I know I probably shouldn't be impatient. If I were a civilian, I'd have to wait for a few months before I got even a preliminary hearing. I've been locked down for only two weeks, but I can't stop wondering what's taking them so long. I want to clear my name, get out of here, and climb back into my *Dasher*.

What makes it worse is that I hear the sounds of fighting every day. Distant explosions, the occasional whistle of a passing artillery shell. And sitting here in a plain white box . . . I can't do anything about it. There's enemies out there, I can go fight them, and for once the powers that be on Terra won't order us off. We don't have to worry about the part we play in the bigger picture because for us, there is no bigger picture. There's only here and now, and I want to get out of here. Right now.

**05 December 3135**

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***Lindon's Folly, Styx, Prefecture II***

The guy acting as my counsel said it would've been a good idea for me to leave fingerprints on Shackleton's jaw when I hit him. Ha ha. But he's right—there's no proof I'm the one who did it. They blacked out surveillance with an electromagnetic pulse just before they came in and met unexpected resistance in the form of me, so there's no record of what happened, besides the testimony of the people involved.

Naturally, Shackleton and company are trying to sell me up the river, saying that I was their cheerful collaborator before ship security came and messed up their plans. It's my word against theirs—except for one thing. They slipped up and gave me a trump card. When I play it—and it will be soon, believe me—this will be over.

## 09 December 3135

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### ***Lindon's Folly, Styx, Prefecture II***

I showed my hand today. I wasn't about to turn my evidence over to just anyone—I didn't want to give the footage to someone I thought was on my side only to have them make it conveniently disappear. But when I got before the tribunal, I figured it was the right time, and my counsel backed my up. So we showed it off.

It would have been nice if it were footage from the recruitment meeting, but they'd scanned that room too thoroughly to let any surveillance slip through. If I'd had that, I would've blown the cover off the operation before anything happened. What I managed to get was something from afterward, something from a camera in a corridor. I was being escorted to a new cell when I passed by Freeson—one of the plotters—and he "accidentally" bumped into me. He took the opportunity to mutter a few threats about setting me up if I said anything—and I took the opportunity to duck out of the way of the camera so that it would have a clear view of the motion of his lips. My counsel found a decent lip reader, and the rest was simple.

I expect to be out in a week.

**14 December 3135**

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***Lindon's Folly, Styx, Prefecture II***

It was even better than a week—I got out in five days. All charges dismissed. I'm done with the whole thing now. They wanted me to turn informer, but I just wanted to put it all behind me, so I said I didn't really know anything other than the fact that I hit Shackleton.

I'm not back in the field yet. They want me on probation, as if they dropped all charges but want to keep an eye on me to make sure they didn't make a mistake. So I'm hanging around the base, desperately hoping for someone to give me a menial task, waiting for them to figure out that dismissing charges should mean the whole thing never happened.

I don't think they'll take very long. The explosions outside are getting closer, and I don't think they can afford to leave any of us sitting on the bench.

## 15 December 3135

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So you talk to a lot of people when you're crisscrossing the Inner Sphere, and one thing that's always the same is that everyone has a favorite joke, and they always want to tell it to you. Some of the jokes I've heard aren't fit for civilized ears (and I'm certainly not going to repeat them here), but some of them are (sort of) funny, and certainly telling as to what people are thinking. There are a few jokes that are the same all across the Inner Sphere, and only the ancient knock-knock joke is more common than the "light bulb" joke. I've recorded a few of the best of these that I've heard in my travels:

**How many Cappies does it take to screw in a light bulb?**

One, but he'll die for his emperor in order to do it.

**How many Wobbies does it take to screw in a light bulb?**

We could tell you, but then we'd have to kill you.

**How many AFFS troopers does it take to screw in a light bulb?**

Thirteen. One to scout out the terrain around the bulb, one to establish a link to headquarters to give them up-to-date information, four to provide covering fire, four more to secure the ladder, one to screw in the light bulb, and two to cover everyone else's retreat.

**How many Dracs does it take to screw in a light bulb?**

Three. One to screw in the light bulb, one to watch the other and make sure he's doing it honorably, and one to sneak off and tell the yakuza what the other two are doing.

**How many DEST commandos does it take to replace a light bulb?**

None. DEST commandos were the ones who unscrewed it in the first place—they like it dark.

**How many Nova Cats does it take to screw in a light bulb?**

One, but he has to ask the Dracs if it's okay first.

**How many Falcons does it take to replace a light bulb?**

The light bulb is degraza for going out in the first place; it must be destroyed!

**How many Rassies does it take to replace a light bulb?**

A full Galaxy of 'Mechs, but we are doing it only for your protection.

**How many Steiners does it take to replace a light bulb?**

Why replace one little light bulb when you can set up a halogen spotlight instead?

**How many Bannson's Raiders does it take to screw in a light bulb?**

Dunno, how much does it pay?

**How many Spirit Cats does it take to replace a light bulb?**

None, we don't need the light to guide us when we have our visions.

**How many Wolf Clansmen does it take to screw in a light bulb?**

Two. But they'll both claim to be the one who should screw the light bulb in, and won't let the other one do it, so neither will actually be able to get the job done.

**How many Mariks does it take to screw in a light bulb?**

Who knows, there are so many Marik pretenders nowadays, you can't tell them apart.

**How many Sea Fox merchants does it take to replace a light bulb?**

Don't just replace it! Upgrade it with this new model at half off.

**How many members of the Republic Armed Forces does it take to screw in a light bulb?**

None, they all ran back to their Fortress already.

Although none of these were told by the group they describe, and I'm sure that each group would protest most vigorously, they do say something about the situation of the Inner Sphere these days, and unfortunately, I think the last one says the most.

## 19 December 3135

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### ***Lindon's Folly, Styx, Prefecture II***

Geez, I must be some sort of prophet. I say I'm going to be out of the brig in a week, and I get out in five days. I say they won't be able to leave me on the sidelines too long, and they put me in a new company the next day. I'm in my machine, pushing against the Dracs, and if I'm not exactly happy, I'm close enough.

The company I'm in has an odd quirk (don't they all?). There's a 'Mech pilot named Charisse who clearly, to me at least, is about the best jockey of the whole group. But they keep ragging on her, saying something about a Ghost. The minute she reports any enemy sighting, there's at least three voices coming over the comm telling her not to worry—her Ghost will save her! She usually doesn't say anything back.

I'll have to talk with her sometime to find out what all the fuss is about.

## 23 December 3135

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### ***Lindon's Folly, Styx, Prefecture II***

Charisse is a little odd, but she's plenty good. I've talked to her a lot these past few days, and she's different from the hard-eyed, kill-'em-all norm for a MechWarrior. She worries a lot about the residents of Styx, and she never seems sure whether we should be calling them citizens of The Republic or of the Combine. Weird.

But she's not soft. When it's time to hit, she hits as hard as anyone. My lance was next to hers yesterday and we pushed a Drac line back a good 10 kilometers, and she led the charge the whole way. She's got guts.

The fighting here is back and forth. We get a 10-kilometer push on one side, they respond by coming into the suburbs on the other. Neither of us can get the upper hand for long. But this is one fight we won't run from. They can order me off if they want, but I'm staying. I'll be the one-man planetary militia if I need to be, but I'm not giving up this ground.



## 28 December 3135

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### ***Lindon's Folly, Styx, Prefecture II***

Best day yet. Unified push on all fronts, hit them hard, shoved them back. They couldn't get an artillery shell within 5 kilometers of the suburbs now if they tried.

Went one-on-one with a Centurion—long, long fight. He had the weight, but I had the speed, and I ran back and forth all afternoon, waiting to get the right angle on him, launching shots into his side, into his back, even charging him once or twice to keep him off balance. Took a lot of damage, but brought him down.

Now I'm tired. Really, really tired. Sleep for a while, get up, do it again. Keep pushing them back. Every day they'll move back until The Republic is restored.