

Through a mirror darkly
"I am not a leader of men, because I prefer to follow"
Nickelback Leader of men

Chapter 1 Beginnings

Historians will look back at the Star League and say it was a golden age. A paradise some will say. Maybe, but it's gone now. To say Stefan Amaris ruined it is too simple. The truth is we, in our hubris, lost sight of what we had. It's an old story, repeated time and time again. Our story is what came after.

Bruce (Free Falling over Manhattan Island.)

Combat drops are always unnerving, I mean there's something wrong about being dumped blind out of a perfectly good DropShip. Something really wrong when you consider the other guy is gonna do all he can to bring you to a sudden, permanent and messy marriage with the ground. Still there is a certain malefic beauty to it all. When the drop cocoon splits away and your 'Mech comes alive around you the sky is alive with a fireworks show few ever get to see. Above me the SLS Tiger Claw and SLS Farragut filled the sky with fire as their area denial barrages kept our drop corridor clear of Amaris SAMs and the bulk of his fighters. Skimming around like deadly fireflies, careful to keep clear of the big cruisers firing solutions the Rapiers and Hammerheads of the Rakshasha's flew MIGCAP and ground strike missions. Beautiful until you realized those fireworks were Captain Matos' command lance being picked apart by Amaris Corvin heavy fighters. And that big ball of light was the Fortress class Mangelot taking a mixed battalion to a fiery end.

Hussy's threat warnings lit off as a ground based radar began to track the big Marauder. Despite the millions of drop pod fragments and other chaff floating about it's almost impossible to miss a 75-ton fusion powered beast with all the radar cross section of a T-Rex. My HUD began tracking two Arrow VI surface to air missiles homing in on me. Hussy however, wonderful bitch that she is, could do more than be a sitting, or rather falling duck. SAM's throw off enough heat from their engines that my sensors could track them even at several miles. The real question was, could I aim and shoot without throwing my 'Mech out of control.

Shifting gently in the linear frame that controls my 'Mech, I brought the blocky right vambrace that made up Hussy's left forearm. At two clicks out I let go with whip slash from the Magna Hellstar PPC encased within. The nice thing about the particle cannon is that you don't have to actually hit dead on. It's basically a lightning bolt you flick like a whip throwing off spurs that seek out large metal objects and electromagnetic energy sources. Like the delicate seeker head of a SAM. The first missile didn't so much explode as simply spiral out of control. The second however came on looking just like a damned flying telephone pole. And its' twisting spiraling flight took it out of my sights.

Fuck me I thought, *it's pucker time.*

Then at 300 meters the missile burst into incandescence. And a sleek steel shark blew by at almost the speed of sound. A Hammerhead ground attack fighter from Gold squadron had swatted the missile with its' massive 30mm gatling. Of course the big fighters' passing whipped my 'Mech around and off the thrust pillar provided by the strap on thrusters.

Bite me Mr. Murphy, I thought.

Sarah (On the ground, Ten Klicks below Hussy's feet.)

Sarah Elizabeth Davion, 12th in line to the Federated Suns throne, daughter to Duke Paul Davion, unofficial ambassador to the Amaris Empire, was scared out of her wits. Unable to escape from Terra during the Usurpers campaign she had grown up during Amaris rule on Terra. Her father's shipping concerns and connections had made him perfect to handle the constant under the table lines of communications that even the worst enemies shared, while his family status made even the worst Rim World troops pause. Going to school with other non-Terran notables her life had seemed unchanged. There was of course the undercurrent of fear. No one talked about of course, that was Just Not Done. When her best friend Talia had disappeared, they'd told themselves she'd moved away, when the 22nd Regulars had executed a thousand "rebels" in Madison Square Garden, well, they must have done something wrong, even the children. These are the things you tell yourself to get by. Then suddenly everything changed. The "rebels" became real, strikes at the Amaris military, and the assassinations of collaborators became a daily occurrence. Word from her father's sources told of Star League fleets and

armies striking within one jump of Terra. Sarah's school had been closed and a squad of Amaris regulars came to "safeguard" them. These hard cruel men terrified her, especially their leader, Major Dupre. Soft voiced and cultured, Sarah knew he'd served time for murder before his father, one of Stephan Amaris' supporters, had bought his position. He'd been strictly professional since day one but the way he looked at her...

Speak of the devil, Sarah thought.

Instead of his usual immaculate duty uniform, the Major was in full battle dress, a wicked subgun slung under his arm. Striding in with the rest of his squad, Dupre found himself face to face with Sarah's aunt Gladys. Gladys Maribeth Davion 70 year old matron of the family, veteran of the 3rd Davion Guards, had been a fixture in Sarah's life for most of her nineteen years. Sharing her rich red hair but having her father's stout build, the elder woman stood in the Major's path.

"Major Dupre, what is the meaning of this?" Gladys tone held a note of command that even the Rim Worlders had respected.

The Major's pale blue eyes met her aunt's hard gray ones.

"Lady Gladys we have orders to move you and Miss Sarah to a secure location, please come with us."

Sarah caught the tension in his voice and noticed the shifting looks in the men crowded in the corridor behind him.

"Surely we can wait till His Grace returns, and we must pack, perhaps if you told me..."

The Majors strike was so fast Sarah almost missed it. His right arm shot up clutching his subgun. The weapons butt caught Aunt Gladys on the cheek. Despite her age, old reflexes still kicked in, and she rolled with the hit but still collapsed at the Major's feet.

"*His Grace* will not be returning, Lady Gladys, nor will you need anything where you're going. Now do I need to repeat my self?"

Sarah stood stunned as her aunt picked herself up and coldly stared back at the blond officer.

"No Major you do not, She turned to Sarah taking her hand with sorrow in her voice.

Come Sarah we must go with these... *Gentlemen*."

As the Amaris soldiers hustled them to a waiting armored car, a flash of light caught Sarah's eye from above. In a daze she stared up at the shower of lights in the sky. With a growl Major Dupre grabbed her arm and shoved her into the car's back. Looking up briefly he whispered

"Damn them, they've broken through." His Rim Worlds drawl breaking through his normal accentless speech.

In the back of the armored car the soldiers whispered amongst themselves, and Aunt Gladys took the opportunity to lean over and whisper in Sarah's ear;

"Be strong dear, remember you are a Davion."

But all Sarah could think of was one thing.

'Daddy?'

Bruce (On the ground, a bit worse for wear.)

The TACNET whined in my skull like a nagging parent that's what finally woke me. I'd managed to survive my landing but as my head cleared, I saw plenty of yellows on Hussy's displays. A quarter of my armor gone, right ankle twisted; the myomer kinked in a couple of places. A RimJob trooper trying to fix a satchel charge to my cockpit window..... The 5cm laser in my right arm went from green to red and back again; some kinda short. Wait a minute. WTF.

Hussy responded to my thoughts with motion, I can only imagine the look on the Rimmer's face as Hussy stood. Like some medieval peasant come face to face with a waking dragon. With pretty much the same ending. I felt the satchel charge go off against my foot as it slammed into the Rim Worlds trooper and passed through him with about as much resistance as you'd feel if you kicked a tube of toothpaste. Yuck.

I sprayed laser fire into the row of parked cars the Rimmers took cover in. Mind you the power a Magna MK IV 5cm laser puts out can cause even steel to burn, so hiding behind a car, not the best option. A fuel cell ignited in one of the cars sending bits of steel and human flying.

City Hall, I thought absently looking around. Training really does take over by the way, for the record, my mind wasn't really functioning for those first few seconds. It wasn't until I headed up Broadway towards a cluster for green IFF symbols that my brain registered as the rest of my company that I realized how close to becoming a pasty mess for some salvage crew I'd actually come.

Shit.

I could hear Gracie Liu and Jack Benning tangling with a mixed lance two blocks up so I hustled up the street and around the corner just as Gracie screamed out.

"Atlas!"

Gracie and Jack both piloted Lynxes, medium weight 'Mechs long on fire power but add even an older model AS-7D to the mix of Manticore MBTs and Infantry they were facing and you've got a negative outcome in the making. This Atlas however, must have been looted from one of our own depots cause it tore in to Gracie's Lynx "Bitch Queen" with a Gauss slug and a pair of heavy lasers on it's arms.

"Watch it guys, this asshole's in a -7T." I yelled as I pulled all my triggers. Hussy shrieked as her 300 extra light reactor struggled to provide the power for what's known as an Alpha Strike. Terran 'Mechs are made better than anything the provincial House Lords can field, we hit harder move faster and are tougher to kill. Even so the wave of heat overwhelmed the armored cooling suit I wore. Was worth it tho'.

The RimJob in the Atlas had been so fixated on taking out "Bitch Queen" he'd actually not even seen me. The faulty right arm laser failed but its' sister in my left arm carved the shark insignia on the Atlas' right torso. The lash of the twin Magna Hellstars mated to the lasers met in the same place and the glow of molten metal turning into vapor made my neurohelmet visor black out the hit to save my eyes. So I missed my gauss slug punching through to go skipping down the street. The hits twisted the armored giant around and knocked him down. As it rose the skull face on the hundred tonner gave me a dirty look. (If you don't believe me then go pick a fight with one, they're made that way, I swear, Tigers Honor.) It then proceeded to kick my ass. Hussy actually came off of the ground as the massed firepower of the Atlas punched into her lower torso. Beer can shaped short ranged missiles punched holes in her armor, 8cm laser fire carved into one of these openings slashing into my reactor shielding. As heat welled up from the reactor hit the Atlas' own gauss rifle hit me in what would have been Hussy's crotch. I doubled over in her linear frame spreading my arms for balance and sending the claw footed machine on its toes. Warning lights screamed red and yellow, the unnerving calm of Hussy's computer warned of imminent shut down. Thumbing the macro for shutdown override, I popped the RimJobber with another gauss slug. Gracie and Jack both told me I was cursing up a storm and carrying on like some mad preacher about how these Amaris scum would pay for their sins etc, etc.

Truth be told I don't remember a thing.

All around me things were happening so fast, Jack polishing off the last of the Manticores. Some of our SAS boys and girls riding an Amaris Phoenix Hawk to the ground and leaping off in their NightHawk suits to assault a Hunchback trying to flank us. The Atlas and I trading fire. A bunch of partisans linking up with us and keeping the swarming Amaris infantry from swamping us. Our Fire Lance linking up with us just in time as the Atlas' friends came out to play. Pushing them back the Atlas dies at St. Marks place from Cranial Gauss Trauma. Six 'Mechs from 2nd Company link up with us at 14th street five from 1st Company two blocks later. We break them at 23rd street just outside of Madison Square Park. Hussy succumbs to massed fire there, losing your 'Mechs like loosing your dog, but I'm out of the cockpit shooting an Amaris trooper who couldn't have been more than sixteen. My Colt Half Rifle turns his head into mist as I pour fire into him. A NightHawk trooper cut's his buddies down with 12mm machinegun fire. I grab a partisan former NYPD by the look of her; she's got a PRC1170 radio clipped to her belt. Need that to call fire support. The six Bombardiers I've got are all Royal Models and can drop their missiles with pinpoint accuracy. Concentrated fire kills a Stalker and shatters a company of Amaris Regulars. Then it's over. None of that "the silence was deafening" bullshit, just a shift in the cacophony. A call from partisans on 26th street gets my attention. On the way over as I'm lighting a cigarette, I realize the cops' still there. Tall must be a body builder, dusky skin and cobalt eyes.

"Got a name lady?"

"Nicole, Nicole Osis, sir"

Sir, Who the hell is that, oh yeah, me.

"Stick with me Tiger, need that radio and it looks like everybody here knows you."

"Tiger?"

"You've fought before right, she nods, so tiger"

I nod my chin a bunch of civilians who'd come out of their boltholes and were staring around aimlessly.

"Not like them, Turtles, all baby fat around the brain."

Osis shrugs and follows, a squad of SAS at our backs. I wonder why I haven't heard from anybody up the chain of command in our battalion, I knew Captain Matos bit it during the drop but the Major? Nobody

seemed to know not even Root Beer Able Battalion's senior company commander and the Colonel's son; Alex Winter (A&W get it, Root Beer, no, you colonists have no culture you know that.)Up ahead some of the turtles decided they had teeth and tangled with a platoon of Amaris regulars. Rage and bricks and bottles will only get you so far. They'd knocked off four or five before the rest opened up on 'em. Those RimJobbers though were none too bright either. They'd holed up in a parking garage just off Sixth Avenue. The civs milled around nobody wanting to try their luck. Across the avenue some more bright boys and girls were testing their rope skills on a couple of women. Collaborators I guessed, fuck what a mess. One of the women caught my eye. Damn it.

Over the TACNET, I called for Paul D'amato in his Firestarter.

"Pauly see the lynch mob over there?"

"Yeah, Eltee."

"Stop them, send those girls to help our wounded, take Sam and Dido's SAS squads with you.

Sam's Firestarter, looks at me for a second, shrugs and stalks off.

Osis looks at me puzzled. Enough of us have died, I tell her. She nods not really understanding.

One of the partisan leaders gets huffy, but you don't argue on foot with a 35 ton 'Mech designed to kill infantry as quickly and efficiently as possible. The girls trudge off under guard as we reach a crew that looks almost as hard as we do. As Osis points out the leader I notice a gas truck in the intersection.

Good thing nobody hit it.

"Lieutenant Gilmour 90th HAR"

"Rod Singh, use t'be Sergeant Singh 1127th Royal Mechanized Infantry."

Singh's a big guy probably Sikh, there are almost as many of them in the Royals as Scots. I point to the building asking if it's clear. Like many such urban apartment complexes the parking garage serves both the residents and commercial uses.

"Any body still live there?" The building above was missing three floors of facade and looked burned out but I've see worse.

"No some local resistance met there, damn fools tried to assassinate Colonel Markasian, the 22nd's c/o. Singh explained, Same boys who're holed up down there were the ones to burn out the resistance, literally.

That tore it, pointing to the gas truck, I asked if he knew anyone who could drive it.

Alex (Heading Downtown on 6th avenue and playing with sharks.)

Captain Alex Winter pulled his Black Knight; Elmo up as the Amaris Shark cut loose with both 8cm lasers. Both red beams from the 45 tonner slashed parallel lines across the Star League heavy sending a ton of armor running down its chest. As the heat in his cockpit, already high from his use of his 'Mech's heavy laser battery, rose slightly, Alex smiled cruelly.

"Nice try asshole but you're outmatched."

Pulling on his primary triggers, Alex sent a blast of equal firepower down at the squat birdlike BattleMech, carving armor from its dorsal plate. Wary of his heat he pressed down with his legs and pulled the big 'Mech into a run. Raising his arms in the linear control frame, he brought them down in a smashing motion. Mimicking him Elmo's fists slammed down on the Shark's body. Fast and maneuverable the SHR-3K Shark was designed to be a raider, armed with twin Blazer 8cm heavy lasers, with dual efficiency heat sinks and protected by eight tons of armor and a 96 kph top speed. The Rim Worlds machine fills its' role admirably becoming the bane of SLDF forces. It was not however meant to stand up to a top of the line Terran heavy like Elmo. Especially not in the close quarters of a city fight. The Rim Worlds Regulars' 'Mech's back caved in and it collapsed back on its birdlike legs. As he lifted his fists out of the wrecked enemy 'Mech Alex noticed a smear of red on his right hand. The TACNET crackled to life.

"Lion Two to Lion Six, Boss you okay over there?"

Lion Two, JoJo's Bombardier was a block over on 7th as Alex's company pressed through midtown Manhattan. Their unit the SLDF 90th Heavy Assault Regiment nicknamed the Black Tigers of New Vandenburg, had combat dropped directly into and around the city with support from the Ryukaze-ichi a regiment of Kurita volunteers. Surviving the long harsh space battle from the Nadir Jump Point all the way into orbit the Black Tigers' had been tasked with one of the initial drops on world. Overhead the space battle was still going on but the Rapiers and Shilones of both regiments air wings had seized a tenuous foothold. Now it was up to the Tigers to seize the city.

"Yeah JoJo, just filleted a RimJob Shark on Sixth, any word from the spaceport?"

"Yup, the Ryukaze's kicked the 22nd out of JFK and we're landing transports now."

Alex sighed, thankful, the Tigers also had the support of partisans calling in targets, civilians retired military and the NYPD, but having their own infantry was a relief. The 22nd Rim Worlds Regulars had broken after a short brutal firefight spearheaded by an ad-hoc battalion of Tiger 'Mechs, partisans and SAS troops dropped in advance of even the 'Mechs. Alex hated the damage being done to his hometown, but orders were orders. Based on Intel smuggled out by Jerome Blake's Department of Communications people among the partisans the 22nd was understrength with only a light brigade of motor rifles in support. Two heavier Amaris Dragoon Regiments outside the city handled much of the Tri-State area's defense. Two SLDF mechanized divisions were handling them in turn isolating Manhattan. The true prize, to General Aleksander Kerensky and his staff were the thirty or so members of Inner Sphere royalty the 22nd was really guarding.

Hostages.

Moving his 'Mech to the intersection of 42nd and 6th overlooking the New York Public Library, Alex hoped it was worth it, while the library was untouched much of Bryant Park was scorched and littered with debris. A full platoon of Amaris manticores had made a stand on Sixth Avenue and paid for it.

Alex's Deuce Lance Commander Mitch Sovino chimed in:

"Boss, heard Bruce, killed the RimJob commander, that true?"

Unseen Alex nodded in response, "Yeah, Mitch, he hit with the first wave and caught their command company with five lances and a company of SAS. That's what broke them."

His best friend had been the highest surviving officer in the first "Stick" of Tiger 'Mechs and had rallied the remains of 3rd Battalion to break the 22nd. Alex shook himself out of his reverie and looked up at the Empire State Building which stood out even among the taller far more modern structures of the Alliance and Hegemony eras. *The grand old girls still here*, he thought, *That's something at least.*

The Terran 'Mechs pass down through Herald Square and link up with 3rd Battalion, Alex climbed down to meet his friend. Smoke from a burning parking garage stung his eyes, and he smelled burning flesh and gasoline. It was then he noticed the fuel truck parked down the block and the satisfied look on Bruce's face. His friend was a few years younger, long chestnut hair hung to his mid back, whipped now and again by the wind from the fire. As Bruce turned toward him Alex noticed a distinct lack of emotion in his friend's face, which was grimy and had a burn across his left cheek crossing a scar from the battle of Acamar that had cost him his left eye. A cybernetic one replaced it but Bruce had always worn a patch of sensor transparent material over it, more for style points than anything else.

"Captain, what do you hear?"

"We're winning here, B, the 22nd's finished and 53rd Dragoon were annihilated just shy of Jersey City. The Huscarl Dragoons are a tougher nut to crack and 2nd Battalions been sent to help out. Ryukaze own JFK and our support troops will secure the rest of the city with a brigade from the Americal Division.

Where's Hussy?"

"Had to leave her on 23rd street she's done till Chief Vinton's crew can fix her."

"What happened here Bruce?"

Bruce looked up, the change in his friend's voice and his use of his full first name said something was up.

"Chased some of the 22nd's Infantry into the garage, the building was empty, so we burned them out. Bruce turned away then and his voice grew soft, I wasn't losing any more of my men Alex."

"You gave them a chance to surrender, though, right B?"

"Umm. Yeah sure."

Alex was about to press further but a tall man still immaculate in the middle of this chaos planted himself in the way.

"Are you in charge, Captain?"

The man's voice annoyed Alex from the start, reeking with arrogance and so sure of getting his way. Behind him Bruce's eye narrowed dangerously and he fingered the safety on his Colt. With a look the man missed Alex backed his friend off.

"Apparently Mr...."

"Donner, George Donner, the man interrupted, Department of Communications Deputy Director for Oversight, and I want this Lieutenant arrested."

"Oh boy, Alex thought *Here it comes.*"

"Mr. Donner, what exactly would be the charges?"

Donner puffed up like a toad, paused to look around and announced loudly;

"Treason and aiding the enemy."

Bruce (Playing rough and rescuing princesses.)

Say what????

I stood there in shock, listening to that fool Donner whine because I'd stolen away two (It turned out to be fifteen year old.) girls he was trying to hang because they didn't say no when an Amaris captain grabbed the off the street at gun point for his troops "use". Nicole had told me later and I'd had them picked up by the Medevac team that had just passed through. Doc. Wynndham our Magistracy born CMO, would know what to do with them.

Alex just busted out laughing. Donner seeing this looked about to snap. Before he could I did. Grabbing Donner by the back of his suit I dragged him to the garage, he's a big man and he struggled but he's still a Turtle.

I whispered softly in his ear "That look like aiding to you."

I won't describe the entrance to you but some of the RimJobs tried to get out.

They didn't make it. I spun him around in the heat and choking stench and stuck my Colt in his nose.

"Those girls had no choice in what they done you fuck, but you did, I spun him back around.

"That makes you no better than those dead assholes."

I felt the panic in him build and tossed him away from me just as he puked all over himself.

Turning away from Donner, I noticed Alex's eyes were huge, but both Nicole and Singh looked smug.

This guy must have been some piece of work.

"They don't know us in our own hometown ,I thought, But they will soon enough."

Alex got his act together and took a call over the TACNET. When he got off he looked at me with that tight smirk he gets when he had to do something he finds unpleasant.

"Trouble?"

"Yeah B, my dad's lost his mind."

"Come again?"

"First you're now a Captain."

"Yea me, this is bad why?"

"No, not that , I'm taking what's left of 3 Batt and going to assist 2nd , the Huscarl's are causing real problems, oh I'm a Major now."

"I've always known you were a Major Ass.."

"This is serious B, you're not going."

"WHAT!" Okay twice today I've lost it.

"You've got no ride, and I'm going into a 'Mech fight, but that Infantry badge you wear ain't for show is it?"

I shook my head something was up now, I could smell it.

"The Old Man wants you to head over with an SAS team, no NightHawks, to a building a couple blocks away and liberate this chick."

He passed me his pocketcomp and I looked over the mission stats after transferring it to my comp.

A fucking Davion, great, old broad this one, still a veteran from a decent unit. Hopefully knows to stay out of my hair, okay number two.

Sarah??? WTF.

I looked up stunned, Alex nodded, "The Colonel knew you knew her from the League posting on New Avalon your dad had."

"RimJobbers got her holed up in the hotel there so go get her out, this is an Alpha priority mission, Captain.

"Gotcha Major RootBeer, Sir."

"Get the hell out of here." He turned to Rod Singh who'd just found himself reactivated and began doing Major type work.

I got.

Collecting Dido Moran and her band of shooters, and Nicole Osis and went as it turned out to a hotel a block away on 27th street. I let Didi lead, despite what Alex had said my job was to put an officer on the scene. Besides Didi's got Mad Skillz as they say.

We went in through a service entrance let in by the concierge and got too where the Rimmers were holding their captives. In a whispered voice the mousy little man told me Major Dupre, the Amaris officer who was in charge had changed rooms three times when he thought nobody was looking but the hotel staff had managed to keep tabs on them. I couldn't help but respect him and his staff they'd risked their lives

without knowing why. Thanking him I got him to safety, and slipped back to where Didi wanted me. We entered just like it said in the manual, popping two Rimmers just in the suite's doorway a third guarding a woozy Gladys Davion, the old bird. I slipped through the bedroom door to see a tall blond guy standing over the prostrate form of a slender redhead, he was ripping away her dress when I came in tho' I don't know how he hadn't heard something going on outside. Her eyes were glazed and a bruise stood out on her right cheekbone.

"Sarah, what the hell did he do."

Sarah (Unexpected reunions)

Sarah felt like she was dreaming, after getting to the hotel, changing rooms three times and sitting around listening to the sounds of battle coming closer, Dupre had finally snapped, muttering something about finally owning a noble bitch, he'd beaten aunt Gladys and dragged Sarah into the suite's bedroom, Some part of her mind noticed she was in the honeymoon suite and found this hysterically funny. Dupre didn't share the joke because he backhanded her across the cheek. Her mind shut down as the Major ripped her dress off, but she still noticed a tall slender form glide silently into the room. A snapping sound followed a flash of light that connected the man, she saw it was a man now, and Dupre. Without even looking at the fallen Major, her rescuer knelt before her wrapping her torn dress around her. After ten years Sarah Davion recognized just who it was who had rescued her.

A slightly crazed laugh tinged with relief escaped her, as she threw her arms around him.

"Bruce, you've lost your eye, I've lost Daddy and Aunt Gladys."

She pulled away to arms length the wrinkling her nose.

"Why are you all dirty"

Her childhood friend looked at her and smiled.

"Lost my 'Mech too, and had to fight my way to get to you so I got dirty."

He turned to the door where a short rough faced woman with a nasty looking carbine in her hand nodded and smiled.

"As to your aunt, she'll be fine, didn't know about Uncle Paul tho' I'm sorry"

He started to say more but, Sarah cried then, so he just held her close.

He did that for a long time.

The mind goes sometimes.

Isokoru: Duty is a mountain.

A BattleMech regiment on the move, the sight takes your breath away. The Black Tigers and Ryukaze were advancing on Chicago driving a full division of Amaris Dragoons ahead of them. Isokoru Satoh watched from an overpass as a mixed regiment of Rim World troops tried to make a stand near a truck stop on the main highway. The alternating dark and light blues of the enemy machines would have been soothing, almost pretty if they weren't mud and snow spattered, blackened from battle damage. If they could catch their breath the Amaris troops could have overwhelmed the Tigers before the advancing Eridani Light Horse could arrive to support them. The Black Tigers wouldn't let them. As he watched, a salvo of Arrow IV missiles slammed into the core of the Amaris formation shattering 'Mechs and tanks. A battalion of Terran heavies in the new black and red paint job the 90th had adopted hit their front lines and Isokoru noticed Alex Winter's Black Knight in the middle of the fray. A column of enemy machines streamed from the rear approaching the Rim World command position. The enemy commander must have sensed something amiss. His hundred ton Great White turned towards the approaching 'Mechs which were painted black with red claw marks on the shoulders. The lead Hecatoncheires a seventy to heavy opened fire then. The class twenty autocannon in it's left arm decapitated the enemy 'Mech.

That's the signal the ex Combine officer thought. Turning he raised his Dragon, "Kachiko's" arm.

"Ryukaze ticket to the last stop, let's close the circle!"

Accelerating to almost 90kph the Combine made heavy was joined by seventy other medium weight and fast heavies all painted in the deep blood red of the 1st Sword of Light. Black claw slashes set these machines apart as did the Cameron star in the coiled dragon insignia. To the northwest a new formation of dark blue machines was approaching. The colors marked them as Amaris House Guards, the 2nd most likely as intel placed them in the area. The new formation hesitated as they caught sight of the Kuritans.

"Ryukaze on me, open channels."

As one the hardened samurai of the 1st Ryukaze Volunteer Regiment turned and over an open frequency screamed out “Banzai!”.

Isokoru could imagine the confusion in the *teki*’s mind. In the middle of fighting SLDF regulars to be set upon by Kurita troops. By a Swords regiment. Even the most skilled and disciplined enemy units would have reason to pause.

Lord Kurita would have a canary, Isokoru thought, whatever a canary is.

Fire began to lance out from the Guards troops but the swift Combine machines closed the distance and crashed into the Rim Worlders. From an outsiders perspective it looks like chaos and madness. There is a purpose and an order even here. Shocked by the appearance of a nominal allies’ most fearsome troops right in their faces the Amaris commanders hesitated for a critical second. This allowed the Kuritans fight on their terms. No soldiers any where are better at close combat in a BattleMech than Kurita regulars. The blood red machines instinctively targeted points of cohesion, enemy commanders, and “heroes” rallying troops to counterattack. Disciplined fire smashed any strong point before it could develop. It was however a costly way to fight. A blue Hecatoncheires slipped out of a knot of Jenners, the few Isokoru had remaining. It’s shotgun like autocannon bringing one down while its battle fist batted another aside. Coming around its right flank Isokoru charged in striking the hulking enemy ‘Mech with his shoulder. “Katchi’s” lower center of gravity and bulked up shoulder myomers shoved the bigger machine to the side where laser and cannon fire from a Wolverine cut into its lower back touching off the Amaris machine’s ammo bin.

“*Arigato* Kurita-san”

“De nada, boss, a little hairy, huh?”

“A bit, Francine, a bit.” A sudden thought nagged at him. “Don’t get to far away from me, I don’t want to explain to the Coordinator how I got his cousin killed.”

“Just tell Minoru-sama I was working off stress, he’ll understand.” Her laugh was a little ragged.

Slicing at a nearby Shark with the 9cm pulse laser replacing Katchi’s 40mm autocannon, Isokoru nodded. He’d trained “Little Frankie” Kurita and knew that years of being a guest of Stephan Amaris had taken it’s toll on the younger woman. Like that little Sarah girl, Francine Kurita was a distant family member posted to Terra to put a name in the diplomatic process. The Combine had several such, giving rise to the old tired joke that there were more Kuritas on Terra than on Luthien. Unlike Sarah Davion, with her diplomatic training, Francine was a warrior. She needed to fight. And she was right, her cousin would understand.

A Great White loomed out of the dust then, spitting out waves of short range warheads at Kachiko. Isokoru twisted in his linear frame sending the Dragon to the right avoiding the bulk of the missiles, but enough hit to rattle him around in his cockpit like a doll. Yellow framework appeared all over his status displays as he returned fire. The Amaris assault ‘Mech could spit out thirty six 80mm free flight rockets at once and backed it up with a standard model particle cannon in each arm. It had the heat sinks to use these weapons liberally which it proved by sending two whips of charged particles at Francine. The two Kuritans split and began circling the bigger machine carving at its flanks but the pilot was superb twisting and feinting using his weight and threat of physical attack to fend off the lighter machines. Two of his Jenners joined the fight circling behind the monster to add their own rockets and lasers to the mix. A Rimmer Hecatoncheires chased them off a minute later and two Sharks began to flank the Kuritans.

“Uh Boss...”

“Don’t have a canary Frankie.”

Sending the last of his 60mm LRM’s to keep one of the Sharks honest turned to the Great White and prepared to charge, thinking; Frankie could get clear, maybe, my honor is safe. A wave of fire swept over the Rim Worlds assault machine. Too many twisting rocket contrails to count and at least four argent streaks from gauss fire. The massive assault ‘Mech twisted like a live thing as it came apart. The Sharks turned to run but a black and red Marauder’s deliberate fire cored both machines before they could get up to speed.

500 meters away four battered Highlander assault ‘Mechs led a wall of steel that was sweeping around the wounded Combine unit.

Isokoru’s TACNET crackled to life then.

“‘Ko, what’re you doin’ buddy hogging all the RimJob Guards?”

A relived laugh burst from him as his optics picked up the amazon carrying an assault rifle on the leg of Colonel Samuel Winter’s “Bertha”. Overhead his IFF showed fighters belonging to the Light Horse strafing and bombing the retreating Amaris troops.

“Hell Sam you know us damned Snakes, always hogging the glory.”
 “Looks like DeChevalier’s plan worked.”
 “The *teki* went gunning for the Tigers once they knew you were on the field.”
 “When they didn’t run outright, plus their comms are jammed with questions about a Sword of Light regiment attacking them, know anything about that?”
 “Not a clue, Sam.”
 A sun bright flash of light interrupted them suddenly. And a deep rolling thunder swept over the battlefield.
 “Orbital Fire?” Isokoru asked, surprised.
 “Yeah, that should be the demise of the 224th Amaris Rifles, Isokoru recognized the voice of 3rd Battalions commander Justine Sinclair, and at least part of the 103rd Dragoons.”
 “The Tiger Claw caught a break in the fun upstairs and we were able to set up a shot.”
 Justine continued, “The remains of the Rim Worlds Navy are being turned into scrap as we speak.”
 “So much for Stevie-boys escape plan, Francine quipped.”
 Over the broadband a triumphant voice sounded.”
 “To all SLDF units, The Greenhaven Gestapo and its support have been eliminated, the Italian peninsula is free, I repeat....”
 “Well that’s good news, Justine chuckled dryly.
 “Sooner they clear Europe, the sooner they get here. Samuel said.
 “Just wish they’d move it, sir, unless they think we can break the Unity Line without ‘em.”
 Isokoru knew what Sam was thinking even before he spoke the words.
 “Be a hell of a thing if we could.”

Alex: A long war.

Elmo’s damage displays glared red at him as he pulled the Black Knight into 1st Battalion’s bivouac. Sorry big guy, he thought, we’ll have you fixed soon, but I can’t promise you any rest. Unhooking his harness and setting his neurohelmet on the shelf behind his linear frame he took a moment to throw a parka over his combat suit, before opening the hatch at the rear of the Knight’s head. A cherry picker’s basket appeared a moment later to carry him down the ten meters to the snow below. In winter you never wanted to climb a ‘Mech’s basic ladder if you could avoid it. The combo of ice and heat was never pretty.
 The last thing I need is to get killed slipping off my ‘Mech, he thought with a sudden grin.
 Nodding thanks to the technician running the lift he spotted MechRat one of Bruce’s lance second, for some reason he never could remember the mans name but his moniker was unmistakable. So was his reputation as a first rate scrounger.
 “What’s the word ‘Rat?’”
 “You’d know better than me, Major, but I’d have to say we kicked their asses.
 Alex laughed nodding and gestured to the Hecatoncheires ‘Rat was driving.
 “How’s the new ride.”
 Rat grimaced looking up at the lean heavy ‘Mech.
 “Ugly piece of Amaris junk, but ...well honestly not that bad, those RimJobbers knew what they were doing on this one.”
 Alex nodded
 “Don’t worry we’ll have you back in a proper Terran machine before long, they wont fall for that trick twice.”
 “Thanks, Major, Check this out though, you can really see it on Wally’s D model Heck.’
 “What am I looking for?”
 “The gun rack housing on mine and the housing on the missile racks on Wally’s.
 “They’re the same!”
 “Yeah, when we were fixing them up, I noticed this early on, I don’t think they can swap ‘em in the field, the software is a bitch but It’s the same chassis. The MasterTech and I think it’s much easier to repair them in the field just swap out the bad systems, just like the Mercurys we use.”
 “Might be something for the boy’s in R&D, good eye.”
 “Thanks sir.”
 Isokoru came up while we were looking over the Heck and stood watching us for a moment.

‘Rat, he asked, got a question.’
 Rat looked back surprised.
 “Yeah, Colonel?”
 “What’s a canary? As in don’t have a canary.”
 “Oh, it’s a little yellow bird.”
 Isokoru looked stricken for a moment then laughed.
 As he walked off the Terran’s heard him mutter;
 “I just told a Kurita not to have a little yellow bird.”
 “Sir...”
 “Yeah I know Drac’s are weird.”
 “Anyway you’re off rotation for now the Eridani’s are taking our place.”
 “Were out of it?”
 “For the moment, General DeChevalier wants us in top form when we take on the Unity line, till then where going home.”
 ‘Rat’s smile was worth a thousand words.
 It was going to be a long war and Alex thought such smiles would be rare. He looked north towards the Unity Line. The defensive ring around Unity City was like nothing the SLDF had seen before, and hell we built it. Even worse Amaris had been making improvements. Walking to the command center he spotted Isokoru and Francine by the coffee machine, she looked furious and he; resigned and sad. As Alex watched Frankie put a hand on Isokoru’s shoulder spoke quietly and walked off past Alex.
 “Frankie what’s up?”
 “I’m going to beat some sense into my cousin, that’s what!”
 “You’re....wait a minute you mean....”
 “Cofucking ordinator Minoru stuck up the ass Kurita that’s who I mean.”
 “Uhhh”
 Her expression softened then and she laid her porcelain hand on Alex’s mahogany one.
 “Al on your honor promise me something.”
 “Yeah sure, you’ve got it.”
 “Take care of the Ryukaze, you and your Tigers, I’ve been recalled to Luthien, but the ‘Kaze, they...
 “Frankie?”
 “They’ve been declared *eta*, they’ve been exiled all of them.”
 “God why.”
 “My cousin thinks the League will fall, he looks forward to it.”
 She shook her head in disgust.
 “He never saw the League the way I did, as a place we were free to be Kurita without enemies on three sides, that to be Kurita meant serving our people and keeping them safe. Never understood that we could serve with honor and Jinjiro’s worse.”
 Alex looked at her with surprise. This was definitely not the image of the warmongering Drac Samurai.
 But then none of the Ryukaze were.
 “We will Francine, they’re Tigers now, *you* all are.”
 Francine’s clear blue eyes looked up at him.
Domo Arigato Busosenshi Winter.
 She stalked off fuming.
 Alex went to get Isokoru, his father and a bottle of scotch.
 In that order.
 It was going to be a long war.

Samuel: A while later

One thing never changes, Samuel Winter thought. You just can’t get decent pizza outside of New York. It’s not much, but you take what you can get. Or not he mused, listening to his battalion commanders hash out the latest news from the high command. The smell from two slices of said pizza kept distracting him from the conversation. As usual Majors Christian Traumintieri and Justine Sinclair were at odds. The North American Front was holding where it was until the divisions in Asia and Africa caught up. Under strict orders to hold what they had, but not to press. Chris of course, was arguing for an aggressive

posture. The big blond Italian had a working mans sensibilities and an iron will. These qualities served him well leading his “Bloody Paws” the 90ths assault battalion. Chris tended to be direct and forceful, which worked well when one led a battalion of 100 ton Pillagers. On the political battlefield however...

Justine Sinclair was almost a polar opposite. The Argentine born commander of the “Hungry Tigers”, was slender and olive skinned with raven black hair and a model’s features. Outside of the cockpit Justine, known as “Sin” by her troops was the public face of the unit with a keen political mind. Inside her Marauder “Wendigo” she was just as direct as Chris, leading her battalion with a wild abandon. At the moment her famed cool looked about to crack.

“We should be in their faces, Chris was arguing, now more than ever.”

“The Cappies and the Snakes, no offense Isokoru, are just waiting to finish the job Amaris started, not to mention that moron, Kenyon.

The only one in the room not in SLDF olive drab, smiled sadly at Chris and shrugged.

“*Shigata ga nai* Chris I’m not a Drac anymore.”

Immaculate in his gray DCMS mechwarrior’s jumpsuit, Isokoru Satoh was the oldest man in the room. Didn’t look it though, Samuel thought, Drac’s must seriously believe in clean living. The Kurita officer’s long black hair and goatee were untouched by gray and his brown eyes normally danced with a wicked humor. A humor that even the Coordinator’s son Jinjiro, had come to dread while Isokoru commanded the 1st Sun Zhang Academy Cadre. Motivated by honor a loyalist regiment of DCMS regulars, most of whom had served in the SLDF, had joined the Black Tigers shortly before the liberation began. With over thirty years of experience and a natural leader Isokoru was the logical choice for commander. Looking over his friend, Samuel knew they’d paid the price for their actions. Every Ryukaze soldier had been regulated to the class of *eta* or unproductives, exiled.

Justine was going over the General staff’s, position for the umpteenth time.

“Look just do the math, the damn Unity Line’s too strong and after we whacked their fleet the RimJobbers know they’ve go nowhere to run.” Under her smooth, lightly accented English Samuel heard a tension building.

“But if we go in now we could lose it all, Africa’s a mess and Kerensky’s still bogged down in a Russian winter....”

Wonder if she’s gonna take a swing at Chris, Samuel thought, be a hell of a fight.

“Sam?” Isokoru spoke up.

“Yeah, ‘Ko”

“You gonna eat those last slices, they’re getting cold”

“Split ‘em, good huh?”

“Yup, almost as good Dani’s back on Luthien....”

“Wha.... Chris sputtered.

“Yeah, It’s on Shiro and Dieron.”

Alex looked scandalized, even Justine looked miffed.

The tension in the room disappeared, as the conversation turned nostalgic, Alex shared a look with Isokoru and turned back to his father.

“Sir you wanted to know when the Stalker’s were ready for action?”

“And?”

“We’re at 100% with the ‘Kaze survivors transferred in, and Captain Gilmour’s company back in town.”

“Bruce got back Wednesday didn’t he?”

“Yeah, running those last Rimmers to ground took a lot out of ‘em, so I’m requesting a weeks leave for the entire company.

Samuel nodded, with records destroyed and civilian police and intelligence services almost nonexistent many ex Rim Worlds soldiers in the liberated zones were simply disappearing into the population. Since many of these troops had been stationed on Earth since the occupation began they were being uncomfortably successful. The repercussions would last for decades. In the end though, the Amaris military was finished.

A call coming in from Major John Zazula of the 2005th Royal Combat Support Group, Samuel nodded to bring the meeting to a close. As Alex was leaving Samuel motioned for him to stay. Closing of f the link he turned to his son.

“You know the fight’s almost over when the engineers get more action than the mechwarriors.”

Nodding wearily, his son chuckled.

“Got plans tonight Al?”
 “CJ and I are going out to dinner with Bruce and Sarah.”
 “The Davion girl, that serious?”
 “I think so, she was engaged, but it was political, some rumors got out she was, well, um...”
 “Gotcha.”
 “Anyway they’re running shows on Broadway again.”
 “So soon?”
 “It’s not quite business as usual, but I don’t think the city shut down even in the middle of the battle.”
 “That photo in the Times with Justine holding a press conference in Starbucks, a latte in her hand proved that.”
 “Humph, that moron Donner won’t shut up about it.” Samuel snorted.
 “He still causing trouble?”
 “Trying to be a big fish in a small pond, since DEPCOM didn’t get gutted the way other government agencies did they’ve been the ones with the infrastructure to get things done....Donner’s been using that.”
 “Sick Bruce on him.”
 For a second Samuel just stared at his son began to chuckle.
 For the first time in over five years father and son shared a laugh.
 “Might not be a bad idea.”

Bruce: A night on the town.

Who ever designs dress uniforms must be a sadist, I thought, pulling at my collar. Not enough pockets, too tight around the chest, and what’s up with the hat? Hell with it. I tossed the fur cap on the bed and looked at my self in the mirror catching sight of my graduation photo on the dresser. My family owns a small house just off the Fort Hamilton base. I’d been surprised to find it untouched after ten years. Closed up and wrapped as if for a move. No sign of my father though. Old man was probably was one of the first guys the Rimmers grabbed. I picked up the photo. Me, Al, Rachel Miller; dead in a battle dozens of light years away. Dad was on New Avalon still, the old man stood behind us hands on mine and Al’s shoulders. We were in full dress looking totally squared away but damn it we looked like children. The Colonel looked so proud. I shook my head with a snort. Shit I still had both eyes then too.

A light touch on my arm shook me out of my musings.

Sarah stood at my side, eyes searching my face. I realized I must have been standing there for a while staring at the photo. Then I caught a good look at her.

Damn the hell she doin’ with me.

Now mind you Sarah’s gorgeous to begin with, lustrous red hair falling in waves to the middle of her back, warm hazel eyes a perky nose and full lips. She was wearing a black gown in the style popular in the Magestry of Canopus, reminiscent of Hollywood stars in the 1940’s and 2450’s. The daigumo silk left her shoulders bare and showed of her creamy white skin. She grinned impishly and stepped back to give a twirl.

“You’re drooling Bruce.”

I muttered something I don’t remember but it must have been the right thing cause she kissed me lightly. Then she took my shoulders and gave me a once over.

“Your wearing your medals” It wasn’t a question.

“Umm well I look like a damn Lyran”

She arched an eyebrow.

“Yes dear.”

She shook her head.

“Sometimes you can be clueless Captain Gilmour.”

“Why?”

One finger came up.

“First this is a big event, the first Broadway premier after the occupation.

The press will be all over this.”

Another finger rose.

“Second; film of you in the Battle of the Flatiron, hunting down stragglers and during the reconstruction efforts over the past couple of months are all over the news.

She paused and crooked her head in almost in disbelief.

“You don’t even know do you?”

“Been a bit busy hon.”

“You’re the ‘Hero of New York’.”

WTF, oh that.

“Sarah that story in the Post was all fluff.”

“The public believes it, that’s enough.”

“But..”

Sarah placed a finger on my lips silencing me. With her chin tilted up and eyebrows raised I knew what was coming next.

“Third, I’m a Davion dear, think about it.”

“Aunt Gladys will call the 3rd Guards if I don’t look good enough?”

All the airs went away and she giggled looking like the little girl from New Avalon who was the first girl I ever kissed, and who threw mud in my face a minute later. Well we *were* ten at the time.

Needless to say I wore my full salad bar and my gunslingers medallion, I lost the damn cap at the theatre though. Strangest thing.

“And now we have Lydia Hilton from the premiere of ‘Jocasta’ at the McKenna theatre on Broadway, Lydia;

“Thanks Ryan, New York’s brightest were out in style tonight, at what is turning into a gala celebration of liberty from Amaris Tyranny. Thomas Kennedy, Silvia Cho, and holo star Kelsey DaMarco all turned out in true New York style, but the most hubbub surrounded Lady Sarah Davion in a stunning Nadine Krantz original, escorted by Hometown Hero Captain Bruce Gilmour of our own 90th Black Tigers. Many are saying this pair are symbolic of both the trials and strengths of the Star League. Both lost family, Lady Davion’s father Duke Paul and retired General Malcolm Gilmour and his wife Janet are both still unaccounted for”

Entertainment Tonight coverage of the premiere of Donald Marquette’s drama ‘Jocasta’

“Welcome back to Straight Talk with Jimmy Hoyle, your source for the real deal. With us today is George Donner, Director of Special Economic Projects or SEP for the Department of Communications. Director Donner, welcome.

“Thanks Jimmy, my pleasure.

“Well top of most news feeds is the reopening of the Broadway theatre district tonight and I understand we have the SEP to thank for that perhaps you’ll tell us about that.

“We at the SEP take a lot of pride in our work, Jimmy, and it’s not just restoring the basics people need to survive, it’s also about preserving our heritage as Terrans. After all for more than a millennia New York has been a center for culture and the arts for all Terrans. Even in the remotest parts of Human Space, if you mention our fair city the first thing that comes to mind is Broadway. So once we had the lights back on and the military presence cleared from the city we realized the restoration projects would create much needed jobs, the rest as you say is history.”

“Will you be attending?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Straight Talk with Jimmy Hoyle interview with SEP director George Donner.

The play at least was good, Sarah thought, Bruce had something to focus on. The walk down the red carpet had been second nature to her. For all his confidence in the field, her old friend seemed like a deer in the headlights in front of the press. She glanced at him, relaxed and enjoying himself at her side.

I’ve got a lot of work to do, she mused. Looking away she caught sight of that Donner man glaring at them across the aisle. By the Unfinished Book man, get a life. If life as a Davion taught you anything, it was spotting opportunists. As the defacto FedSuns embassy, Sarah and her aunt had been coordinating her Uncle John’s relief efforts on Terra. Working with the SEP was inevitable. When they’d met he’d been outgoing and seemingly selfless but under it all Sarah always came away with an oily nasty feeling. When Donner had found out about just who her boyfriend was, he’d become cold, distant. Video of the incident on 6th avenue and the backstory had hit the Internet by then and Donner was still trying to spin his way out of it.

As the lights came up and the crowd applauded Sarah looked back at Bruce, the smile forming on her lips died as she saw the look he directed at Donner. The last time she’d seen a look like that it was on a

documentary on Tigers, real ones, she'd watched as a kid. There was no emotion to it, just a predator sizing up prey. As they left he glanced down at her his one hazel eye gleaming. Humanity flooded back into his face and he smiled slipping an arm around her shoulders.

"Good show, huh?"

"Yup, have fun? She cuddled closer.

"Always."

"Listen, I..uh, we're getting' kinda serious y'know..

"Really, I hadn't noticed..

Bruce raised an eyebrow.

Sarah grinned, "Go on."

"Justine gave me a grilling about you on behalf of the CIB, no big deal, but she said you were engaged?"

Her smile slipped, Bruce took a deep breath and went on.

"Look Sarah I don't play second fiddle to anyone."

"I was engaged, to Sebastian Green."

"Sebastian, are you kidding me."

"It was family not choice... And I thought you liked him."

"I do, but he's like a little puppy dog."

"I know he still is, did you know he's a Guards captain now?"

"Really?"

"Yeah with the 5th on Kathil, MechWarrior too."

"So what happened?"

"Stephan Bloody Amaris happened, almost ten years away, rumors start."

"Rumors?"

"That I'd been as Aunt Gladys would put it, soiled."

"They bought that?"

"Appearances are everything with Lady Green."

Bruce just shook his head in disgust as they got in the limo.

"Relax honey, after all that's happened I'd have called it off."

She slipped onto his lap and smiled.

"Look at it this way, your girlfriend's loaded."

"I knew there was a reason I kept you around", he said with a smirk.

Chapter 2 The Unity Line.

A static defensive line is always vulnerable. Once penetrated in force at any point, every other post becomes moot. Its men cannot bring their arms to bear and in fact can do nothing except wait in impotence to be overrun.....

Alexander, King of Macedon

Minerva Ramos hunched down in her Mongoose's linear frame as if that could make the six meter tall scout 'Mech even smaller. Below the low ridge she and the three Talon Strike 'Mechs of her lance crouched behind waited a full battalion of the Rim Worlds Huscarl Dragoons crouched like a pack of misshapen hyenas. They were prepping a strike on the rear of the 71st Light Horse Regiment. 'Nerva and her lancemates had other plans. The lightest machines in the 90th, The three Mongoose Recon Platforms and nine Talons of Puma Company, 2nd Battalion lived up to the unit's moniker of "Swift Claws".

"Puma Two-Six to Sherman six we have forty repeat four-zero big fish getting set to run. Request fire mission grid three five by one eight."

"Roger Puma two-six, Sherman six; fire mission grid three five by one eight, shot out correct as needed."

Over the line of sight laser commline Rolly, the company's First Sergeant spoke quietly.

"Got a Vamp-A here his Beagle just went active."

"Won't matter, Nerva growled, here it comes."

The Amaris Huscarl regiments represent the finest formations in the Amaris military. Well trained, with the finest equipment after ten years of access to Terran technology. Both totally loyal and utterly ruthless. A full company spread out in a formation designed to maximize their sensor arrays. Eighteen 210mm guided anti armor rounds split over a kilometer above the Huscarls. In each section of the round was guided by an AI with all the intelligence of a small rodent.

The rodent brain was programmed to seek out specific BattleMech and armor profiles and ignore the IFF signals from friendly units. While Puma company's 'Mechs were on idle their IFFs were shut down, but the Huscarls were, as a showcase unit, chock full of just what the little rodent minds were looking for. The Amaris troops had only just detected the rounds splitting apart when at about a hundred meters the submunitions detonated. In side each round the rat brain committed suicide by igniting a shaped charge that turned an ingot of copper beyond molten. The slug of copper plasma slammed straight down at the Huscarl 'Mechs. 'Nerva's eyes couldn't process this of course, but the end result was enough. Each round carried six of the lethal submunitions. In a flash of red gold light the Amaris battalion disintegrated. Out of forty hostiles only five Huscarl machines were standing after the barrage.

"Okay people finish up, 'Nerva's c/o Captain Kevin St.Paul ordered.

Let's open the hole."

The Amaris machines were one leg in the grave as the Talons went to work.

As the last machine, a Great White, went down six Ripper VTOL transports flashed by at treetop level. 'Nerva knew they carried a detachment of the "Stealthy Tigers" the 90th's SAS detachment. The what and why of their mission was a mystery.

Dido (Behind the lines.)

Fort Bollenger was one of the earliest of the Castle Brians built. Designed to be a key anchor in the line of ground and aerospace defenses protecting Unity City. Nearly impregnable it housed a full brigade of troops. Almost entirely underground, the batteries of antiship lasers and missiles would make orbital support costly at best. Hidden sally points provided defenders with access to vast portions of the surrounding area. To secure the surrounding area you had to take the fort in its entirety. Under the SLDF this would have been next to impossible.

Under Amaris rule a glaring flaw came to light. Plans smuggled out by partisans employed by the Rim Worlds troops revealed a major change in the way the facility's command and control was handled. Instead of a decentralized cellular structure in which each fortress section could survive independent of the whole, command was centralized in one location. The annihilation of the 3rd Battalion, Amaris Huscarl Dragoons a week before had set up the insertion of six of the Stealthy Tiger teams. Forty two troopers, even the elite of the SAS teams may seem futile in the face of over five thousand Amaris regulars. If all went well the Tigers would do in hours what took the Rim Worlds troops two years to do.

Dido Moran led her team down the dark hole of an electrical service tunnel. Running from the edge of the town that had grown up around the fort and shared its name. The access point to the tunnel was sealed behind concrete forty feet thick. Ten years of neglect and a series of severe torrential downpours in the past three years had collapsed a section of tunnel and the RimJobs hadn't fixed it. Corporal Lindon had bypassed the sensors set up around the breach and the chameleon technology in the Tiger's uniforms did the rest.

So they can't see us Didi thought, but they sure as hell could smell us. After a week dodging patrols and hiding out in abandoned buildings and the basements of resistance fighters, showers had not been a priority. Just hope that sweet little blonde from the 71st doesn't show up with our relief. After all a girl's gotta' look her best.

Making sure the unit was in the clear, Didi raised her visor. Wiping off her face she winced as her bandana rubbed against the bruise Sarah had left under her right eye. When Bruce had asked her to give his pet Davion some pointers in self defense, Didi hadn't figured Sarah would pick up the Escrima style the SAS troops used so quickly. Leaning back against the wall she smiled at the memory. Okay so "pet" wasn't the right word, we did pretty much adopt her.

Tommy Lindon knelt at an access terminal plugging in his pocketcomp. Didi knew he was setting up a remote backdoor to the command center's security and surveillance system. Giving the thumbs up Tommy signaled he was done. Lowering her visor, Didi marked the new icons representing Amaris troops in the hallways just on the other side of the wall. A maintenance hatch rigged with remote sensors was all that guarded the fort.

Her team spread out into position, as the corridor cleared. Tommy typed a command into his wrist computer. The access panel slid aside and the SAS teams slid inside. Each team spread out. On her visors HUD Didi saw the icons of several Amaris troops wink out. The silenced SMG's of the SAS teams began their work. Didi's team headed for their goal, the central command center. Signaling the team to set up at the corner just south of the center, Didi flipped the switch to set her Colt half rifle to constant beam. Before she could give the command an alarm began to sound.

Crap, she thought, there goes the neighborhood. Rounding the corner her gun came to life. Sweeping the Colt in an arc, its beam scythed through both door guards. The door hissed open and Michael Kelso's HK MP2 burped in response. A Rimmer officer fell back gurgling. The grizzled sergeant spat fire into the squad behind the stricken woman. Fernando Beria tossed a flash bang into the command center. Didi slipped in covering the right as Kelso took the left. A couple of quick bursts and it was over. Joanne Kimmel and Fernando took positions by the door while August Martine patched up a burn on Kelso's shoulder. Tommy was already at the console pulling aside a dead technicians body. Plugging in to the base's central computer, he ran a modified diagnostic script to bypass the Amaris technicians changes. The distinctive chatter of an Amaris RAsa-77 assault rifles sounded through the door.

"Boss, Huscarl infantry, ahh fuck.."

A burst of fire caused Joanne to duck back, and Didi leaned out and snapped a shot. The Huscarl infantry wore ceramic plate armor treated with chemical camouflage that blended in with their surroundings. Though not as effective as the SLDF troopers gear the Huscarls looked like gray wraiths in the corridor. The ceramic on the troopers armor ablated under the Colt's intense beam. The vaporized armor caused enough force to bring the man up short. As he raised his bullpup rifle Didi pumped two more shots into the Huscarls faceplate. Dropping his rifle, the Huscarl was dead even as his hands clawed at the 2cm hole in his helmet. A 9mm round whined off the doorjamb and took Didi in then side. Knocking her back from the doorway as the antiballistic mesh in the SAS troopers uniform spread out the heavy slug's impact.

Kelso clicked the tube under his carbine and the grenade launcher loaded a 20mm grenade.

"Hammer round up."

Joanne and Fernando sent a wave of fire down the hallway as Kelso swung out and pumped a high explosive armor piercing grenade down at the Huscarl squad. Much too expensive for regular use, the Hammer HEAP grenade was a smart round designed to defeat heavy personal armor like the SAS Nighthawk powersuits. At a preset moment the advanced plastic explosive detonated sending nails of hardened aligned steel that could shatter even the tough ceramic of the Huscarl body armor. As the Huscarls reeled back, Tommy called from the terminal.

"Didi we're set."

Didi slammed the hatch shut, her TACCOM alive with calls from the other teams.

"Time to finish this shit, do it Tommy."

Takeo (A view from the other side.)

Colonel Takeo Amaris, commander of the Amaris Huscarl Dragoons was going over yet another round of miserable reports when the alarms sounded. Major Billy Compton his XO ducked in before Takeo could thumb the comm unit. From the look on his subordinates face he knew the news was really bad.

"Spill it Billy."

"We're crawling with SAS, Tak they're like Apollo chiggers."

Unlike most Amaris Empire officers, Billy never tried to hide his Apollo drawl. The man's frontier to the end. Takeo knew just what the SAS troops were planning, just what he'd warned the high command about in the first place. You'd think being the Boss' son might mean something, but nooo.

"Reinforce the command center with our own guys and get me Itchy."

Ichijiro Thorton the general commanding the base had been the one to make the changes to the base's command and control. One of Takeo's fathers favorites, they'd butted heads from day one.

A squad of Huscarl infantry caught up with the two Imperial officers as they rounded the corridor from the Huscarl barracks heading for the stairs to the command level. One of the soldiers handed Takeo a comm headset. Putting it on he was assailed by panicked conflicting reports and orders. General Thorton's voice came over calmly beginning to restore order when the bang of a grenade and the unmistakable snap crack of Terran Colt's silenced him.

Bye, bye Itchy, he thought.

As Takeo was about to take over, the door to the stairwell burst open and six barely visible forms rushed out. Blending perfectly with the corridor the Terran SAS troops opened up on the Amaris soldiers. The Huscarls however were the best the Amaris empire had to offer. Despite being clipped by a 10mm round from a HK subgun, Billy Compton pumped a twelve gauge flechette round into one of the ghostly forms. The razor sharp tungsten needles cut through the man's body armor below his ceramic inserts and he went down screaming. While two Huscarls joined him in death their return fire sent the SAS team back

into the stairwell leaving a total of three of their number down. Checking his wrist comp Takeo realized what was happening.

“Lost the link Billy, They’re gonna take the base.”

“The vehicle bay then?”

“Yeah.”

With the infantry to cover them, the two officers made their way to the vehicle bay without incident, rendezvousing with several of his mechwarrriors and tank crews along the way. Having given the order, Takeo hoped the rest of the depleted regiment was doing the same thing. Taking a moment to slag the bay doors in the open position, Takeo mounted up in his seventy ton Hecatoncheires, “General Lee”.

As Billy powered up his Great White, “Tough Guy”, Takeo shook his head in resignation. Damn it Pop, you’ve got us all killed, he thought glumly.

Bruce (Downloading.)

Strapped into the Leopard class transport *Roadrunner* with the rest of my command lance, I felt Hussy come alive around me. I’d been piloting that Amaris Heck for far too long. Mind you any BattleMech has roughly the same cockpit and control layout but they’re all a bit different even if they have roughly the same performance profiles. Then there is the DI, the core of the ‘Mech. The big brains and talking heads will all tell you that the Diagnostic Interface isn’t a true artificial intelligence. Anyone who pilots the same ‘Mech for several years will tell you different. Hussy knows me, anticipates my reactions.

Superstition, you say.

Well which one of us is the ‘Mech jock?

At any rate my big bad Mad was the only ‘Mech I’d download in.

House troops called it insanity, even regular SLDF warriors got a queasy look on their face when you talked about it. The ‘Mechs aboard the *Roadrunner* and her sister ships all had the ABP-23 strap-on thruster packs mounted on their legs. Normally used to slow a ‘Mech down in an orbital drop, the disposable thrusters made by Rolls-Royce produced enough thrust to slow even an Atlas to a relatively safe landing. It wasn’t gentle or pretty but landing the transports under fire from enemy troop wasn’t an option and any high altitude traffic would be downed by the Unity Line’s aerospace defenses. Tanks can’t do it and infantry just doesn’t have the push to handle it alone. It was one of the reasons why ‘Mechs work as a combat machine.

Over the TACNET Captain Persaud of the *Roadrunner* gave us the ok to move to drop position. Now a successful download requires a skilled DropShip crew as much as it does excellent MechWarriors. Having up to four hundred tons of metal moving around in your ships belly as it flies at nape of the earth takes a steady fast hand on the stick. As we reached our jump positions I checked our status. “Rat in his Bombardier, “Boom-Boom”, the Terrible Two; Hatchiwara Yuri and Iuchi Kei, the only two of the Ryukaze to have downloaded, in Marauders. All Royal machines. I nodded in satisfaction.

“Rat, All set?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be Bossman.”

‘Rat hates downloading.

“Kei, Yuri?”

“Give the word, Boss”

“Hai!”

Kei and Yuri love it.

But ‘Rat’s sane, the Terrible Two definitely aren’t.

As for me, well, It IS fun .

Captain Persaud cut in;

“Thirty seconds Major Gilmour”

“We’re ready Geoff.”

The bay doors open. The roar of the wind load even in our cockpits. I extend Hussy’s arms rotating the vambraces to use the built in climbing claws. Mad’s don’t have hands, the cost of such heavy firepower in the forearms. The designer Melissa Christie, had been a Mech jock back in the day however. Built into the insides of each blocky forearm were four Rapiere like claws that retracted flush with the Magna Hellstar’s reaction chambers, the strongest point on the forearm. Works pretty well. Kinda figures, her umpteen great-granddaddy invented the tank suspension that’s been standard on tanks for a thousand years.

“Twenty seconds to drop.”

The thrum of *Roadrunner*'s energy weapons was echoed by bright flashes from *Skirtchaser* the Leopard visible through the bay doors. The Leopards would clear the drop zone, suppressing enemy defenses.

"Ten seconds."

I coiled the myomer fibers that make up Hussy's muscles.

"Drop."

Surging forward in the linear control frame, I send the seventy five ton coiled mass of fusion powered malice out the bay doors. The wind hits you immediately. You have to judge your jump so you clear the ship but have enough time to slow down with your jets. Thumbing the auxiliary button on my joysticks the sudden hammer blow of the big Rolls-Royce engines slams me back into the frame's cushions. The ground hits almost immediately and Hussy shrieks throwing up sparks as she skids across the tarmac.

Then it's over. Fort Bollenger, meet the Black Cats, Black Cats meet Fort Bollenger.

Bravo and Charlie Lances hit almost simultaneously. Five Bombardiers and seven Marauders, we make up the Thirteenth Assault Company of the Black Tigers. My Company.

Behind us three Fury Infantry transports repeat our maneuver dropping a mix of jump troops and Nighthawk equipped SAS. Resistance is scattered and disorganized. A Manticore MBT rolls out from behind a bunker right into my sights. I can see the tank commanders shock as he spots me. My fire washes over the big tank. PPC fire lancing into a hole opened up by my gauss slug. When the haze of sublimated metal and burning rubber smoke clears in the wind it's as if he transformed into a blackened stick figure. Only his helmet protected head fixed into a permanent scream resembled anything human.

Didi Moran came over the TACNET with the prearranged signal for success. Our SAS troops had overridden the security systems and locked down Fort Bollenger, sealing the Amaris troops in their barracks and duty stations and deactivating most of the fort's defenses. Tommy Lindon, Didi's slicer or computer whiz, had also activated the internal security grid and released enough knockout gas to put down a small city.

"Stealth two six, this is Cat six, sitrep."

"Stealth two six reports mission success twelve KIA, ten wounded, request HazMat support."

"HazMat?"

"Confirmed Cat six, RimJobs replaced kicker fourteen with sarin-k."

Sarin, fucking nerve gas, a cold pit settled in my stomach.

"Roger Stealth two six, HazMat enroute."

Now I'm no saint, you all know that, but five thousand men trapped like rats and gassed, even after the garage incident, gods above. And it could have been our troops walking into that. Over a private channel I called Didi.

"Di its B, talk to me."

"We didn't know B, and even if we did..."

"You safe?"

"Yeah, listen B, Harry says he spotted Takeo Amaris near the vehicle bays and we ain't got 'em on any of the security cams."

"Gotcha Di, be safe."

Switching channels I got to the rest of the task force.

"Cat six to all Cat elements, be advised locked down buildings are nogo. Sarin-k present.

Also be advised, Huscarl Dragoons may be present, Including c/o."

"Look sharp people, I finished up, Takeo Amaris may be out here and I want his punk ass."

Takeo (Can't get no love.)

Takeo led the way out of the bay, his ears ringing with the choking cries of the men and women left behind. General Lee's sensors were alive with signals. Too many of them the red of enemy forces. As his ad-hoc company spread out into the base's quad, he got his first look at the enemy. A black Marauder pumped fire into one of his Manticore MBTs. As the tank brewed up Takeo lined up his sights on the SLDF heavy. The machine's markings sent chills through him. One of his Shark pilots cried out;

"God's above it's the Tigers, Hell's Own's come to play."

"Fine so lets send 'em back to Hell." Takeo growled as he pulled his triggers.

Fire lanced out from the General Lee, spiking the raptor shaped enemy mech along its dorsal armor as it twisted to meet him. Even as the lead machine reeled under his fire, its lancemates returned fire

concentrating on Billy's Tough Guy, the biggest target on the field. The Bombardier crouched on its back canted legs arms held out for balance as it spat out thirty Artemis guided Phoenix missiles. As soon as the warheads cleared the two flanking Marauders crossed in front of the smaller machine drawing the Huscarl's fire and spitting out lightning and hypersonic slugs of metal. Thrown to the side by a violent explosion Takeo noticed the blue dot representing Billy Compton wink out. With the Great White's death taking the heat off him the enemy leader had recovered. The hulking 'Mech moved with a grace Takeo had never seen before. Striding forward it leapt up on the four meter height of a bunker, looking like some prehistoric monster as it flashed fire down on him. As General Lee shuddered around him, Takeo saw two more heavy lances moving to flank his position.

"Ripper six to all Ripper units fall back, they're trying to overrun us, don't let them pin you down."

Takeo sent another burst from the 120mm cannon in the General's right arm at the enemy machine punching into its hip as he ducked back around the vehicle bay. Jon Brannigan one of his original command lance pilots sent a ruby pulse from his Shark's left arm into a parked fuel truck just inside the bay. The resulting smoke and fire creating an obscuring wall between the two forces. Fire from his seven remaining manticores mauled a Bombardier and a Marauder from the lance on the Amaris right. The SLDF troops ducked for cover and the respite gave Takeo a moment to clear his head.

Goodbye Billy, he thought, I'll see you in Hell.

Bruce (Shark Hunting)

Shit, I thought as the Huscarls slipped away. The fire from the burning fuel truck had touched off ammunition in the bay itself. This in turn blew the bay's inner wall. Which of course released the sarin laced air inside. The Tigers' HazMat alarms began going off almost as soon as the Amaris 'Mechs disappeared in the smoke. While all it took was a flip of a switch to set the 'Mechs and Nighthawks to internal life support, the shock stopped the Tigers for a critical moment.

Regrouping, we stalked off after the Huscarls. The last hit from that Heck threw a hitch in Hussy's step. The network of bunkers and weapons emplacements that made up the surface of the fort played havoc with our sensors. Crossing a wide avenue between sections of the fort 'Rat takes down a Shark. Gracie Liu, newly promoted to Lieutenant and running Deuce Lance reports downing a D model Heck.

Then it happens, Jack Benning leading Trey Lance gets a fix. Pounding around the corner with Ace Lance behind me, I come face to face with a mixed company of blue and gray machines. Kicking aside a Manticore I core a Vampire at less than sixty meters. The light 'Mech falls like a puppet with its strings cut. 'Rat, Kei and Yuri pick out their own targets as Deuce and Trey Lances converge on the Huscarls.

In a normal (if there is such a thing.) 'Mech battle both sides will battle each other for an eternity, say ten minutes, with no loss in performance. Then, suddenly units on both sides will begin dropping from even minor hits. Because of their construction and the similarities to living beings that allows them to dodge fire and maneuver in ways conventional armor can't means that competently piloted BattleMechs fight on even in the face of catastrophic damage. The point of failure is called a units combat loss grouping or CLG. I've seen calculations used in simulators that claim to be able to predict any 'Mech fight's outcome.

They always leave out the human element.

In a fight like the one at Fort Bollenger it's the human element that counts. The Huscarls are the elite of the Rim Worlds forces. Before the coup, they were the most likely troops to be found in any Rim Worlds contribution to the Star League Defense Force. And these guys were veterans of the coup on Terra. The Tigers under my command from 'Rat to the Terrible Two are arguably the best in the regiment. Several, like Gracie and me, are gunslingers. Imagine a knife fight, between Special Forces, in a small well lit room. Very messy.

'Mechs start going down almost immediately. Concentrated fire snaps off limbs and shatters cockpits. Widows of opportunity open and close almost too fast to follow. Kei and Yuri combining fire to take out a Great White, then Yuri has her legs cut out by two Hecks and a Manticore. I charge into one of the Hecks, bowling it over and kicking in its cockpit. The Heck later identified as Takeo Amaris decapitates Jack Benning's Bombardier and then cripples my right leg. My gauss slug cuts off his arm mounted autocannon, its last chambered cassette firing off wildly as the limb spins away. A pair of Sharks entwined with Kei's Marauder knock Amaris out of my sights so 'Rat and I shoot them off her.

And then it's over.

The Huscarls still standing broke contact slipping back into the base. Regrouping I took stock of what we had left. Seven of our 'Mechs were still standing. Jack Benning, who'd survived the drop on Manhattan and the push across the country was gone. So were Kevin Poulson and Dana Maldonado. Kevin was one hell of a poker player. Dana sang in the regimental choir, to hear her sing almost made me believe.

Yuri's Marauder was down and not going anywhere, I knew she was okay by the stream of vulgar Japanese coming over the comms. Dion Mitchell's Bombardier stood motionless. I'd thought he'd bought it too, but he was just down with a concussion. All of the rest of us had major damage, our 'Mechs looked like they'd stumbled out of a junk heap. From the wreckage, it looked like maybe seven of eight Manticores littered the field. Three Hecatoncheires a half dozen Sharks and a second Great White were strewn like discarded toys about our route.

None of the Amaris pilots survived, make of that what you want.

As I began to give the order to continue pursuit, Didi came over the comm passing the order to stand down. The rest of the regiment was arriving with support from the 151st Light Horse. The Light Horse would take up pursuit.

To this day it still makes me uneasy to admit it; but at that moment I hated them.

Takeo Amaris was *mine*.

George (Politics: Ur doin' it wrong)

...so I can't speak as to Director Donner's motivations, or the SEP's reluctance to accept our aid, but I would like to reassure the people of Terra that the Federated Suns will continue it's relief efforts both here on Terra and across the Hegemony.

We Davion's never forget our friends."

"Thank you Lady Sarah for your candor, and I can tell you as a journalist; the people of Terra won't forget either.

Could I ask a personal question?"

"Of course Dianna."

"You made quite a splash at the Jocasta premiere with a certain 'MechWarrior on your arm, are you...?"

(Laughter)"Let's just say we're happy, Uncle John told me I've broken hearts all over New Avalon..."

George Donner clicked off the Tri-d irritably.

Enjoy your moment in the sun, princess, this war won't last forever.

Across the room, Elias Bruenig chuckled at his boss irritation. George glowered at his aide, but the man remained unfazed.

Elias isn't afraid of anything, but then that's why you hired him.

That any his lack of anything resembling morals.

"What's so funny?"

"She always gets your goat, boss"

George shrugged, another thing about Elias, the man didn't allow any illusions.

"Can't control her, or that boyfriend of hers."

"Sure you can."

George looked up, surprised.

"Think it through boss, you turned off the TV too soon."

Of course, George thought.

"Our little princess is in love with a soldier in a war zone."

Elias nodded a small smile on his face.

"And with all she's lost, who'd blame her if she hightailed it back to New Avalon, he finished.

"Two birds with one stone." George smiled. "I like it."

"I've got just the bunch to handle it too."

His aide's smile dropped then.

"Out with it El."

"Sarah Davion is the least of our problems, those two girls.."

George groaned in irritation; not this again, and said as much.

"Boss they've seen too much, plus you're ham handed attempt to silence them..."

“Hey that almost worked, until Captain Hero got involved.”
George shook his head, Damn Tigers again.
“Now they’re firmly ensconced in the camp of a bunch of people who’d kill you as soon as look at you.”

“Ahh, for Christ’s sake, a pair of drugged up teenaged whores, who’d believe *them*?”
Elias fiddled with the remote bringing up the ‘net connection. Reaching a local blog by a soldier in the 90th HAR he followed a link.

The video that came up documented the activities of the Tigers’ medical team. On the screen a young black woman was organizing the setup of a forward aid station, in the back ground a petite blonde also in SLDF fatigues was accepting the delivery of a pallet of medical supplies. Both women exhibited a cool confidence as they went about their duties.

“Any one look familiar?”
As the video continued to a point apparently a few days later, the aid station was in operation. An all too familiar, longhaired captain entered to check on one of his troopers. He stopped on the way out to share a laugh with the two young women.

“Don’t look like teenage whores to me boss. Elias quipped, Plus one word to Captain Hero..”
George sat back a cold pit forming in his stomach.
“He won’t need proof will he.”
Elias shook his head grimly.

Alex (Dreaming of a better time.)

“Base jumping Angel Falls.”
“Too much like work.”
“Do The Tourist thing in Paris.”
“Not bad.”
“Same thing only in Rome.”
“Not much left.”
“Damn Greenhaven bastards.”
“Colonists got no respect, uh, sorry my lady.”
“No biggie, Gracie, it’s Sarah, now don’t hog the bottle.”

Alex came around the scaffolding around Hussy’s left leg, the banter of familiar voices like a siren song. Master Technician Misha Vinson was handing a tool up to Bruce, who was buried to the shoulders in the Marauder’s knee. Gracie Liu, ‘Mech Rat, Iuchi Kei and to his surprise Sarah Davion were passing around a bottle of California’s finest, offering advice (helpful or not), and wishful thinking about what to do after the war.

Gracie smiled wickedly saying;
“I’m gonna find that actor Malcolm Farrell and kidnap him for a month.”
Sarah piped up.
“Only a month?”
“Yeah, I bore easily.”
“Still, he is cute...” Sarah trailed off grinning impishly as Bruce came half way out of Hussy’s knee to give her a mock glower.

“...not that you’ve got anything to worry about honey.” She finished.
Turning back to his work Bruce gave a grin.
“Hell Gracie you’d break that turtle, oh hey Al.”
“Zup B, Sarah, when did you get in?”
Sarah handed him the bottle, motioning to the field outside.
“Couple of hours ago, General DeChevalier didn’t want to ok the trip, but Aunt Gladys intervened.”

“Really?”
“Well after all I’m in the safest place on Earth. “
Alex raised the bottle and took a swig to a chorus of “Hear, Hear and Damn Straight.”
“Besides, she motioned to the SLDF fatigues she was wearing tied off at the waist and the olive drab T-shirt, I blend in.”

Kei choked back a laugh through a mouthful of wine.
“What?” Sarah asked innocently.

Grinning Bruce looked a question at Chef Vinson, who checked the readout on his pocket comp.
 "Tension's good, we've got it this time, Captain."
 "Then we're officially off duty, Chief, the younger man smiled handing over another wine bottle.
 "Thanks, what about you, after the war, I mean?"
 Bruce looked over at Sarah and smiled.
 "At least a month in Tahiti, then well, I'll figure it out as I go along."
 Sarah returned the look solemnly.
 "Yes we will." She said.
 "Hey Sarah, when you're picking out the bridesmaid dresses, be kind." Gracie laughed.
 "Oh, don't worry, Gracie I'm sure you'd look fine in Davion Green taffeta." Sarah shot back.
 "Gaah."
 "You staying with the service B?"
 His friend shrugged.
 "Haven't thought about it, probably, I mean being a 'Mech Jock's all I know, and Terra's gonna need all they've got."
 He shook his head, glancing back at Sarah.
 "Like I said we'll figure it out later, you?"
 "Nah, I'm done, I've gotten some feelers from TerraGov."
 "No Shit!" Gracie burst out..
 Bruce busted out laughing.
 "Sorry Al, you a politician?"
 Alex smiled ruefully.
 "Looks like, I mean we've got a lot of work to do." He said seriously. "The Cameron's are gone so some one else is going to have to restore the executive branch."
 The others got quiet then, unanswered questions and fears suddenly brought into the open.
 "Maybe Kerensky will step in." Gracie shook her head. "Hell at least there'll be a line of succession."
 "He'd get a lot of support here, and the other States wouldn't dare object."
 "Who say's we need anyone to step in, Kerensky or some lost Cameron, Bruce said leaning forward, It's not like we need a royal family."
 Both Sarah and Kei looked shocked, the others uneasy.
 "Look, we have a working framework in place the Hegemony can govern itself." He paused then, took a breath and pushed on. "After all it was the Camerons' who got us into this mess in the first place."
 In the quiet that followed Alex mused, ten years ago he'd have gotten his lights punched out. Now however...
 "How many people warned Richard about Stefan Amaris, You've all seen the Intel. Bruce went on. "This one guy doesn't listen and there's no oversight and where the hell are we now."
 Sarah spoke up then, "Who would be First Lord then, The House Lords wouldn't accept a committee." "Besides, she went on, you underestimate the effect of the loss of Terran legitimacy."
 "The First Lord should be separate from TerraGov anyway, so sure Kerensky, or maybe one of the older Noble Families. Bruce answered. Who ever Terra supports, both the Lyrans and Prince John should back as well," Sarah nodded.
 "Now you've got the Cappellans, the Combine and the League."
 Alex nodded, "And the Liao's *hate* Kenyon Marik."
 Bruce raised four fingers.
 "That's four either directly supporting the First Lord, or at least neutral, now add in us."
 "Huh, wait a minute Gracie chimed in, *us*?"
 "The SLDF, Kei answered her, neither Kenyon nor the Coordinator would risk a war with the largest most battle hardened military force the human race has ever seen."
 She leaned over to Gracie and patted her knee.
 "Y'know us."
 Misha spoke quietly; "The guns of the Tigers are gonna put down a tyrant."
 He looked up; "It's not unthinkable those guns will hold the Star League together."
 As they all looked up at Hussy, Bruce spoke up;
 "And there it is."
 Alex laughed, "Maybe it's you who should be the politician, B."

His friend smiled sadly; "No way, I'm just the tool, not the hand that welds it."
 Alex looked at Sarah in mock disbelief.
 "Hey B, I may be the politician, but you're gonna be royalty."
 Sarah took Bruce's hand in hers, a huge grin on her face.
 "I am eleventh in line for the throne."
 "I thought you were twelfth?" Alex asked.
 Sarah shrugged, "Reynold Davion passed away last month, heart problems."
 She turned back to Bruce a wicked smile on her face.
 "I think Uncle John has a Barony in mind for you."
 Bruce started to speak, but only a squeak came out.
 "Oh my God, Sarah he's speechless."
 "I know, Kei said thickening her light Combine accent, Captain be First Lord, we fix it no problem, you see."
 Bruce fixed her with a sour stare.
 "Fine, he said, put me in the bullseye."
 "Better you than me Lord Bruce."
 A voice interrupted from behind them.
 "Am I missing something, Major?"
 Recognizing a tone in Samuel Winter's voice the group, even Sarah rose, the Tigers saluting.
 Colonel Samuel Winter stepped around the boxy myomer calibration computer a fifty something officer at his side. Everyone recognized General Aaron DeChevalier. Returning the Tigers salute the General smiled and reached for the bottle of wine Bruce was holding.
 Taking a pull, he passed it to Samuel.
 "Good stuff Sam, DeChevalier said, but I think your Tigers are planning to choose our new First Lord for us."
 Bruce looked like he was going to melt, Sarah looked amused.
 Kei grinned proudly and burped.
 Alex just wanted to disappear.
 "You might want to check with us first Major, Samuel quipped enjoying the moment.
 "Umm yes sir."
 DeChevalier nodded to the group as the two officers walked off.
 "Lady Sarah good to see you again."
 "And you General"
 "And if it would be no trouble, Lord Gilmour, could you join us at 0800 tomorrow, I have a job for *Captain* Gilmour."
 "Yes sir!"
 When they were gone both Alex and Bruce sagged with relief.
 Kei however was put out.
 Catching Bruce's eye she said solemnly,
 "*Tono*, the General stole our booze."

Samuel (Looking at the big picture.)

The room was crowded with officers way above his paygrade. At least everyone here smokes Samuel thought, puffing on his Havana. The holographic table in front of him was centered on Vancouver Island. Clustered around the south east edge of the island in a broken series of concentric circles the icons of fifty two known Amaris divisions, air and naval units swarmed like bright red ants. Strong points and natural barriers showed in red and orange. To the south the age old radiation symbol marked the Gorst Flats and the grave of the Royal Black Watch. Seventy four SLDF formations of varying size stood facing them. Twenty more symbols representing units in transit straddled long green arrows from all over the globe. A smaller globe hung in mid air, in red three locations in central Asia, and one in the Congo showed Amaris strongholds yet to be reduced. Surrounded and isolated they were now the sidelines. Here, in North America, was the Big Show. From the edge of the Rockies to several hundred miles out in the Pacific scattered red flares showed current skirmishes.

East of Mount Reinier, Samuel spotted the Tiger insignia of the 90th Heavy Assault turning back a probe by Takeo Amaris' Huscarl Dragoons. Zooming in he watched the tail end of the battle. Worries about his son who had the command in his absence and the unit in general must have been plain on his

face. Colonel Ezra Bradley, commander of the Eridani Light Horse and fellow West Point graduate, put his hand on Samuel's shoulder.

"They're doing fine Sam, Alex has good officers under him and you've trained him well."

Samuel nodded in response, Ezra knew the worst fears of any father and commander. His son, Davis, had been lost with the whole of the 19th Strikers at the beginning of the liberation. On the screen the last of the Huscarls retreated behind the umbrella of their artillery. The fast strike companies of Isokoru Sato's re-formed 2nd Battalion broke off, using their speed to out pace the Rim Worlds Artillery.

"Just a little pissed, lost two companies to DeChevalier's big secret, plus all my Nighthawks."

Ezra rolled his eyes then looked around lowering his voice to a whisper.

"They nabbed a mixed battalion from us."

"Still not telling us why though."

"Nah, its Kerensky's baby though, the pressure's mounting to end this, the damn politicians are crawling out from under their rocks."

"Save their necks and five minutes later they think they run the show."

Ezra smiled sadly.

"Don't mean nothin'." He said quietly.

"Not a thing." Sam finished the age old soldiers phrase.

A commotion at the entrance signaled the arrival of both Aaron DeChevalier and the man himself.

General Aleksandr Kerensky had not aged well over the two years it had been since Samuel had last seen him. The weight of seeing his nation and the family he served torn apart had taken its toll. Kerensky's voice, always strong and confident, had a resigned tone to it that troubled Samuel. As the General outlined the plans for the assault and liberation of Unity City a growing unease gnawed at the back of Samuel's mind. As the briefing progressed, Kerensky's voice regained its familiar tone, the trusted and honored leader, the Liberator of Terra. But the unease remained.

The plan's solid, plays to our strengths. Samuel thought, but something's wrong.

He kept coming back to the Kerensky's eyes.

Cold, distant, resigned.

He's lost hope, Samuel realized, for the Hegemony, the League or both.

God help us, he prayed.

Pete (Teaching 'Mechs to swim.)

"Time!", called Brevet-Major Bruce rockstar fucking primadonna Gilmour.

Light flooded the simulators cockpit as newly promoted Captain Peter Altman pulled off his neurohelmet.

"Thirty two minutes, twelve seconds, said Erika Von Manstien, the captain from the 151st Royal Division (George S. Patton) who Gilly had picked to be his exec. Inwardly Pete smiled at his private nickname for his new c/o. The transfer from the 71st Light Horse hadn't known what to expect when he'd heard about who'd been given charge of the adhoc 'Mech battalion. Oh, his creds were strong enough. After all they don't just give out Gunslinger medallions, and the SAS troopers respect him. But with his eye patch and that hair the man looks and sounds like a bandit out of a bad holodrama. How the hell did he land a chick like Sarah Davion. To make matters worse half his company are Snakes. OK, four but still....

"Six more than the last time."

The man in question closed his eye and said in that soft cold voice of his.

"Okay Erika, set it up."

He looked up. "We'll run it again."

Pete coughed loudly.

Gilly looked up.

"Yes Captain?"

"Sir, Pete said drawing himself up, we've run this set six times, how.."

The Tiger officer smiled coldly.

"We run it *Captain* Altman until your Horsemen make the run from the DZ to the beach in twenty minutes."

Gilly shrugged.

"I know you're capable of it, you guys forded the Ohio River on our left flank just fine."

Peter looked at him uncertain of his earlier opinion.

"Yeah, Pete, I recognized that 'Hawk of yours."

“Where were you, if I may ask sir?”
 “In the black and red Heck holding the far bank.”
 Grinning wickedly he went on;
 “Now my Black Cats did this run in fourteen minutes five seconds, and we drive, whaddya call ‘em?”
 The tension broken, Pete chuckled, relating the Horsemen’s term for any ‘Mechs over fifty five tons.
 “Thunder thighed elephants sir.”
 “Give me Twenty minutes then Captain Altmann.”
 “Sir!” Pete snapped a salute turning to his troopers
 “We’ll give you ten.”

Always attack. Even in defense, attack. The attacking arm possesses the initiative and thus commands the action. To attack makes men brave; to defend makes them timorous. If I learn that an officer of mine has assumed a defensive posture in the field, that officer will never hold command under me again.

Alexander, King of Macedon

Bruce (In a holding pattern.)

I leaned back putting down the battered softcover I was reading at Sarah’s touch. Surrendering to her warm, strong hands as she worked my shoulders. It’s become a weird sort of war, I thought. Home on weekends, twelve to sixteen hour days training for the op. Commanding three times the number of troops I’m used to. At times it’s a little unreal.

I must have spoken aloud as Sarah rested her chin on the top of my head and asked;
 “What’s unreal?”
 “Everything, being here, the job we’re training for, that the end is in sight.”
 Sarah pulled me a little closer letting me talk.
 “I can only guess what it was like for you, here on Earth, for us it was always one planet after another. Weeks in a tin can wondering if the KF drive would fail in mid-jump, if the next planet we hit would be your grave.”
 I shook my head in wonder.
 “Ten years Amaris took from us, and you know if I didn’t have you...”
 “At least you could hit back”, Sarah laughed bitterly.
 “We could just sit and hope, go on like nothing was happening.”
 I stroked the back of her hand aimlessly and nodded.
 “You didn’t know Talia Greenberg, she was my best friend here on Earth,” Sarah went on, “Her parents both worked for the Department of Communications. She trailed off then.
 “They were passing information.” I said guessing what was coming next.
 Her voice got husky with emotion then.
 “I was on the vid with her when they came. I think they shot her mom at the door, then her dad.”
 I felt her shudder at the memory.
 “Dupre, the one who tried to... Who you shot, he was in charge.”
 I sat up and Sarah rested her head on my shoulder, wiping away the tears on her sleeve.
 “They shot her then and there was nothing I could do.”
 Zeus, father and savior, give me vengeance, I thought, clamping down on the rage.
 “Daddy told me you were a soldier that same night, he’d heard through channels about Acamar.”
 I kissed her forehead and brushed the hair from her eyes as she looked up at me.
 “I never saw you as the soldier type, but every night I would call up a starmap and wonder when you would come to save me.”

“Some nights, when it was really bad, I’d curse your name for taking so God damned long, others I’d imagine you charging in on your ‘Mech and stepping on Dupre and the whole Amaris clan.”
 I chuckled then and she looked up at me angrily.
 “What’re you laughing at.” she growled
 “Just thinking, here I show up, late without my ‘Mech, all raggedy assed and stinking of gasoline.”
 Sarah looked away, smiling and shaking her head.
 “Not the way I expected you to show up, no.”

“Forgive me?” I said teasingly.
Slipping on to my lap she leaned in for a kiss whispering,
“I’ll think about it.”

Alex (Killing Time, Killing Sharks)

Elmo shook around him as the Excalibur’s gauss slug and wave of missiles swarmed over the heavy ‘Mech. Known as a “Streak” for its speed and lack of armor the SLDF heavy must have been looted from some colonial unit. The humanoid machine had a third less armor than the Terran version, but plenty of speed for its weight and a huge amount of firepower. In the right hands it was a deadly cavalry machine providing rapid fire support to lesser units. The RimJobber piloting this machine had no clue how to properly employ his ill gotten ‘Mech.

Not, Alex mused, to say he can’t shoot.

In reply Alex accelerated the last few meters into range and let go with a full salvo from his six laser weapons, the twin 8cm heavy lasers in Elmo’s torso sliced into the Gauss Rifle in the Amaris machine’s right arm. The tremendous energy detonated the capacitors storing the energy for the railgun’s next shot. The detonation sent the other ‘Mech stumbling to the left and the four 6cm pulse models carved in the ruined torso to savage the Excalibur’s extralight engine.

The blue and gray ‘Mech stopped dead in its tracks staring down at the empty air where the right half of its chest had been. As the Amaris machine’s safety mechanisms engaged it stiffened collapsing flat on its face. In spite of himself Alex laughed at the sight.

A lull in the fight allowed him to pause bleed off the built up heat. Below him what should have been pristine early spring Rocky Mountain wilderness was charred and cratered, littered with the corpses of both men and machines. Takeo Amaris’ Huscarl Dragoons and elements of the 113th Regulars; a combined arms brigade; were fighting a spirited defense against the Tigers and the 21st Striker Regiment of the Eridani Light Horse. Artillery from both sides hammered sporadically at the troops on the ground. In the clear blue sky Amaris Corvins and Star League Zeros dueled amid twisting contrails. Occasionally a flight of Hammerheads or their Rim Worlds counterparts; Vultures broke through on bombing and strafing runs.

Christian Traumentieri’s First Battalion anchored the Star League line digging in their heels against a mixed regiment of Amaris Regulars. Three of the Assault Battalion’s four companies were made up of Pillagers the last of Devastators. Chris commanded the single most powerful concentration of firepower in the 90th Heavy Assault. With advanced munitions in short supply on both sides what artillery strikes that did get through were mostly conventional rounds. Most BattleMechs could use a mix of mobility and armor to resist such rounds. While more mobile than most Assault ‘Mechs what the Bloody Paws of 1st Battalion did have was nineteen tons of armor apiece. Barring the more advanced armor piercing and smart munitions the Paws had little to be afraid of. The Amaris troops however were advancing into a meat grinder. At full strength for the first time in years the Bloody Paws turned their fields of fire into interlocking kill zones filled with argent streaks.

In contrast to most modern weapons the cost in terms of supply, money and even heat during combat the Gauss Rifle is the about the lowest cost weapon imaginable. The devastating almighty gauss slug was nothing more than a 250 kg hunk of ferrous metal. The gun itself is where all the high technology rests. As a result Chris’ Paws had ample ammunition. The Manticores, Hunters and Colonial tech BattleMechs of the 113th Regulars seemed from Alex’s position to simply dissolve, one blackened and burned Marauder simply vanished as its 120mm cannon ammunition detonated. The ‘Mech looked so much like one of the Tigers own Mads’ that Alex felt a chill down his spine.

The failed assault opened a seam between the Regulars and Huscarls. The 21st Striker Regiment surged forward looking to split the Amaris line. Alex pulled his battalion up in support as did Justine. Backing up the Strikers, Alex was glad it was the Eridanis’ sharing the line with them. Despite the rivalry between the Light Horse and the Tigers, the two units had formed a bond over the past year. As the first of the Huscarls began to close the gap, Isokoru’s Swift Claws slammed into them. Justine, closer to the action than Alex, maneuvered her heavies to support the closely engaged Kuritans. The Strikers were overrunning the front elements of the Regulars.

“Mitch, he called to, his exec, form up the hole is open.”

“Gotcha boss, Captain Mitch Sovino answered, Don’t want to be late to the party.”

Takeo (Baiting Tigers.)

Heat rose from the floor of General Lee’s cockpit as Takeo salvoed a wave of cannon and laser fire at the Dragon in his sights. The red and black machine twisted away from him stretching out its arm to

spit cannon fire back at him. Taking the hit he spat 90mm warheads back at the Combine designed heavy as another cassette clunked into his big gun. With a ripping whine the rapid fire cannon spread a line of destruction up the Dragon's side. The squat machine plowed a groove in the ground as it fell on its face.

Finishing off the SLDF machine with a quick lance of laser light to the top of the machine's head, Takeo moved to engage a Lynx leaving it a broken wreck on the ground. Pushing through the Tigers' second battalion his command company plowed into the gray green 'Mechs of the Eridani regiment. Rending a Phoenix Hawk and two Griffins with concentrated fire, Takeo snarled orders to his first Battalion.

If they could hit the 21st Striker Regiment hard enough, the SLDF advance might stall.

The massed assault machines of Takeo's 3rd Company arrived, the massive Great Whites sent a shock through the Eridanis. Then fate took a hand.

A squadron of Vultures; rearmed from a previous mission got through the air battle. Six fighters dropped a full load of cluster munitions into the middle of the Strikers. The combination of the increasing fire and the bombing run sent the Strikers reeling. Fire from the ground chased after the retreating planes but only took down one.

A gauss slug slammed into him from the left crushing the laser emitter in his chest. Twisting in his command couch Takeo dodged the following whips of particle cannon fire. Half a click away separated by chance from its cohorts a black and red Marauder had crested a low hill and was tracking in on him. A secondary viewscreen set to zoom in on his targeting systems caught a quick image of a pair of icy blue predator eyes on the forward torso.

Wendigo, Major Justine Sinclair commander of the Hungry Tigers, he thought.

"Pinging" the enemy machine on his tacmap Takeo brought the target to the attention of his own Fire Lance. A pair of 7J Hecks and two Whitworths sent a hundred warheads at the Terran heavy. A swarm of the hypervelocity rockets sent the Marauder to the ground with the spasmodic jerk of a wounded pilot.

"Sergei, I want that pilot!"

Calling back an affirmative, Sergei Johannsen commander of 2nd Battalion's Jackal Company led his mix of Sharks and Vampires into the fray. Both of Takeo's remaining battalions a little over four companies had taken a high ground position around the mouth of the valley and were laying down a pattern of covering fire. Around them the remnants of the 113th Regulars were reforming and coming to the aid of the Amaris heir.

Jackal Company had reached the downed Marauder which was sheltered by the hill it had climbed. Acting quickly a Vampire used a combination of lasers and myomer power to wrench the cockpit from the stricken machine. The Tigers were not however going to let this prize go. The heavy 'Mechs of the Hungry Tigers surged forward shielding the regrouped faster machines of the 21st Striker and the Kurita expatriates of the Swift Claws. The retreating Jackals were too fast however. Shielding the cockpit toting Vampire with the mass of their own machines the bulk of the strike company slid away with their prize.

Hope she's worth it, Takeo thought.

Christian (Tigers Fury)

"Goddamn it, fucking move!"

Christian Trauamtieri screamed at his men but the massive assault machines were never meant to be fast. Pulling the triggers on his dual gauss rifles he slammed a Shark into the ground. Shifting targets he sighted in on a Great White dug in on the ridge. Sending two more of his dwindling rounds downrange to hammer at the Amaris machine he felt a cold pit form in his stomach. Fear in combat was par for the course. You feared death of course, but the training and instinct kicked in. But getting captured by the Usurper. And Justine, well argue as they might, they'd served together ten years on the line. Even his wife Kaitlin didn't know him like Justine did. To lose her now....

In the back of his mind he noted the Great White exploding.

The Amaris troops were stiffening their resistance now. Showing some backbone. That little pecker Takeo. Say what you want but the bastard was one good troop. A wave of long range missiles hammered down on the Paws then and his sensors screamed a warning. In the movies the cavalry always arrives to save the day. This day however it was the bad guy who got saved.

A brigade of Amaris heavy armor had arrived to support the Huscarls. As the battle raged the tankers had used their ECM and the confusion to take hull down positions on the ridges flanking the valley. Almost three hundred armored fighting vehicles began to pour fire down onto the Star League troops. Boxed in on three sides, Chris knew what was coming.

Still, passing on the retreat order left the big blonde major with bile in his throat.

Chapter 3 (The end of the beginning.)

Takeo (Dealing with Daddy.)

The throne room of the Empire of Amaris sat in what was the Grand Ballroom of the old Star League Capital. The Throne of the First Lord of the Star League had been sealed by Stephan Amaris. The bodies of Richard Cameron and his guard in the same positions as the day they fell. His father had been spending more and more time in that ghastly chamber. Of course Stefan Amaris had been getting stranger and stranger, more out of touch. The architect of the greatest single coup in human history was without a doubt crazy as a loon.

Or maybe he was always nuts.

Takeo Amaris kept the cookie cutter smile plastered on his face as the line of well-wishers past him by with their gifts and pleasantries. The tension in the air seemed to heat the room despite the Emperor's preferred cool climate settings. Takeo noticed beads of sweat on the foreheads of many in his fathers court.

They know it's over. The Empire is a corpse that doesn't know it's dead. And the brain keeps going on like every thing is fine. The Brain in question sat beaming on the Wormwood Throne, looking for all the world like a Mongol version of Santa Claus. Beside him Takeo's mother was checking yet again for flaws in her makeup. A famous runway model on Apollo, she had never been known for her smarts.

Still, Takeo thought, she had been a good mother to him and his siblings.

She doesn't deserve what's going to happen.

Looking down he saw his sister Sinthya holding her arms up at him.

Since birth she had taken to Takeo with a subconscious connection that spooked him sometimes. Picking her up he smiled, relaxing for the first time ages. As he rose he caught Hideki's eye. His brother smiled back grimly. While Sinthya was definitely her own person, even at six, and their other sister Kara took after their mother, Hideki was dad through and through. At twenty seven, a year younger than Takeo, and the commander of the elite 219th Dragoons Hideki was a total bastard.

While Takeo had fought on the front against Kerensky's forces as they marched through the Hegemony, Hideki had been in charge of suppressing rebellions on Terra. His brutality was legendary. He was also hideously efficient. As the last of the well-wishers filed past Hideki sauntered over to stand by his brother.

Under his breath Hideki sneered;

"Idiots, all of them."

"They know we've lost."

Hideki looked at Takeo sharply.

"Careful what you say brother, not even you are immune to Dad when he hears such talk."

Bouncing Sinthya on his hip to start her giggling Takeo replied;

"This would be over today if he did, note the guards 'Ki."

His brother nodded thoughtfully. Instead of the usual squad from the 1st Guards, the sentries in the Throne Room were from Takeo's Huscarls.

"And here I thought you were a regular space scout Tak."

"Be prepared, bro."

Chuckling Hideki handed him a small data chip.

"Happy birthday big brother."

Slipping Sinthya to Hideki's waiting arms, Takeo ran the chip through his wristcomp and looked up in astonishment.

Hideki tickled Sinthya under the chin smiling faintly.

"Iron Maiden as Charlotte the Harlot at L'amour, Brooklyn."

"Ki, this must be over a thousand years old...."

"Took that long to find it."

Rising from the Wormwood Throne Stefan Amaris gestured to his sons.

The Amaris Emperor's voice boomed in the spacious hall.

"Takeo, my son, for both the day of you birth and the valiant service you have provided I grant you the world of New Avalon and the Princedom of the Federated Suns. For the actions of his vile family

in supporting Kerensky's rebellion, I have stripped John Davion of his lands and titles and ordered the arrest of the traitor Sarah Davion."

As the shocked murmurs rose in the court, Stefan Amaris settled back in his throne.

The cherubic smile on his face sent a chill through Takeo even as he stepped forward and thanked his father. He dismissed the thought of contradicting Stephan almost immediately. While subconsciously he'd known his father had lost his grip on reality it had never hit home. Now he understood why General Sunderland, his father's Commanding General had all the Emperor's commands coming in on a private channel.

A stern look passed over the Emperor's face then as he gestured for silence.

"The second part of our gift to you, Takeo comes with some sorrow."

Takeo glanced at his brother who shrugged looking puzzled.

"Our most trusted servant General Sunderland has betrayed our trust and opened negotiations with the enemy."

As shocked exclamations of disbelief rose for the second time the Emperor raised his hands.

"It is true, In the hour of our final victory the General saw only defeat and was preparing to open a hole in our seaward defenses. A strike force of Kerensky's rabble was to hit our forces from behind, led by the criminal DeChevalier. Takeo, you are hereby promoted to General of the Armies. Your first task will be to eliminate this force when it comes to land on Vancouver Island."

Okay, Takeo thought, can do.

"Then before knowledge of their failure reaches them, General Lo of the First Guards will unleash our nuclear arsenal on the rebels as they assault our positions. With the bulk of Kerensky's force dead you will sweep the remnants of the rebels from Terra."

Oh shit, he can't be serious, nukes?!

"Father, by waiting for Kerensky's armies to engage us, many of our troops will be caught in the blast zones."

His father smiled and spread his arms.

"Then they will die Heroes of the Empire, their sacrifice will pave the way to the greatest victory in human history."

As his father sat back on the throne a satisfied look on his face, Takeo caught a flash of fear on his mother's face, just for an instant. The birthday party lasted only two more hours but it seemed to Takeo like an eternity. Hideki seemed just as antsy. As soon as was politic the brothers slipped away.

Walking out onto the terrace surrounding the top of the needle like central core both men were silent for a time. Hideki pulled out a bug detector rare even among Terran troops. After sweeping the area he turned to Takeo.

"You've got a plan, so spill it."

"You're not gonna like it."

"Sonny Cobb still alive?"

Hideki held up the bug detector in answer.

"Good I need to talk to a certain bad ass on the other side."

"That Captain from Fort Benning."

"Yup."

"You're right I don't like it."

"You know what happens if Dad goes through with his plans."

"Kerensky replies with his nukes."

Hideki looked at his brother grimly.

"And we all fry."

"Us and about seven million John Q. Publics."

Hideki snorted.

"Takeo, I don't give a fuck about those sheep, Dad's delusional and Mom'll never leave him."

He grabbed Takeo's arm and glared at him.

"But you get Kara and Sinthya out and safe."

"We both will."

"Nope."

Takeo's brain stopped dead in its tracks. Hideki went on his voice tense, as their Mom would say; his Apollo showing.

"Kerensky knows my face, you they've only got a ten year old High School photo of."

“How...”

“Sonny got lucky, aww hell Tak, you know these Terrans, they’re good but arrogant.”

Hideki met Takeo’s eyes then.

“You know Kerensky will want his pound of flesh, and he’ll get it.”

Hideki smiled a vicious gleam in his eyes.

“But he won’t like the price he has to pay for it.”

Justine (Life in Hell.)

I am an officer of the Star League Defense Force.

I am a MechWarrior.

I am a Black Tiger.

I am stronger than these RimJob fucks.

The Light and the Voices came again. That dumb ass Apollo drawl from the Brute. The smooth cultured tones of the Inquisitor. The questions came again. How many? Where? When? Justine barely heard them anymore. That didn’t bother her. What did was she didn’t know was if she answered any of them. She didn’t think so. Mainly ‘cause the pain came after the questions. When the Inquisitor caused the pain it was cold, impersonal. When the Brute caused it.

Well it was far worse.

Through the haze, she heard the Inquisitor’s voice.

“I’m done, you can have an hour, do try not to bust her up so badly.”

A low grunt was the reply. She felt the Brute’s hands.

I am an officer of the Star League Defense Force.

I am a MechWarrior.

I am a Black Tiger.

God no, God no, God Christian help me...

I am an officer of the Star League Defense Force.

I am a MechWarrior.

I AM A BLACK FUCKING TIGER!

I AM STRONGER THAN YOU BASTARDS!

Christian I need to tell you....

Wait that’s a laser.

Bruce (An unexpected call.)

I don’t think I’ve ever run so fast in my life. My quarters are close to the Presidio’s Headquarters but still. In the back of my mind I know that screech of metal was the Mongoose I cut off. The pilot’s curses followed me all the way to the Admin building. I stumbled to a halt in front of two very surprised sentries. Returning their salutes I realized I still had shaving cream on my chin. One of the sentries handed me a handkerchief. Cleaning up, I handed it back to him with an apology and thanks. I’d just had the presence of mind to call ahead to General DeChevalier and was passed through without hassle.

The General was pouring over weather reports and looked up when I entered.

“Bruce, what’s going on?”

“Sir, I was on the vid with Sarah when this came through.”

I held out my pocketcomp.

I’d recorded the words scrolling across the screen over Sarah’s call.

As he digested the message I went on.

“I had Tommy Lindon try to trace it but we didn’t have time, he’ll keep his mouth shut tho’.”

DeChevalier nodded and looked up gesturing for me to continue.

“Tommy did catch a SIG off of it, Sunny Cobb...”

“Hideki Amaris’ pet slicer.”

He fixed me with that stare of his. Aaron DeChevalier has this way about him very open and honest. I guess that’s what makes him a natural leader, you just trust him in your gut. Samuel Winter’s like that too. That stare of his just makes you do your best for the guy. You don’t even think about it.

“What’s you read on this?”

I collected my thoughts.

“Sir, it’s genuine, we’re sticking our heads into a noose.”

I shook my head at the insanity of it.

“Sunderland is dead, our boys are looking at the business end of the Amaris nuclear arsenal.”
DeChevalier voiced what I hadn’t.
“An arsenal that includes strategic level weapons.”
I nodded, nausea tickling the back of my throat.
“‘We would wipe out the Usurper but the damage, Sir we’d be left with a charnel house.’”
“‘You know who sent this, don’t you.’”
I nodded.
“Takeo Amaris, I guess after me chasing him across North America for a year he thinks he knows me.”
The General rose and poured coffee from the pot next to his desk.
“Since this Cobb fellow sliced us back in May we don’t even have a DNA profile on this guy, so you’re the resident Takeo expert, coffee?”
“Thank you, black please sir.”
Sipping on the dark strong brew, I thought about how to broach the second part of the message.
DeChevalier beat me to it.
“Are you going to go?”
Whoa, not what I expected.
“Sir, unless ordered not to....”
I met his gaze.
“‘She’s a Tiger sir, If there is even a chance.’”
I shrugged.
“‘This is off the record Major Gilmour, his terms state no more than a squad. I understand Major Traumintieri is close....’”
I cleared my throat uncomfortably.
“‘I know Major, nothing dishonorable, they’ve served together for ten years, such friendships can be strong.’”
“Major Traumintieri is on downtime rotation, Didi Moran and her gang of shooters, if I can borrow them.”
The General chuckled, “Got it all figured out then.”
I nodded, the coastline around Astoria in my head.
“Elements of the 3rd Mechanized Infantry are nearby if we have to run.”
I looked out the window behind him into the clear August sky.
“‘What about his price, General.’”
“Leave that to me, If the Amaris nuclear stockpile can be bought for the price of three lives, two of them young girls, then they’ll be safe as I can make them.”

Chris (On a Wing and a Prayer.)

The Poseidon class submarine Trident hummed around him as Chris sat in his loaned bunk. Captain Hsu ran a taut ship, crew and machinery working in the harmony only trained and disciplined professionals on a top of the line ship can achieve. Having spent three years as a crewman on a cargo sub serving the undersea domes in Indonesia, Chris had some idea what was going on. It was the smallest of comforts. Looking across the corridor at the rec room he saw Captain, no Major Gilmour pacing restlessly. The younger man had called him that evening saying only, “We’re getting Major Sinclair, are you in.”
Kaitlin had hugged him fiercely, whispering; “Get Justine, then get you’re ass back here.”
She’d turned away, but not before he’d seen the tears in her eyes. Chris clenched his fists, letting his muscles tighten and release, wishing he’d said something, anything to his wife. But he’d just grabbed his keys and drove like a madman to the SLDF blue water naval base in San Francisco.
Captain Hsu, a short gray haired officer in his fifties, with way too much grief in his eyes paused by the doorway and watched Bruce as he sat back finally and sipped at his iced tea.
The submariner looked down at Chris, and he could feel the man measuring him. Chris nodded rising to salute but the older man waved him off.
“Bruce never shipped undersea before, sir.”
Looking up at him Hsu seemed surprised.
“‘But you spent long periods in space, must be the same thing.’”
“‘Weightlessness makes it different somehow, maybe a psychologist could explain it.’”
“‘And you?’”

"Engineers mate on the S.S. Marlie Howe, three years on the Indonesia Dome run."

Hsu looked up in surprise, then away thoughtfully.

"The Marlie, that was Captain Baresh's ship."

The way he said it told Chris everything.

"When."

"Two years into the occupation, she was running supplies from Australia. Amaris left the shipping alone for the most part, but somebody must have tipped the Rimmers off. Air strike took them on the surface, sharks got the rest."

"Baresh taught me a lot about the sea, and about leading men."

"Guys like him are the reason Amaris never took the Domes. Drove him crazy and cost him a lot of men and equipment, but he never broke us."

Hsu grimaced.

"And now we're a taxi service."

Chris looked at him sharply.

"Captain you're on a mission that might just end the war for good."

The other officer nodded.

"And you're helping us get back one of our own."

Something in his voice made Hsu look at him closely.

"Well then Major, I hope you find what you're looking for."

Didi (On the Water.)

The Trident's assault boat was of a type unchanged for almost a millennia. A light inflatable boat holding the six members of her short squad plus the two majors. Its engine was almost silent and almost invisible among the waves. The LZ a small abandoned town ten miles north of Astoria, Washington had a small section of docks. At the prow of the boat Bruce was looking out with a set of IR goggles.

"Got him, straight ahead."

Pucker time Didi thought, as Bruce flashed a small but powerful directional IR light at the shore.

It seemed like no time at all to reach the docks. As the team slipped off into the town, Didi could see three men and two girls in the square crossing a row of benches overlooking the water. Two of the men were holding a stretcher. She sensed Major Traumintieri tense next to her.

"Easy sir" she whispered.

Under cover of Didi's team Bruce rose and went forward to meet the group.

Then the world exploded. Forty millimeter cannon fire ripped one of the men apart and sent another tumbling over the rail. One of the women ran screaming only to be cut down before she got three steps. As the stretcher dropped Didi recognized Justine Sinclair as its passenger. She also recognized the shape of an Amaris Vulcan.

Bruce was on the ground on one knee holding his side. Through the thermal on her helmets visor Didi saw blood.

Behind her Mike Kelso and Joanne Kimmel were readying disposable SRMs while Fernando Beria had a portable target acquisition laser ready to relay data to the Trident. The risk being Amaris fighters detecting the launch of the Tridents Sea Arrow guided missiles and sinking the teams ride.

As Bruce tried to stand Didi shouted to him to get down.

The Vulcan homed in on him, a block away towering over a general store.

Knowing it was too late Didi opened her mouth to order the team to open fire.

Then the Vulcan exploded, hit from behind by large caliber autocannon fire, knocking down the longhaired major.

A Grey and white Hecatoncheires pushed the burning wreckage aside almost frantically. Holding up her fist to stop her team, she noticed its sensor arms pointing at each male then at the dead woman.

"Hey, asshole, you want to live, check the little girl."

Bruce staggered half crawling to the still form a few feet ahead of him. Checking her quickly he shouted back that the girl was alive but needed a doctor.

"All right pretty boy, I see two of my men but no Takeo..."

On his knees Bruce straightened up, looking up at the 70 ton 'Mech.
"I think he got hit."
"YOU THINK?"
"Goddamn it yes, If the girl means anything to you dickhead, you'll let me get her out of here."
The center torso laser on the Heck aligned with Bruce's head.
"Are you afraid, pretty boy?"
Gods, Didi thought, this guy's a loon.
"Of course you asshole, like you wouldn't be."
"I'm already dead Captain Gilmour, I have nothing to be afraid of."
The machine straightened and paused.
"Gilmour, that pack she has is your prize, the girl's name is Sinthya with an S, Take good care of her you son of a bitch."

The Hecatoncheires stalked off into the night. Chris rushed forward to cradle Major Sinclair's head as he checked for wounds. As Didi ran over to Bruce, she noticed he was holding the girl who looked five or six and was trembling uncontrollably. Despite the wound in his side he was rocking her back and forth singing an old lullaby.

Sinthya Amaris looked up at him and said.

"Tak go away?"

"Yeah kid." He answered.

Takeo (Floating in Time.)

Takeo Amaris stared up at the unforgiving stars. The Pacific waters were cool and soothing. Idly he wondered if the ultrasonic shark nets were still active. Be just my luck to get eaten by the family crest, he thought. I'm certainly bleeding enough. It occurred to him that he should be in a great deal of pain. His face felt like a stiff mask.

How the hell did I get myself into this mess? He wondered.

Leaving Hideki, Takeo had set up the betrayal of his father. It was simple really. Sonny Cobb hadn't even been surprised. Changing into jeans, boots, T-shirt and his favorite leather jacket. Slipping a Sony palm laser into his pocket he strode out to get the final piece of the puzzle. Heading down to the detention block installed by his father in the deepest levels of Unity Center he braced himself.

Stefan, Hideki, and many of his father's supporters were cruel to the point of depravity. Convinced of their own superiority they treated others like vermin. Takeo was no angel but there was a line he wouldn't cross. Brutal suppression of rebellion, savage no holds barred tactics on the field. But torture as punishment, or worse for no reason at all got real. You got physical if it would get you information to win a battle or get you the names of some rebel ringleaders.

It was after all that kind of stupidity that got us into this position in the first place. Shaking his head in bemusement he came up to Sergeant Kerrigan and her squad of Huscarls. Hideki had a detail set to relieve the dungeon's guard. Both units were fanatically loyal to their commanders. Across the hall the guard detail changed the signal Takeo had been waiting for.

Striding into the room he saw two of his father's "interrogation specialists" at work. Major Justine Sinclair was strapped naked to the worktable. Electronic and chemical gear sat ready on tables, ignored. Takeo had seen her in intelligence briefings on the 90th Heavy Assault Regiment and on intercepted news broadcasts. Even wounded and captured she'd been proud and defiant. Now bruised and battered the SLDF warrior stared off at nothing. As the taller of the two inquisitors straightened and started to turn to the door.

Without thought Takeo raised the palm laser and shot both men in the head.

Sergeant Kerrigan entered the room quickly and set about checking the other woman over.

With a nod to Takeo she signaled two of her men to bring a stretcher and without preamble got the other woman into a clean jumpsuit. Sedating her and strapping her in the Huscarls with Takeo in the lead strode purposefully out of the dungeon. One thing about life under his father, seeing the Heir to the Throne and a squad of heavily armed troopers, no one questioned them. A second squad of troopers escorted both of his sisters, meeting them outside of the main garage. As Sergeant Kerrigan took the wheel of a waiting armored car, Takeo looked back. Standing in the garage doorway was their mother. Mother and son watched one another for a few seconds. Wiping away a tear, she would be Empress waved goodbye to her son and closed the door.

Clearing checkpoints had been child's play. Driving thorough the capital for the last time, memories of the first time he'd seen the center of all humanity superimposed them selves on his vision. Twelve years ago Unity City had been bustling with activity. A sixteen year old Takeo had been overwhelmed by the enormity of the place. The Amaris capital on Apollo was roughly the size of the old city of Tacoma, Washington. Unity City encompassed the established urban centers of Seattle-Tacoma and Vancouver. Built with a sense of environmental harmony there were numerous parks and trees everywhere. His father had grumbled at having to detour around a street festival but Takeo had been mesmerized by the street performers and colorful stalls. It was all gone now. Unity City's streets held only Amaris patrols. Playgrounds rusted away, A city of twenty million people had shrunk to a little over six. The district that had once held the festival had been the theatre district. Driving through now he saw the garish lights of brothels, strip clubs and gambling halls. If we had won, would I have even changed anything?

Sinthya tugged on his arm then. Holding up her palm media player, Takeo noticed she had a checkers game set up. Chuckling he put aside his gloomy thoughts and played with his youngest sister. Kara watched worry playing over her face. He smiled at her with what he hoped was calm strength.

"Mom knows about this Takeo." A statement, not a question.

"People don't give her enough credit."

Kara smiled at that.

"I know the feeling."

She looked out the small ferroglass window, wrapping her arms around herself.

"You're betting it all on one Terran officer."

"I know, I know....But it's all I've got."

She nodded and sighed.

The ride to the rendezvous point was spent in relative silence. Parking out side the town Takeo took two of his men to carry the unconscious Major Sinclair. Hiding in the shadow of a convenience store they waited for what seemed like hours. A flash from the water signaled the arrival of the Terrans. Sending the reply, Takeo waited till he saw the SLDF major step out from the shadows across the square. Stepping out to meet the other man he raised his arm, thinking; This guy looks like he stepped out of a bad space pirate flick.

Kara looked him over and smiled, whispering, "I like him already."

Chuckling Takeo whispered back, "He's marrying a Davion."

His comlink squawked to life then.

"Colonel, we have 'mechs on your pos...."

Across from him the SLDF officer's single eye widened and he opened his mouth to shout. Kara screamed and a hammer blow lifted him off his feet.

Takeo hadn't even realized he'd drifted off. The feeling of hands dragging him out of the water onto a fishy smelling surface woke him.

A worried female voice came from out of his view.

"Dad this guy's really hurt."

"See what you can do Kailey, I'll get Doc Martinez to meet us on the dock."

"Can you talk?"

Takeo tried to answer but gobbledygook came out the first couple of times.

"Wha..Where am I?"

"You're safe on our boat, can you remember your name?"

Thinking back to a game he used to play with his brother using the names of old storybook characters and heroes of myth he croaked out;

"Jones, Henry Jones...jr."

He passed out then.

Samuel (Tigers on the move.)

"Jacob, watch the fire from those Manticores," Wrestling with Bertha's controls Sam forced the big machine upright. Targeting one of the platoon of Amaris tanks contesting the highway, he cut loose with a salvo of Phoenix missiles. The warheads broke the left hand treads on the sixty ton AFV and fused the main turret into position. Jacob Roth sent a mix of laser and missile fire in to finish off the Amaris machine. Scouts from the 3rd Mechanized Infantry Division (The Pride of Puget Sound.) were calling artillery and air strikes trying to keep the bulk of the Rim Worlds defenders away from the unfolding battle. Elements of the Eighteenth Amaris Chasseurs, Gunthar Von Strang's infamous Death's Head Regiment

had executed a strike on what they'd thought was a supply and repair depot. The Chasseurs had been running ops on the SLDF lines of supply for the past three weeks. Despite propaganda to the contrary the Chasseurs were not just a bunch of thugs suitable for terrorizing civilians. They'd managed to slip through the tightening Star League lines three times, each time hitting supply depots, transport hubs and airfields.

Three days ago the Star League troops had gotten a break.

The Amaris Empire's premier slicer, Sonny Cobb had just walked into a café in San Francisco sat down across from his counterpart in the SAS, Tommy Lindon and sealed his defection over a latte. Tommy who'd handled the debrief said Amaris had totally lost it. The loss of his daughters and the disappearance of his heir had driven the Usurper over the edge. Stefan Amaris had ordered the immediate launch of every nuclear weapon in their arsenal. Of course when his troops had tried to launch those same weapons the self proclaimed Emperor of Mankind had gotten a nasty surprise. The packet carried by Sinthya Amaris had contained the codes for said weapons. A simple series of commands carried over the old SLDF network had fused the almost the entire arsenal to a useless mass of metal, wires and fuel. Sealed and unreachable in silos and bunkers on Vancouver Island the warheads would sit out this war and be spoils for the victor. It was a solution going back to James McKenna that was never supposed to be used.

Of course, Sam mused, we didn't get them all.

Some thirty tactical weapons hadn't answered the command, weapons up to 50 kilotons. On a strategic sense it wasn't enough to change the outcome. From Sam's level those weapons could wipe out every one of his girls and boys. Wild and unruly like the tigers they were named for, he loved them all. The thought of losing them all was not something he wanted to dwell on. Lose them he would, one by one as any commander did, and you dealt with it. You used the anger it bred inside to do the best job you could, to end the battle quickly and decisively. To be so threatening that no rivals even dared contest you.

Around him the 90th was demonstrating the end result. Von Strang's Chasseurs were disciplined, highly skilled troops. Easily as experienced as Sam's Tigers. The difference was simple, Von Strang and many of his RimJob peers led by fear. The Tiger's, the Eridani, were led by respect, in fact they demanded it.

Of course the Tiger's were also pissed off and the Chasseurs made for a satisfying punching bag. News of Justine's rescue and condition had spread. Samantha Wynndham the Regiment's CMO, had given Sam the report. Justine would recover from the physical injuries, but the psychological aspects of her ordeal would haunt her for the rest of her life. It didn't stop there, Justine was the diplomat, the voice of reason, and her calm cultured demeanor had an effect on the Tigers as a whole.

Putting a gauss slug through a Jackrabbit, Sam sent the light machine tumbling to the ground. Turning away he began to stalk a lance of Phoenixes slipping around to attack Christian Traumentieri's Pillager. Chris has been pure shit since we got Justine back. If I didn't need every trooper on the line, Sam thought, I'd have pulled him.

Drawing a bead on the tailing Phoenix, Sam sent a slug into the armor behind the Chasseurs' left shoulder detonating the medium 'mech's short range missile load. Quickly shifting his aim he sent twenty long range missiles into the rear of the next Chasseur without using the sophisticated Artemis fire control system. Years of practice let him arc the missiles to smash into the lighter machine's vulnerable rear torso. As his first kill exploded, the second machine had just begun to react. Sam's missiles slammed his target to the ground with a smashed gyro.

"Damn it Chris, wake the fuck up."

Not to sell the assault 'mech commander short Chris' Pillager Harbinger was swinging around to engage the remaining two. Surging forward Chris caught one Phoenix in the chest with two gauss slugs. Losing three of his comrades in under ten seconds must have thrown the remaining Chasseur for a loop. The medium 'mech stumbled into arms reach of Chris' Pillager.

With a brutal overhand punch Chris disposed of the Amaris machine and its pilot.

With a glance at his commander Chris rallied his command company and began pressing on the Chasseurs' 1st Battalion in the center of the formation. Both Alex and Isokoru, their numbers bulked up by two brigades of heavy armor pressed inexorably on Von Strang's wings. Justine's Hungry Tiger's were held in reserve under Captain Lewis Rosenthal, Justine's XO. Lew's a good officer, Sam thought but he can barely hang on. All of the 90th took Justine's ordeal personally in general, her troops however took rage to new heights. It was a cold silent rage to be sure, but given the opportunity Sam knew they'd go berserk.

The trick was to unleash that rage where it would do the most good. The Chasseurs' were pulling back in good order, knowing they'd been suckered. Amaris air power had come out to play and the skies above were filled with a twisting storm of contrails as the Corvins, Vulcans and Vultures of the Rim Worlds forces tried to support the Death's Head troops on the ground. Jake Melindez, Sam's wing commander wasn't having any of it. The Rapiers and Hammerheads of the Rakshasas along with the Ironsides of the 1195th Royal Tactical Wing pounced on the RimJob flyers.

Leaving the air war to the professionals, Sam brought the Hungry Tigers up in a concentrated fist formation. He could feel the anger in the 4th Battalion's warriors in the way they moved their 'Mechs. His Command Company around him in front he set the unit to charge the retreating Chasseurs.

A shift in the battle caught his eye, looking over the tacmap he noticed Chris' Bloody Paws were in full charge with the Chasseurs now *pulling* them along.

"Chris, you're too far out hold up."

"Colonel we've got them, we can finish 'em."

Jake Melindez's voice broke in panicked warning.

"Avenger inbound, radiological warning, he's packing nukes, get that fucker now!"

Commander Jake Melindez rolled his Rapier wing over to dive on the assault DropShip. Pouring fire into the big aerodyne he flashed past fire from the RimJob crew trailing in his wake. His wingman Min Hsieh repeated the maneuver. Hammerheads from Gold Squadron followed their 30mm gattlings spitting rounds into the big strategic bomber. Fire in reply sent two of his planes slamming into the side of Mt. Reinier. Jake's hopes soared when he saw a blast explode out of the DropShip's port wing. Traveling at the speed of sound and tree top level the big aircraft lost control and spun past the Tiger's lines to slam into the ground.

His satisfaction turned to horror as a sun bright bloom of light rose behind him and a massive blast wave slammed his fighter around like a toy.

Bruce (Payment is due.)

I winced as I pulled on the sleeves of my uniform jumpsuit. The wound in my side had been worse then I had thought. The shrapnel from the Vulcan's 40mm had sliced fairly clean, but deep. After the adrenaline of the night's action had worn off there had been the kid to worry about. August, Didi's medic had put a field dressing on it and given me a pain shot. I'd gotten as far as the docks where General De Chevalier was waiting with Sarah. I'd been about to hand over Sinthya Amaris to him when I collapsed. They told me later the kid had raised such a stink when they tried to separate us that De Chevalier had let her go with us to the hospital. Sarah had finally calmed her down when they patched me up. I came too several hours later to find Sarah asleep in a chair next to my bed, with the kid sleeping on her lap.

The impression of a mother and child at daddy's bedside was unsettling and comforting at the same time. Sinthya had woken up briefly looking at me with that intense green eyed stare of hers.

"Tak said I'm supposed to go with you," she said and went back to sleep.

As I drifted off I thought, Thanks a lot Takeo, just what I needed my own pet Amaris.

I'd slept for about six more hours when the news came in.

I woke to Justine standing above my bed, Sarah; standing next to her was glaring at the taller woman. There was some bruising around Major Sinclair's face and her eyes were dead, cold. She was leaning against the frame of the bed heavily and when she saw she had my attention she straightened up.

"They nuked us."

"What?" I knew from her tone what she meant, but knowing and believing are two different things. After all we'd been through it just wasn't possible.

"Amaris, hit the Tigers with a nuke, we've got no word on casualties, but it doesn't look good."

Justine's voice was calm, as if she was discussing the price of a pack of gum as she went on.

"Our gang was hunting Von Strang's 18th Chasseurs, they had them too when contact was lost."

I started to get up and both my side and Sarah protested.

"Bruce you're in no condition..."

"He's a Tiger, Lady Sarah," Justine interrupted glaring down at her.

Sinthya stood there staring from one to another, eyes wide a Dr Seuss book in her hand.

Handing me my uniform jumpsuit, Justine looked a question.

"That's Sindy, we picked her up along the way." My glance told her not to make an issue of it. Justine's eyes narrowed but the sight of the major's tabs on my shoulders distracted her.

“You’ve been promoted.”
 “For this Op anyway, doubt they’ll let me keep it.”
 “They will, Sarah said sitting down on the bed putting Sinthya on her lap, the kid went back to her book.”
 “Sorry to spoil the surprise, She went on, General De Chevalier meant it as a wedding gift, something about Captain’s shouldn’t marry but Majors can or some such nonsense, so act surprised when he tells you.”
 Sometimes it feels like everybody is planning out my life for me, as a soldier you get used to it, but it still hits you once and a while.
 Not that I’m complaining mind you.
 I looked at Sarah then and leaned over and kissed her.
 “Take care of the kiddo there, I’ll see you later.”
 “You’d better”, she answered her eyes tearing up.
 “I love you.” There damn it I said it.
 “I know.” Sarah kissed me back, whispering in my ear.
 “Now get the hell out of here and end this fucking mess.”
 Damn me if the kid didn’t reach up for a hug too.
 I guess you can’t fight fate.
 Glancing back as we left a saw a sight that stayed with me for the rest of my life, Sarah sobbing quietly into Sinthya’s hair. The six year old, just holding her looking at me as I went out the door. Zeus, father and savior preserve me, I’ve got something to come back to.
 Man, that’s scary.
 We must have been quite a sight striding out of the hospital room, it wasn’t until we got into the elevator that I saw just how beat up we both looked.
 Justine turned to me then.
 “Bruce, I need a ‘Mech.”
 In my head a hundred reasons why she shouldn’t go welled up in side, but the look in her face killed them as surely as a gauss slug. It’s hard to describe but in one glance we had a whole damn conversation. It boiled down to this; Justine didn’t want to be left behind.
 “All I’ve got is a stock model Heck.”
 She glowered as we got out of the elevator brushing past some busybody who shouted after us that we were leaving AMA or some bullshit.
 “Better than nothing I guess.”
 The rank and the gunslingers medallion got us a ride in an APC to my battalion’s staging area. The door to the headquarters building had a hand painted crude one eyed tiger in a cowboy rig brandishing a pair of six guns, a cigar clenched in it’s teeth.
 Justine chuckled at the name scribbled underneath.
 It read:
 Gilmour’s Gunmen, 3rd Battalion, Force of Last Resort, SLDF
I shall fear no evil, for I am the meanest son of a bitch in the valley
 I shook my head as she asked; “Not you’re idea I take it.”
 “Nope, but it was either that or Bruce’s Bastards.”
 “Ouch.”
 “Yeah...”
 Well, she’s showing some life, I thought walking in.
 ‘Rat was coming out of my office looking over his pocketcomp. I knew from the look on his face it was supply issues, he gets this grimace....anyway he stopped dead in his tracks when he saw us.
 “Boss, they told us you were down for the count!”
 He looked at Justine and back at me before trying to salute.
 “Sorry sir..uh sirs.”
 “Relax Sergeant, Major Sinclair will be riding shotgun with us on this one, I need you to prep that Heck you used in Ohio if we still got it.”
 “Yessir, but I mean nobody told us...”
 “Don’t sweat it ‘Rat I’ll handle it, now get me up to speed.”
 “You heard about the regiment, sir”
 “Anything new?”

“Not yet, but the Old Man’ll pull it together.”

I nodded.

“Trust me ‘Rat, we’re putting it on Fat Boy’s tab, and the account is due.”

‘MechRat then went into the nitty gritty of the Gunmen’s readiness including a bewildering series of trades and deals he’d man to secure us parts and ammo that had Justine cross eyed. Granted he did flirt with breaking at least a half dozen SLDF regs but we were in top form. Entering the ‘Mech bay I realized the fatigue I’d been hiding had slipped away as we went over the mundane details that make any fighting unit work. I was grateful because in the middle of the bay the entire battalion was assembled around General De Chevalier. The General stepped forward, behind him the Terrible Two gave me a matched set of shit eating grins. Gracie and Pete Altmann nodded reassuringly and Erika Von Manstien gave a slight bow.

Justine and I came to attention and snapped up Academy fresh salutes.

Returning our salutes smartly Aaron DeChevalier gestured for Erika to continue the briefing and took us to the side.

“The hospital informed us that you had checked yourself out, Dr. Wynndham was put out to say the least.”

“With respect sir, we’re both ready for duty, I had hoped to set Major Sinclair up with the Hecatoncheires in our spares and attach her to my command lance.”

He raised his eyebrows “I see.. Major Sinclair, you feel you’re fit for duty?”

“Yes sir I am.”

Justine’s voice was steady and measured.

“General, I said, I believe Major Sinclair’s skill and battlefield experience will be an asset to the mission, and having worked with her in the past her addition can only have a positive effect on....”

DeChevalier raised his hands chuckling, “Enough he said, I’ll take any one I can get at this point.”

Turning to Justine he said with a solemn graveness;

“Welcome to the Force of Last Resort, Major Sinclair, may god have mercy on your soul.”

Alex (Juggling Disaster.)

The whine of system wide alarms brought Major Alex Winter back to consciousness. Over the TACNET he heard a miasma of calls for help, rallying cries and screams. Getting Elmo to his feet he charged behind a low rise. Flickering with static the secondary screen set to display the battlefield a mix of friendly and enemy units were just now beginning to recover from the shock of the blast. Those that survived anyway.

Fucking nukes.

No I’d be dead if it was a nuke.

Mitch Sovino’s Bombardier moved up next to him armless and smoking.

“Mitch you alive in there?”

“Yeah boss, what the hell....”

“Who else we got.”

“Most of Isokoru’s boys were on the other side of the hills so they’re holding, Josh’s company is supporting, but Justine’s boys are scattered to hell and back.”

“My father?”

“Al.. I dunno man I’ve got no IFF on either of them.”

More of Alex’s troops were converging on his position along with some of the Hungry Tigers who’d been out of the blast. Seeing the red symbols of the Chasseurs heading for the breach formed by the explosion, Alex took stock of his own numbers. *Got about thirty from both battalions, looks like three times that in RimJobs, damn.*

Signaling Paul D’amato in his much abused Firestarter; Lucyfur, Alex outlined the plan taking shape in his mind.

“Pauly, set up here and collect stragglers, send them up in lance sized lots.”

With a nod of Elmo’s head Alex motioned to the ragged formation of ‘Mechs gathered around him. Over a private channel Mitch signaled him.

“Boss what the hell was that, a nuke?”

“Nah, if it was we’d be dead, what it was was an Avenger full of fuel and ammo hitting the ground at mach two. It had a nuke on it but the sucker wasn’t armed.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“The debris is gonna throw our long range comms to hell for a while.”

Topping the rise along side Isokoru's Swift Claws Alex's Tigers came face to face with the 18th Amaris Chasseurs. As soon as he cleared the ridge Alex targeted a BattleMaster leading a group of Chasseurs trying to flank the Swifts. His first shots carved into the wounded machine's left arm. As the looted royal model machine returned fire the damaged arm sparked and hung limply robbing the Chasseur of half his long range fire power. Still the punch of its Kinslaughter-d particle cannon found a flaw in his armor to blast away a heat sink. Mitch sent a double flight of missiles to pepper the Amaris assault 'Mech. The Amaris fire intensified as more of their unit got range on the Tigers. Alex's troops held the high ground however and began to turn the valley floor into a web of interlocking fire. Concentrating on obvious unit commanders the Tigers quickly brought down the BattleMaster and then a Great White. The odds were against them however as more and more Amaris troops converged on the battle.

The blue gray Chasseur machines were every bit the match for Alex's beleaguered troopers and were far less damaged. Sending a burst of energy downrange at an azure painted twin to Elmo, Alex took a sudden hit from an Excalibur's gauss rifle that tore off his battered 'Mechs left arm. JoJo and Maria Vogeler hammered the Amaris machine to the ground but a blue painted Highlander spat a wave of missiles at Mitch's Bombardier. The armless 'Mech toppled backward its cellular ammunition storage blowing out to spare the machine's most important component who was screaming curses as his mech hit the ground.

Despite the rising heat Alex slammed an Alpha Strike down at the Amaris Black Knight coring the machine with all three of his main guns. Slapping the override macro he wrestled with the sluggish machine as his opponent fell to a destroyed gyro. Maria's Marauder cut in front of him to shield her commander as his heat slowly diminished. Her continual stream of fire was interrupted as a pair of gauss slugs ripped off her Mad's right arm and twisted the big 'Mech to the right. A pair of lightning bolts whipped over the stricken 'Mech knocking it to the ground. As his line of sight cleared the source of the fire chilled him to the bone.

Four DVS-2 Devastators had taken the center of the field shielded by a host of lesser machines. Aptly named the hundred ton monster of a 'Mech had the most firepower ever fielded and was designed to be the pinnacle of Terran BattleMech design. Those four machines had enough punch to turn the tide of the battle. Zooming in on the Amaris formation he saw the middle Devastator had a prominent skull insignia on its massive chest armor.

So Amaris' hatchet man is here to play. Alex thought.

As the fresh Chasseurs and their commander began to slam Tiger machines to the ground almost at will, Alex realized there was no way to hold out. Despite their losses and the hideous damage being dished out his troopers were standing strong.

Dad would be proud he thought.

No thought of retreat, Alex Winter gave the order to charge.

Rod Singh (Saving the boss.)

Newly minted Lieutenant Roderick Singh and his command squad poured fire at the RimJob troopers advancing on the downed Highlander. The snarl of Mausers at max fire rate silenced the chatter of the Rimmers' assault rifles. Pumping out an anti personnel grenade to encourage the enemy infantry to leave the party he detailed his medic and one of his regular troopers to check on the machine's pilot. The company he led was one of the few intact infantry units near where Colonel Winter had gone down. The wrecked, still forms of at least twenty Black Tiger assault 'Mechs lay scattered about the field. That an equal number of Amaris machines were keeping them company was a small consolation. Several of the machines jerked and shuddered as their pilots lapsed in and out of consciousness. The Colonel's machine Bertha was ominously still, as Corey, Rod's medic, gave a cautious thumbs up.

At least he's alive.

A motion in the distance caught his eye. A lean dark shape stalked through the smoke and dust. An Amaris Vulcan prowling after infantry.

Lovely, Rod thought.

Behind him he knew the rest of his squad and the troopers of his other platoons were readying portable SRM launchers and taking cover as best they could. The Vulcan stalked closer, the effects of the Avenger's destruction cloaked Rod's troops from its sensors, but the pilot must have sensed movement. As the Amaris 'Mech neared optimum firing distance one of the Bloody Paw's Pillagers jerked spasmodically. The Vulcan spun to face the prone BattleMech, spitting out a burst of fire from its dual purpose autocannon. The 40mm shells splattered over the downed machine barely scratching the armor.

“Now”, Rod ordered.

With a rush of smoke twenty short ranged anti armor rounds shot from around the field to smash into the medium ‘Mech. The Vulcan flailed back fire belching out from the bell nozzle of its flamer. Regaining control the Chasseur pilot jogged his ‘Mech back out of range stopping on a boulder strewn rise. Turning the gawky ‘Mech spat fire over the field to little effect. Rod signaled his weapons platoon hiding in the cleft of the hills behind the Tiger infantry. A series of dull crumps sounded as his four 120mm mortars spat out four round clips in rapid succession. Guided in by the sights in the Tigers’ Mauser assault rifles sixteen rounds hammered in and around the Chasseur ‘Mech. One hit directly on the machines head and the Amaris pilot decided enough was enough bugging out at a full if wobbly run.

“Alright boys and girls, Rod said, shows over, that Vulcan will be back with friends.”

“Boss we can’t move the Colonel, Corey told him, it’s his back.”

Closing his eyes, Rod swore softly in the language his grandmother had taught him.

“Then we defend this position.”

His men just nodded and got to work, fortifying the site as best they can. Corey climbed back into Bertha’s cockpit to do what he could for Colonel Winter. Behind the prone ‘Mech Vassily Dunov signaled he’d gotten through too the Regimental headquarters, the radioactive debris from the explosion was dissipating. The lead elements of the 7th Battle Regiment, 3rd MID were enroute to the Tigers’ position and would arrive in half an hour. Regiment had no air support available, the radioactive cloud from the Avenger was still playing havoc in the airspace above the battlefield and Jake Martinez’s surviving birds were either called to support the 50th Heavy Cavalry Battalion’s push to the north or had gone home for repairs.

In other words they were on their own.

A dull thumping sounded in the distance. Placing his hand on the ground, years of experience told him only one thing could cause the sound and vibration, at least 80 tons of BattleMech coming down on one foot. Around the valley bend the bullet nose of a Chasseur Great White appeared.

Oh... joy, Rod thought.

Isokoru (In the middle of the fray.)

Waves of heat hammered at Isokoru as he spat a web of ravening light over the Chasseur Catapult. The support ‘Mech’s lack of arms and fixed short ranged armament had the machine at a disadvantage in close combat that the Kuritan officer was only too happy to exploit. Using Kachiko’s superior speed he’d slipped behind the Amaris machine for the second time to unleash heavy pulses of energy into its weaker rear armor. Idly he wondered if he should let Misha Vinson, the Master Tech of the 90th, put that spare 360 extralight engine in.

Be more vulnerable to fire, but Katchi would top out at almost a hundred kph....Still.

The Amaris pilot had finally remembered he had jump jets and chose precisely the wrong moment to use them. Recognizing the crouch Isokoru waited until the Catapult’s feet had left the ground and punched at the point where the thruster packs met the rear armor. Predictably (If one’s first machine fresh out of Sun Zhang had been a ‘Cat, and if one had had a SLDF Gunslinger do exactly that to said first BattleMech.) the Catapult’s jets sputtered and it crashed back to the ground. Before it could react Isokoru snapped one of the Amaris ‘Mech’s back canted legs with a kick and sent it tumbling to the ground.

When the DropShip had exploded Isokoru and his battalion had, by a quirk of fate, been shielded by a low ridgeline. The Chasseurs facing them had been taken as much by surprise as had the Tigers. Realizing that who ever gained the initiative first would most likely slaughter the opposition, he’d quickly rallied his Swifts and as many of the scattered Tigers as he could and slammed into the Chasseurs. The resulting melee stalled the Amaris northern line.

It wouldn’t last forever.

The center of the Amaris line was beginning to react now. Fire from a heavy company lanced out at the Tigers, and the Amaris troops already in the fight were recovering from their shock. In the distance Isokoru could make out a full company of assault machines engaging Alex’s position on the ridge. Fire from a Heck smashed one of his Griffins to the ground. Isokoru, his last rockets exhausted drove his Dragon in range of his laser battery. Flaring in the smoke and dust the 8cm pulse laser in Katchi’s right arm carved armor on the raptor like enemy ‘Mech. Jimmy Hicks one of the replacement pilots recruited in Ohio stepped in to slash a whip of particle fire from his *Phoenix Hawk-Special* ducking away from the Heck’s return fire to carve at the Amaris machine’s chest with the 8cm laser mounted on the machines shoulder.

Together the pair crippled the Amaris heavy and moved to support Holly Mitchell, one of Isokoru's original Ryukaze. Mitchell's Kurita variant Shadow Hawk was crippled by a trio of Sharks and holding them off with only nerve and fire from her particle cannon. Using his Hawk's superior mobility, Hicks corralled one of the Sharks between him and Isokoru. Highly accurate pulse fire from the Dragon's heavy laser downed the squat medium. Holly caught another with particle fire as it twisted to get out of the SLDF machines crossfire, crippling the linkage between the 'Mechs bird legs and it's wedge shaped body. Across the field Isokoru could see a mix of Tiger machines atop the ridge holding against the Chasseurs.

As Tiger machines fell up on the ridge, Isokoru saw Alex Winter's Elmo rise missing it's left arm. The Black Knight paused for a moment looking like a vengeful spirit in the smoke of the battlefield, then led a charge down the slope. Throwing themselves into the teeth of the Chasseurs fire single-mindedly charging in at the lance of four Devastators in the center of the Amaris line.

Damn it Al, you're not a Kurita.

"Swift Claws, on me ready charge!"

Christian (Bruised and battered.)

Coming too, Chris felt like he had God's own percussion section hammering in his head. Glancing at his secondary displays it looked like Harbinger, his Pillager was in better condition than its pilot. A blue steel clawed foot rested just out of his view port. Low crumps and thunders sounded from outside, a real snarl of a fight it sounded like. Damn that's gotta be a Great White, and Sam was back there.

Checking his screens he saw the Great White was the only Amaris 'Mech close enough to threaten the Colonel's downed machine. That decided his next actions. Harbinger surged to its feet, the Great White staggering back in shock. A volley triggered in reflex shook the hundred ton BattleMech but Chris kept his balance slamming the spiked gauntlet of Harbinger's right fist into the Amaris assault mech. The bullet nosed 'Mech fell back as Chris crashed into him. Bodily climbing up on the blue and gray 'Mech robbed the Amaris pilot of his fire power.

With a second punch Chris robbed him of his life.

Looking around he saw no other immediate threats but motion from the ground caught his attention. Zooming in he saw one of the Tigers' infantry officers stand up on the head assembly of Bertha, the Colonel's 'Mech. Stomping on the fear welling up inside he opened a channel.

"Lieutenant, what's the Colonel's status?"

"Sir he's got some back injuries so we can't move him, but he's stable."

As Lieutenant Singh relayed the situation to him several of his pilots began to come to. Kimberly Reiss' Highlander staggered to its feet its left hand on its blocky head. Wally Kasparov and Eddie Martinez rose in their Devastators to take up position between the Colonel's 'Mech and the growing battle in the north.

Checking the static filled tactical display Chris noticed Paul D'amato's Lucyfur assembling an ad hoc lance of Tiger Marauders and Black Knights to send to the front. Over the TACNET he heard Alex rally the troops just over the rise. The remains of their armored support were forming up in hull down positions to lend their voice to the battle below. The SLDF armor had taken the worst hit and Chris could see the strewn about remains of at least a regiments worth of tanks. Most were simply disabled, their crews heading back to prearranged rally points to be extracted from the field or escape and evade depending on the fights outcome. Some however would be temporary tombs for their crews.

Some fourteen of his warriors were alive and somewhat combat ready, ten others were too disabled to move, injuries to either pilot or machine keeping them down. Thirty or so others where dead. Most caught in blast never had a chance others, too injured help themselves had died because the radiation from both the Avenger's engines and the bomb it had carried screwed up the TACNET and held up the search and rescue teams even now beginning to arrive.

Detailing his most able walking wounded to guard the rescue teams and the Colonel, Chris led his remaining troops in a loose line toward the battle. Cresting the ridgeline his troopers immediately began to engage the Chasseurs attacking the line of Tiger machines in the center. With the remains of 3rd and 4th battalions disintegrating around him Alex gave the charge order. Reacting as one entity the black 'Mechs of the Tiger center charged the knot of assault machines in the center of the Amaris lines. A Bombardier exploded leaving just its lower legs tumbling to the ground, a Marauder lost a leg and plowed a furrow in the road bed. Cutting loose with his particle cannon Alex Winter cored the gyro on one of the Devastators in the Chasseurs' command lance. On the ridge behind them, Puma Company's Talons cut loose with their

Particle cannons to sow chaos in the Chasseurs. Individually each machine, though potent for a light BattleMech, would have little effect. Nine of them opening up on the same Atlas caused the iconic machine to crash to the ground. The Pumas kept on it until it exploded. The battered but unbroken SLDF armor began to make themselves felt. Waves of LRM's began to hammer down among the Chasseurs. Chris picked out one of the Hecatoncheires in the Amaris formation immediately opposite him. His gauss slugs picked the blue gray machine apart, its spattering of missiles barely touching him in reply.

Harbinger's heat level remained low, testament to the quality of its design, as Chris led his Bloody Paws into the fray. Most of the damage to the Tiger assault 'Mechs was to their rear armor and the Death's Head warriors had no shots at that. The Tigers advanced assault machines hit the heavy 'Mechs of the 18th Chasseurs right with the brutal punch of massed gauss and particle cannon fire. With the Bloody Paws tearing into the Chasseurs right and the Swift Claws slamming into their left the pressure was lifted from Alex's assault in the center. The Tigers hit the Death's Head's center with a sound like God's own jackhammer firing, punching and in some cases bodily crashing into the Amaris line.

From a full charge Elena Suarez's Marauder lived up to the 'Mechs nickname of "Mad". Leaping up from a demolished off ramp the 75 ton machine came down with the point of its left claw foot into the chest of the Devastator on Von Strang's right. The impact split open the chest of the Amaris machine and the brief flare of golden light burned the Marauder's foot off before the Devastator's automatic containment system could quench the fusion reaction. The Amaris commander turned to put a gauss slug into the stricken Tiger's cockpit but Alex Winter's Elmo leapt bodily on top to the big assault 'Mech. Momentum bore the two backward until the unfocused particle beams from Von Strang's 'Mech blew the already savaged Black Knight onto its back. From the ground Elena unleashed an Alpha Strike on the Devastator, the gauss rifle detonating Von Strang's own right side weapon. From further back a wave of Phoenix long range missiles slammed the machine to the ground.

Von Strang's troops had had enough, at the downing of their leader they began to break. In good order perhaps, but they wanted no part of the fury being unleashed by the Black Tigers. The Tigers of course had their teeth in their prey and after all that had happened they were not letting go. The pursuit broke open the Amaris central defensive line as the Tigers pushed forward. It wasn't until a Rim Worlds commander began dropping 200mm Long Tom rounds on both units did they finally let up.

Sixty two BattleMechs and forty armored fighting vehicles remained when the 7th Battle Regiment caught up. The lead elements were met with Jimmy Hicks' busted up Phoenix Hawk holding a street sign up that read:

"Welcome to Unity City, Capital of the Star League"

As for the great and fierce Gunthar Von Strang, right hand of Stefan Amaris and all around nasty boy, well he tumbled out of his cockpit an hour later and being the classic comic book villain began to make his escape. This not being a comic book, however, good old Gunthar forgets to look both ways as he darts for the hills and stumbles right into the path of green as grass recruit John Steven Reily of Columbus Ohio, and his trusty Hussar. John who was in a hurry to get into his first battle also forgot to look and thus was not paying attention when he got his first "kill."

The pit crew repairing this mech after said first battle was quite surprised to find Gunthar's head stuck between actuator assemblies. They reported later, the Amaris Colonel looked rather shocked as well.

This is all true by the way, Tiger's Honor.

Bruce (Out at Sea.)

The game is finally up Fat Boy, I thought, looking around the Trident's massive drop bay. Suspended in cradles above the floor hatch the forty one BattleMechs of my Gunmen hung ready to drop on the sea floor just off Vancouver Island. Although the death of General Sunderland at the hands of Stefan Amaris had scrapped the previous plan, which would have put us directly in the Star League court killing the usurper, the brass had decided to send us after the spaceport and the main orbital defense batteries for the city.

We would take and hold the Island with support from the submarines of the Royal Southeast Asiatic Squadron. Tough bastards all, these guys had held out on Terra for over a decade defending the undersea domes and mining communities of the ANZAC regional state. Above it all they'd never given up and Fat Boy; Stefan, had never been able to conquer them. The artillery missiles and air wings of their submersible carriers would be there to provide fire support and interdict any reinforcements from the Court's garrison.

I realize I've left a couple of things out in my attempt to chronicle the events of the liberation so with your forgiveness I'll correct them here.

For those of you who have never seen it the Court of the Star League was built up on fill from the eruption of Mt. Reinier in 2265. The mudslides resulting from the blast filled in a portion of the sound and provided a stable base to construct the massive structure. From space the main bridges that connect the structure to the mainland and Vancouver Island form a Cameron Star. At night they look like gossamer filaments of some stellar nebula. The Court rises fifteen hundred feet above the surrounding manmade island. It looked pristine even now, It was said Stefan Amaris had spared no effort keeping it that way.

Surrounding the Court the cities of Seattle Tacoma and Vancouver had merged into a megacity designed to support the capital of humanity. The established cities themselves retained their original flavors for the most part but newer construction and the development of Unity City as a whole was meant to promote a sense of peace. Large parklands and districts showcasing the glory of the Great Houses had for the most part brought a variety and sense of beauty to the area that hit most travelers with a powerful sense of wonder.

Under Amaris the House districts were bare and looted, the great theatre districts and the museums stood empty or had been converted to other baser uses. It was about what you would have expected. Except for the parks. Slave labor had kept these areas pristine although unused. Rumor from the resistance said Stefan kept them beautiful for his wife who had once said they were "pretty".

Cute huh?

The other thing most people will say I've left out are the speeches. Cole Fraiser's *Liberation* by far the best of the glut of "Battle for Terra" holovids got panned for the same thing. The truth of the matter was at the time of the battle for Unity City Kerensky was too busy to stop and give the troops some words which summed up what they already knew anyway. Individual commanders have their own styles and those who had the opportunity to do so had those ceremonies that they felt comfortable with.

My own went something like this; we were all going over the last walk around of our 'Mechs when I realized the bay was too damned quiet. Looking around I realized every one was staring at me. *Crap*, I thought, *they want me to say something*.

"Alright, look I suck at speeches so I'll keep this short."

'Rat chuckled and small smiles played over the faces of others.

"This is it, we win here and all this crap is over. Amaris took ten years from our lives, took from us our families, friends and lovers, for what?

"Nothing, that's what."

"I used to get angry about it but that didn't do me any good. This isn't about rage or vengeance, it's just a job."

I paused then meeting everyone's eyes.

"It's a job that each and every one of you knows well. We do our jobs and Amaris is out of the way. We do our jobs and we can get back to our lives. Stefan Amaris? He's an obstacle, just something in our way. He's between Erika and her kids.

He's between 'Rat and that bar he's always talking about opening.

He's between Pete and the Great Terran Novel he wants to write.

He's between each and every one of you and the rest of your lives.

Hell, he's between me and my girl", I grinned wickedly.

And you've all seen my girl."

Okay so "We few, we happy few, We Band of Brothers" it's not but it worked, a few laughs, a few nods, and we mounted up.

ShowTime.

Pete (Pathfinding.)

Moving a BattleMech through water is kind of like walking with weights strapped to your arms and legs. Pete couldn't understand how the pilots of non humanoid 'Mechs like the Major's Mad handled it. The waters of Vancouver Island didn't help. Wreckage from battles fought at the prior to the formation of the Hegemony mixed with that from the coup. Anything that would have interfered with the shipping lanes had been removed of course but there was still enough to make the going hazardous.

At least it plays as much havoc with the RimJobs sensors as it does with ours.

His Hawk, The King, slipped around the hulk of a Manatee class 'Mech carrier and stared out at the slope of the island. Amaris wet naval power had suffered several serious defeats during the campaign

to secure the undersea colonies in the Pacific and had never fully recovered. Stefan Amaris, old Fat Boy himself had relied on aerospace forces to interdict the seaward defenses for Unity City. The Rim Worlds leader's focus on BattleMechs had not helped matters for the Usurper.

The few destroyers and submersibles left to the Rim Worlds forces were kept busy by harassment from the SLDF wet navy. Key to this strategy was the eight submersible carriers of the RSA. The mix of conventional fighter bombers and Sea Arrow missiles controlled the ocean to the west but couldn't get to close. Artillery and fighters from the islands defenses could swat the fighters from the sky and sink the carriers.

Star League slicers fought a silent cyber war against their Rim Worlds counterparts, but the League slicers had a major advantage. The defection of Sonny Cobb gave the SLDF a vast amount of intel on Amaris information security. As a result the enemies sensor grid had become suspect. This coupled with increasingly contradictory orders from their now unmistakably insane leader paralyzed the Amaris troops.

Defections, rare even up to the breaching of the Unity Line due to the efficiency of Amaris' secret police had become commonplace. Even the keepers could see that the end was near. Even the demeanor of the SLDF troops had changed. The righteous fury had faded, replaced by a weary let's get this over with mindset. That and a "What are you stupid?" attitude towards the RimJobs, the nickname semi-official now after DeChevalier slipped up during a press conference.

Like they didn't know this was how it would end?

We're the fucking Star League, you morons, what were you thinking.

The King's heavy 8cm laser broke the water first, its DI caused the weapon to begin panning across the field. The only sign of human habitation was a gravel road leading down to a manmade beach. A wrecked Ignus IFV sat rusting out, victim of some Resistance action. The beach was a private one constructed mainly so the Cameron family could watch the 4th of July fireworks popular in North America. Popular legend claimed it was the final resting place of a lance of Royal Black Watch stationed near the spaceport.

Warren Maltin's Hussar paused listening with its enhanced sensor array.

"All quiet Captain, some reactor readings to the north, looks like a company of heavy 'Mechs."

"Ok send the signal."

Lilian Mistovic, her own 'Hawk waist deep in the sound crouched and sent a low range sonar pulse under the water. A few minutes later a black Marauder rose like some sea going monster. The hulking lines of an Atlas followed. Across the two kilometer stretch of beach a full regiment of SLDF 'Mechs landed on the beach in battle array.

Force of last resort, my ass.

General De Chevalier's Atlas, Audacity, stopped next to him. Amphibious transports began to offload a mix of mechanized heavy infantry and Nighthawk equipped SAS troops. Dawn was still two hours away and the beach had an almost mythic feel to it, steel titans striding through the starlit night.

"Recon elements commence your sweeps," DeChevalier ordered.

Acknowledging, Pete led his company off the beach along with the Maultier APCs carrying the Nighthawks. Behind them a company of mechanized engineers followed after a gap of a hundred meters to clear any minefields detected. The Bulk of the unit followed behind, 1st Battalion The Devils under DeChevalier himself with the bulk of the SAS teams would take the Unity Line's Central Air Defense complex. 2nd Battalion's Vipers under Esau Nogura, from DeChevalier's own 12th Royal Battle, would hit the spaceport. 3rd Battalion, Pete's own Gunman, would kill the garrison for the island then, take and hold the Bridge to the Star League Court.

An eerie light show played out in the sky to the east as the bulk of the SLDF force pushed ever closer into the city, an arrow of steel pointed straight at Stefan Amaris. Scouts from the 3rd Mechanized Infantry Division, the famed Red Arrows battalion had worked their way deep into Unity City marking defenses and navigational hazards for the following force. Earlier today word had come down that a squad from the Red Arrows had the Court in sight from an office building just east of Puget Sound.

Maltin's Hussar paused and raised a stubby arm then.

"Mines boss, looks like two fifty deep, vibrobombs and standard MATA-71's"

"Major, Got that?" Pete asked.

"Yeah, Pete, what are those RimJob heavies doing?"

"Not much only one Lance is active, the others are idling."

"Okay, here's what we'll do."

Didi (Such a dirty girl.)

Damn Nighthawk suits, Dido Moran thought crawling through the mud. They chafe in the worst places. Raising her head up she panned in on the RimJob troops. One lance was up on guard duty, the others idling, a company of infantry secured the encampment.

Two almost random sets of clicks came over the TACNET. Mike Kelso had finished laying the last of five thumpers, Set to send a subsonic pulse to detonate the vibromines. Slipping off into the darkness the SAS teams spread out to cover the enemy encampment.

Now to watch the show.

A sharp series of crumps startled the Rim Worlders. Didi could see the infantry scurrying around like startled mice. A light on her visor showed the 'Mechs of the Gunmen using the Nighthawks integral sensors to track the RimJob 'Mechs. From out of the smoke argent streaks of gauss fire hit first the active 'Mechs, a Heck, an Excalibur and two Phoenixes. Whip slashes of particle cannon fire followed and the core on the Excalibur blew apart. The infantry was stunned and high arcing LRM fire plunged into the encampment.

Didi watched as three Amaris troopers ran for an armored car. A trio of missiles crushed the car and shrapnel from the resulting explosion scythed shrapnel through the soldiers and the fell as one like marionettes with their strings cut. The ammunition carriage on a Thumper artillery piece detonated, twenty 105mm shells adding to the mayhem.

From out of the gloom an olive drab Phoenix Hawk with a cartoonish singer with big sideburns was painted on its right leg. As the Amaris 'MechWarriors poured out of their adhoc barracks the Hawk spat 12mm machine gun fire into them, then took deliberate aim at an idling Warhammer. Particle cannon fire slagged the cockpit rendering the 'Mech useless.

Didi spotted Bruce's Hussy stalking targets across the field, one of the Lynxes from the Gunmen walked with a limp, twisted and torn armor around its right leg showing not all the mines had been safely detonated. Following the 'Mechs, a company of mechanized infantry moved to police up the remains of the Amaris troops. The Gunmen were forming up to move on to their next objective, as Didi and her team boarded a prime mover to head to the Air Defense complex. Pausing a moment, 'Rat raised his Bombardier's gauntlet in a jaunty wave at Didi's squad. Waving back she jumped onto the truck bed.

Go with god my friends, she thought.

Aaron (Storming the Castle)

The 213th Dragoons Rifleman, fire from internal hits raging crumpled around the Gauss slug Aaron DeChevalier pumped into its midriff. An Amaris Warhammer exploded shaking the ground like an earthquake. His command company had the mixed battalion guarding the Aerospace command by the throat. Flashes of light and rolls of thunder from the Orbital Defense Batteries pulsed out regularly to keep the Star League Navy at bay. If those batteries had been able they could have destroyed his entire command, but the guns and their mirrors could only be used against ships in orbit.

"Lucifer six to all Devils, Alpha Company hold them Baker, Charlie mass rabble bypass now!"

The Dragoons were held fast pinned down by the weight of Alpha Company's firepower. Despite having the superior numbers the Amaris troops were unable to gain any kind of advantage. The Wolverines and Lynxes of Aaron's Baker and Charlie Companies swept past. In Aaron's mind his troops became the jaws of some prehistoric beast. The double envelopment was a classic tactic and the Dragoon commander should have tried to blunt Baker and Charlie's enveloping wings.

Said commander had a full plate on his hands though. Over a thousand tons of angry BattleMechs can do that to you. The Amaris battalion commander's BattleMaster was riddled by gauss and missile fire in the first few seconds.

A year ago it wouldn't have been this easy. Aaron thought, shifting fire to a gray Thunderbolt. Three hammer blows snapped his Atlas back a step then as fire from a pair of Galahads converged on him. The medium machines carried a pair of M-7 gauss rifles and ample ammunition.

Okay, maybe easy isn't the right word.

As the Thunderbolt spat a pair of laser bolts and a wave of missiles at him Aaron gave thanks to the designers of his Atlas. Though he was shaken around inside his linear frame like a bell striker he was still up and running. *Getting to old for this, maybe Aleksandr has a point.*

Vassily Korolev stepped up in his Devastator then taking down one of the Galahads with a full salvo of gauss slugs and charged particles. More laser pulses and a salvo of missiles from somewhere behind him found a chink in the T-Bolt's armor and killed the RimJob's gyro.

Taking careful aim Aaron struck with his machines full arsenal. The heat overwhelmed his cooling suit stealing moisture from his mouth and making his eyes feel like sandpaper. Aaron welcomed the sensation watching with satisfaction as his fire threw the Galahad down like a rag doll, its 60 ton frame coming apart at the seams.

A final ripple of laser fire and it was over.

A lance of Wolverines strode up to the main entrance dismantling the antipersonnel turrets and electrified defensive grid by the simple expediency of bodily ripping them from the structure. A group of prime movers pulled up and Nighthawk suited SAS troopers poured into the hole ripped open by the medium 'Mechs.

Reports began to stream in almost immediately. Resistance was heavy, but the Nighthawks gave the SAS teams all the advantage they needed. Within minutes the pulses of light from the orbital batteries went out and Aaron's MechWarriors had set up a perimeter.

Over the TACNET, Esau Nogura signaled contact with the spaceport garrison. The heavy and assault machines plowed into the RimJobs at the spaceport. The shock of the hit drove the Amaris troops out of the port. Warfare is of course fluid and unpredictable. Predicting what the opposing force will do in any situation is shaky at best. For example the extreme violence of Nogura's attack from the south *should* have sent the defenders reeling back to the north and the water.

Instead the 3rd Battalion of the 213th Amaris Dragoons split losing its Beta Company immediately to massed fire. The remainder headed east to the Aerospace Defense Command to link up with the defenders there. The speed of the SLDF assault broke any coordination the Amaris defense groups had.

While this wouldn't have been a problem as Nogura's troops followed up their victory with a full pursuit leaving a company of combat engineers to hold the port as a platoon of SAS cleared the tower and support structures. What Aaron didn't expect was Hideki Amaris holding the remains of his brother's Huscarl Dragoons in reserve northeast of the orbital guns.

The dark blue machines came howling out of the forests north of the complex hitting the seam between Charlie and Baker companies. The SLDF line bowed taking the fire of two full 'Mech battalions. As Aaron led his Alpha Company and Command Lance up to reinforce his lines the remainder of the 213th's 3rd Battalion charged the League western flank. Amidst the snap crack of energy weapons and clouds of missile smoke trails Charlie company broke. Overwhelming fire took seven of the twelve machines down in under ten seconds. Aaron's 'Mech shook as a J type Heck spat thirty missiles at him. The swarm of hyper velocity rockets pockmarked armor all over the Atlas and an 8cm laser found a chink in his armor to blow one of his heat sinks in a cloud of green coolant.

"Boss, I've got a battalion of the 213th hitting me west of you!"

Esau Nogura rattled off a string of coordinates.

"Hold them there, Esau, The Power is on the way."

Switching frequencies Aaron brought the HNV Trident's fire direction center online. Giving the fire mission orders he received the reply.

"Shot out and on the way Lucifer six."

'Rat (Securing the bridge.)

Resistance began almost immediately. Infantry and light armor mostly harassing with hit and run attacks. The boss kept Captain Altmann's company out to screen the Gunmen's advance. Their Beagle probes flushed out most of the RimJob ambushes. Roughly two clicks out from the Vancouver Central Bridge the Gunmen's screen picked up the signatures of fusion reactors straddling the parkway.

Over the TACNET 'Rat listened to Captain Altmann's report, thirty to forty BattleMech reactors, magnetic anomaly readings of maybe that many heavy tanks as well. A quick burst of chatter from the SAS teams let them know the Amaris orbital defense was down. A light on Boom-Boom's heads up display let 'Rat know air support was available.

The Major came on the line then.

"Alright people you all know the drill, naval air'll hit them and we clean em up."

Good, MechRat thought, *Nice and easy*.

A low rumble came from out to sea as the blips of a wing of Seahawk conventional bombers roared above the Gunmen. Coming in at a few meters above the tallest of the Star League 'Mechs, the

fighters looked to ‘Rat like avenging angels. At nearly twice the speed of sound the thirty six Seahawks dropped their loads of conventional bombs aided by targeting data from the two Light Horse Hussars in Captain Altmann’s company.

Before the bombs finished exploding the forty one BattleMechs of the Gunmen charged, covering the two kilometers in under a minute. Unity City loomed in the background, secondary conventional anti-air responding to waves of SLDF strike fighters freed from the hyper accurate main defense grid. Armed with precision munitions the League fighters began to systematically dismember the Amaris defenses. Rim Worlds fighters providing cover for units at the edge of the defense grid began to arrive to contest the airspace sending a Hammerhead crashing into the central spire of the capital.

It was too little, too late.

A Shark staggered out of the smoke and dust in front of him and ‘Rat sent pulses of laser fire into its torn frame. The Amaris machine trembled, twisting to return fire. MechRat smashed the low slung machine with both his ‘Mech’s massive battle fists. Leaving the fallen machine to the ‘Mechs of Captain Von Manstien’s company following behind him, ‘Rat used Boom-Boom’s superior speed to catch up to the rest of the Gunmen’s first company and command lance.

The remains of a pair of Hecks and a platoon of Manticores smoldered around the on ramp to the bridge. “Rat saw Justine’s Heck spitting autocannon fire into a barely recognizable Atlas. The Major and the Terrible Two concentrated fire on a Devastator fronting for two more Manticores. The Black Cats tore into the already brutalized Amaris defenders hammering them until the remaining six ‘Mechs powered down in surrender.

General DeChevalier came over the TACNET suddenly.

“Lucifer six to all Gunman units, area secure estimate thirty, that’s three zero Huscarl Dragoons inbound on your position. SEA 1st CAAN landing ten kays south of your position, hold the Huscarl’s and the CAAN will hammer them.”

As the Major acknowledged his orders ‘Rat thought *It’s almost over.*

No matter what, things will never be the same.

The Major gestured with Hussy’s bulky arms.

“Justine, take Gracie and her Deuces and Pete’s Rockabillies and hold the bridge.”

“Everybody else on me, hold ‘em my ass, we’re gonna kill the Huscarls.”

In his cockpit ‘Rat shook his head.

The Boss has his fur up.

On his screens he could see the short battalion of Huscarls pass the two kays line. After a year of fighting them all across America, ‘Rat knew better than to sell the Amaris troopers short. The Huscarls kept formation their rearguard together and a strong penetrating point to push through the defending Tigers.

Just out of weapon range ‘Rat drew a bead on a massive Great White. *All heavies and assaults, shit*, he thought, *this is gonna hurt.*

Then they stopped.

What the hell?

A broad beam message crackled out a RimJob’s drawl.

“Huscarl Six to the Star League commander I’m lookin’ fer Cap’n Gilmour of the Black Tigers ?”

The Major’s voice rang out coolly.

“Whatchu want RimJob?”

“The Colonel said we could surrender t’ y’all if we found you.”

WTF?

In his cockpit of his Hecatoncheires MechWarrior Wally “Walleye” Katsuyama was doing his own double take. *Oh Hell No.* The young Huscarl thought. *Better to die*, a knot of fear rose in his stomach, *Never mind we didn’t commit atrocities like the Death’s Head nut jobs or the 213th. We’re still Amaris, RimJobs, like that Furball said.*

Never mind he’d grown up on Terra, moved here with his dad a month into the occupation. It made up his mind.

“Power down your ‘Mechs and dismount our infantry will be along to take custody of you in accordance with the Ares Conventions.”

“Roger, Gilmour, wilco, Huscarl Six out.”

Shifting in his Heck’s linear frame he brought his heavy autocannon in line with his former c/o’s Great White.

Wally never saw the gauss slug that ended his life. The four other Huscarls who refused surrender took three of their former comrades with them before being downed by the Gunmen. As the battered remnants of the Force of Last Resort arrived 'Rat eased back into his command couch and whistled.

"Well that was different." 'Rat snorted.

He knew what was coming next.

"No shit, 'Rat, alright, Pete have one of your lances detached to guard the prisoners 'till our infantry arrives, our air is suppressing the western city defenses so let's get our sorry butts over there and finish what we started."

A low rumbling came from the west as the marines of the CAAN added their artillery to the mix of fire striking Amaris positions in and around the city. Guided by targeting information from the 3rd Mechanized's Red Arrows the GNP of an entire planet in precision munitions were used to open the door the SLDF needed. Well, maybe not a *whole* planet, but you get the idea.

Nogura and DeChevalier's troops got beat to hell, 'Rat thought, *As bad as us after Chicago*.

During the fight a storm front had rolled in. The tower of the Court was mostly masked now only the fires from the fighters crash showed near the peak as a dim glow. Rain began to fall on the SLDF troops and their captives, steam rising from rent armor and slow cooling heat sinks.

DeChevalier came on line, static from the storm crackling.

"My friends, the 3rd Mechanized and 151st Royal have pushed to within sight of the Court, resistance at the bridges is fierce and casualties high. We have an opening here and I'm thinking, let's take these bastards from behind."

He paused for a moment.

"What say you?"

A roar of assent thundered across the TACNET, a thousand voices raw with emotion answered Aaron DeChevalier with wolf howls and coyote yips, every thing from simple affirmatives to the foulest invectives. MechRat didn't even realize he was contributing until his throat went raw.

DeChevalier's Audacity raised it's gauntlets then. In the silence that followed he gave the order.

"Major Gilmour, your Gunmen have the van."

Pete (Crossing the bridge.)

The snap crack of heavy lasers and the rattle of hyper velocity autocannon sounded out as the Amaris troops across the bridge spat fire at the Gunmen's lead elements. The Rim Worlds troops had held their fire until the League troops were in optimum range. Electronic countermeasures, the storm and the massive metal structure of the Vancouver Island Access Bridge had masked the defenders from even the Beagle probes on Pete's Hussars.

Thank god the Cameron's built these bridges strong enough to hold up to orbital fire.

Warren Malin's own Hussar was scattered across the 200 meter width of the bridge. Joanna Cox had her 'Hawk prone and was snapping out shots from the asphalt next to her 'Mech's severed right leg. As Pete moved to allow one of Bruce's Bombardiers to add its firepower to the mix, a gauss slug slammed into Joanna's head. As the Phoenix Hawk crumpled to the ground a ringing tone sounded in his headphones as a missile locked on. Downrange a massive Arrow IV streaked towards him.

"Sonofabit..." He yelled as an impact slammed into his right side.

His mind had an instant to realize that it was no missile that hit him but the Bombardier bodily slamming him out of the way. The Arrow IV hit the Tiger mech at the juncture of the shoulder and head vaporizing pilot and cockpit instantly.

We've got to get the fuck off this bridge, we're bottled up like rats in a sewer.

"Boss, Kelly Lind screamed out, got a fix on that launcher when it fired, Chaparral behind that blockhouse."

On his HUD the artillery tank's location was highlighted in the mass of Amaris defenders.

"Rocker six this is Blitz two six, heard you boys need some big guns."

"Damn straight, Blitz, Chaparral marked at the end of the bridge."

"Got it Rocker Six, the Power is on the way."

Blitz Two was the callsign of a lance of CAAN Helepolis Artillery BattleMechs. Armed with Armstrong Industries 155mm Sniper artillery guns the design was old but too useful to retire. Using targeting data from Pete's Kelly Lind's Hussar the four Artillery BattleMechs settled into a firing stance.

Adjusting for the curvature of the bridge each “Mech ripped out five rounds in rapid succession. The round arced above the SLDF troops turning the blockhouse and the surrounding area into a storm of fire and steel. Secondary explosions muted almost lost in the thunder.

Pitted and smoldering Gilly’s Hussy strode past, particle fire seeking out the stunned defenders. A black and red Heck followed, pausing to send a stream of fire into a blue painted Fury Gauss Carrier, gutting the armored fighting vehicle. Picking himself up, Pete rallied his company, moving to follow the Black Cats of the bridge and into the Court of the Star League.

“Rocker Six to Blitz Two Six, helluva shot and thanks.”

“Call us if you need us Rocker.”

Sarah (The Art of Patience.)

The buzz of her pocketcomp tore Sarah Davion away from the Tri-Vid. News coverage of the final assault on the Star League Court was spotty at best. But it was better than nothing at all. Silencing the annoying buzzer she answered the call. On the holographic display her aunt Gladys stood in the simulation used when a live image was unavailable.

“Sarah, how are you holding up?”

“I...I’m alright, where are you?”

“I’ve sent a car, come to the headquarters building with Jack, I mean General Everts’ compliments.”

“I’m on my way.”

Grabbing Bruce’s motorcycle jacket to ward off the rain, Sarah ran out of her base quarters. The downpour was cut off by a raincoated sergeant with an umbrella. The olive drab sedan sped her to the Command and Control Complex in moments. The guards ushered her into a corridor just outside of the central command offices and asked her to wait.

“How are you coz?”

Turning at the familiar voice, Sarah was brought face to face with a tall man in his early thirties dressed in the uniform of the Armed Forces of the Federated Suns. The red haired man laughed at her shock and stepped up to sweep her in a strong embrace. Hugging him back Sarah stepped away and ran a hand through her unruly mop of hair.

“Joshua when did you get here, no one told me!”

“A week ago with a brigade of Guards engineers.”

Joshua Davion held his cousin by her shoulders and looked her over. Sarah realized she hardly looked like a member of Inner Sphere royalty. Dressed in worn, comfortable jeans, sneakers, her T-shirt emblazoned with a cartoon tiger giving a Bronx cheer. Blushing she pulled Bruce’s jacket around her.

“I must look a fright.”

“Well, I doubt any of these Terran’s have read ‘The Care and Feeding of you Davion’”

He chuckled then, “What *have* they been feed you anyway, pizza and hot dogs?”

“Ooh, you..”

“Come on, Aunt Gladys is waiting.”

Her cousin led her into the Command Center, a large half circle filled with ranks of technicians and officers pouring over holographic maps and consoles. Gladys Maribeth Davion was speaking to an older man in the uniform of a Star League Major General. It took a moment for Sarah to realize that instead of her usual stylish pantsuits, her aunt was dressed in a similar uniform.

Gladys laid her hand on the General’s arm and nodded at Sarah and her cousin. The officer smiled warmly and walked off. Motioning to them, Gladys called them over. Something in the set of her shoulders and the strength of her motions seemed to strip away the years on her aunt. Although current medical technologies and the wealth of Sarah’s family kept aging at bay, Gladys looked barely fifty, Sarah could now see where her aunt had gotten her nickname of “Firefox”.

Motioning to her aunts uniform, Sarah looked a question.

“Jack Everts and I served together when I did my service with the SLDF.”, she smiled with a private memory, “We got to talking and he mentioned he needed an experienced officer to handle rear area relief efforts, so...”

“So you had your commission reactivated?” Sarah asked in amazement.

Her aunt nodded. “Jack had the forms already set up on his pocketcomp.”

“A colonel’s rank was the best they could do?” Joshua asked a teasing smile on his face.

“It was a favor for a friend dear, Gladys answered archly, don’t be petty.”

“Anyway, I’ve got to get back and Joshua has duties to attend to, however this is for you.” Gladys handed Sarah an earbud headset. “It’s set to Major Gilmour’s frequency.” Motioning for Sarah to sit she went on. “Sit tight and listen in.” Sarah stared wonderingly at her aunt, who smiled sadly. “I know in your place I couldn’t bear waiting.” Joshua placed a hand on Sarah’s shoulder and said his good-byes, as Gladys took an empty console and began taking calls and issuing orders. Setting the earbud in place Sarah was struck by the chaos coming in but in the midst of it all she heard Bruce, along with dozens of familiar and strange voices. “‘Rat, watch the fire from that T-bolt.’” “Got it boss, Kei gimme a hand here.” “Somebody get that fucking Shark” “Terra and Cameron forever!” “Jesus, Vince is gone, that Devastator cut him to pieces.” “Justine, take Kei and Yuri and give Pete some support.” “Got two Hecks and a lance of Manticores holding out near the McKenna library.” “Lucifer Actual to Viper and Devil swing around and take the 213th in the right flank, Gunman Actual, can you hold?” “Holding Lucifer, be advised Rocker down to forty percent effectives, Kitties’ at fifty percent, committing Lightning now.” Symbols displayed on the earbud’s holographic boom showed a birdseye virtual view of the battlefield, like that ‘Mechcommander game popular a before the coup. Sarah could see the ‘Mechs of General DeChevalier’s unit pushing on to the quad in front of the Star League Court, while units marked “CAAN” were pushing around the opposite side of the massive needle. There were, however a lot of blue gray machines and troop symbols fronting them. Too many, to Sarah’s untrained eye. In the midst of the orderly chaos of the command center, Sarah sat against the wall, her arms wrapped around her abdomen, listening to her friends and her lover fight, live and die.

Justine (In the Court of the Star League, Fighting for her Life.)

The other Heck was a 7J, Its jets were disabled by a lucky hit and Justine Sinclair was well within the minimum range of the Amaris ‘Mech’s pair of long range fifteen pack launchers. *Thank Jesus for small favors*, She thought as her own borrowed ‘Mech rocked back from a fusillade of coherent energy that burned two tons of armor off of the lean Heck. Although similar in design to her Mad; Wendigo, the Heck handled differently. Its balance shaped by the massive autocannon on its right arm and its narrower claw feet gripped the ground strangely. *The one-twenty may not be my gauss but it’ll do.* The hypersonic crack of the heavy guns’ slugs was lost in the din of the surrounding battle but their effect on the other Heck was far more noticeable. The blue and green ‘Mech staggered back as its frontal armor was shredded by the osmium slugs. For good measure Justine sent a six pack of stubby free flight rockets and a barrage from her own laser battery. A needle of white hot steel spalled off from the massive damage lanced through the enemy ‘Mech, piercing the solid fuel on one of the machine’s missiles. The resulting chain reaction blew out the Hecatoncheires’ cellular ammunition bins. The reinforced storage unit channeled the blast out the back of the machine before being consumed, but the resulting feed back must have run up its control circuitry and knocked the Rim Wolds pilot out. As the other ‘Mech collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut Justine sent two more slugs into a Crusader angling for a shot on Kei’s Marauder. An argent blur from General DeChevalier’s Atlas burrowed in to snap the Crusader’s spine. Captain Altmann knelt behind the shattered Crusader to lace a Rifleman with laser and particle fire. *There are too many of them* she thought. Followed by *But damn it feels good.* Ever since her release from the hospital, Justine had been in a numb daze. Nothing seemed to matter and she just went through the motions. And then there was Christian. Just thinking about the man made her head and heart hurt.

To ease the pain she salvoed a volley at a Rhino main battle tank rolling off the bridge. Her fire fused the tank's turret and tore off its left treads. A particle bolt ripped in to the rent in the tank's turret to turn the fighting compartment into a crematorium.

The tank's death felt good, but not good enough, it was a BattleMech she needed to kill. As if in answer to her call another Hecatoncheires, this one painted a silvery gray and white, stepped from the shadow of the Court's main tower laying about with cannon and laser. Altmann's King went down with half its torso gone, the bulky extra light engine wrecked. Gracie Liu was caught from behind, Deuce Queen's gyro shattered.

"FUCKER!", Justine screamed over an open channel, "C'mon you son of a whore face me."

Quick as a snake the other machine spun sending lances of energy and an osmium slug into her chest. A RimJob drawl came over her headphones, a very familiar one.

"You must've missed us so, Justine honey, to come a'callin' so soon."

Hideki Amaris juke and wove evading most of her return fire. His own Heck, Hangman, took only a ragged line across the left shoulder from Justine's 8cm laser. His laughter rang out in her ears.

"What, baby, you so hot for me ya can't shoot straight?"

He laughed again.

"Don't you worry now, I'm all yours."

It was then that all the pain and grief Justine had felt melted away. In its place came a cold peace. Time slowed down and Justine began to react without thought, her Heck no more than a second skin. Swaying in the machine's linear frame, she avoided a blast from Hideki's autogun. Her pulses of coherent light carved deep into the silver and gray machine's right arm exposing ropy myomer muscles.

Her instincts told her she couldn't avoid the ravaging blast of laser fire Hideki sent her way in return. Justine sent her 'Mech charging into Hideki's fire letting it wash over her torso losing armor and a heat sink in the exchange. Her charge carried her into point blank range and her heavy cannon cracked out a hypersonic slug.

The osmium round slammed into the foamed titanium bone of Hideki's right arm. The arm and its autogun spun away, reflex spitting out a final round into the pavement. Riding the recoil from her shot as Hideki's machine spun from the loss of its arm Justine slammed her left arm battlefist into the other 'Mech's bird like head. Her overhand punch crunched armor and shattered ferro glass. It was a testament to the Amaris design that Hideki was able to stagger away.

In the end it made no difference. Justine calmly extended her left arm twisting the battlefist out of the way. The 8cm beam she fired carved straight into the crumpled cockpit armor to melt steel, armor, electronics and finally flesh. Without its human component the Hecatoncheires stumbled over its own legs to crash twisting into the ground.

Bruce (In the shadow of the Court.)

Hussy's gyro screamed in protest as I charged at a Shark arrowing in on Duce Queen's downed form. Gracie was either dead, unconscious, or playing possum but the RimJob didn't seem to care. Here at the end of this long bloody war, in the shadow of the center of the Star League, the Amaris troops had gone wild. Uncertain of their fate in our hands they did everything they could to take one more SLDF trooper with them into death.

A silver pile of metal that used to be a BattleMech slammed to the ground in front of me as I cut loose with my left arm weapons. Leaping the fallen junk pile screwed up my shot and only my pulse laser hit. Still the weapons fire brought the Shark up short and I could sense his shock as Hussy's seventy five tons crashed into him.

In the depths of my soul I could hear Roberto Julio deVega y Harrington the Gallistan born gunslinger and Regimental Command Sergeant Major who'd took me under his wing after Acamar. *A 'Mech is more than just a machine boy, the Drac's have part of it with their samurai nonsense. A BattleMech is no mere sword. The truth of the matter is your 'Mech is your lance, your armor and your warhorse. You are more a Cabellero of the Reconquista than a Samurai of Nobunaga.*

Don Roberto, dead of wounds and malnutrition in the two year long meat grinder on New Home that killed over 500,000 men and women on both sides with civilian casualties reaching thirty million, had trained me out of my reliance on my guns and taught me to use the whole 'Mech. With no gauss ammo and my right arm guns fragged just over the bridge, his lessons came in handy. Twisting Hussy as she came out of her leap I hit the Shark with her shoulder. Metal shrieked as we came together. The Shark crumpled under the impact staggering back as I back handed it with the ruined right arm's hunk of fused metal.

Shifting in Hussy's linear frame, I sent a burst of energy from my undamaged left arm into the Sharks cockpit. As I turned away from the wrecked Shark a glance at my secondary monitors showed way to many blue friendly symbols. Blue symbols marked with the 3rd Mechanized Infantry, the 151st Royal BattleMech and 2003rd CAAN. But more importantly a single machine that strode over to the rent form of DeChevalier's Atlas.

The blocky 'Mech with the cylindrical arms stood tall in battle scarred olive drab. It was an Orion, and old but potent design. Its name was Irina. And it's pilot was General Aleksandr Kerensky.

All around the field the Amaris defenders were either dead or surrendering. Followed by General DeChevalier, Kerensky marched up to the gates to the Court. With a brutal kick Kerensky smashed the ceremonial gates open with a squeal of metal and a shower of sparks.

DeChevalier paused and motioned to me to follow and then passed into the gates after his friend and commander. With an unsteady gait I led the Terrible Two, Justine and 'Rat into the expanse of the Court of the Star League. Awaiting us was a stocky unkempt man with long black mustaches and a crowd of frightened brightly clad men and women.

I don't know what was said by the Amaris officer with the field radio but when the Stephan Amaris went down on his knees the message was clear. Kerensky stomped his machine up to the former emperor, and for a moment I thought he was going to step on Amaris, but DeChevalier reached out with Audacity's arm and grabbed Kerensky's 'Mech. After a moment the Amaris officer sagged in relief as Dido Moran and her SAS team came forward to take the top dogs of House Amaris into custody.

The pretty blond woman who could only be Stefan's wife was shielding two young girls until the SAS troopers separated them. That puzzled me for a moment but DeChevalier's voice came over the TACNET.

"Major Gilmour, broadcast to all troops, Stefan Amaris has surrendered, then take charge of the SAS teams and the rest of the Force's infantry."

Audacity turned towards me then.

"With the General's compliments, when your troops are assembled, you are to secure the Court of the Star League."

I was stunned, and filled with an almost holy reverence but managed to stutter out an affirmative.

It sounds kind of corny, I know but joy filled my voice, warring with disbelief as I said the words;

"Black Cat Six, to all Star League Defense Force units, Stefan Amaris has surrendered, repeat, Stefan Amaris has surrendered."

Didi (In the halls of the dead)

Dido Moran watched as Bruce lowered Hussy's wedge shaped torso into a crouch and crawled down the built in chain ladder. Justine, 'Rat and the Terrible Two joined him at Hussy's feet. As they walked past Stefan Amaris and crew, Amaris must have said something. Justine whipped around, the look on her face causing the prisoners to shy away and the guards to step forward. Her standard issue 10mm Stoner service pistol centered on Amaris' forehead.

Come on Sin, don't be an idiot. The guards'll let you take the shot but you will pay for it.

As she hurried, over her squad in tow, Bruce was just talking calmly and quietly to Justine. His hand rested lightly on her arm. Didi missed most of what he said but Justine stopped looking at Stefan Amaris and was fixed on Bruce's face.

"...He's lost Sin, and he knows it, but if you shoot him now you lose too. Look at him he's got nothing left, his kids, his Empire, he can't even run home."

Bruce tossed a dismissive wave at the fallen dictator.

"Shit Justine, he's even lost his mind, he's nothin'."

"And you're a Tiger."

Over Justine's shoulder Didi noticed General Kerensky watching, a sad look on his face. A short red haired woman in ragged fatigues stood next to him eyes fixed on Amaris and older model Enfield in her hands. A mix of League troopers and resistance fighters surrounded the scene all of them watching and waiting. Justine lowered her sidearm and turned to stride over to the Force of Last Resort's infantry contingent, which was assembling in the quad.

In a loud clear voice Bruce called together the infantry leaders, and dismounted MechWarriors.

"SAS and Colonel Hazen's people will lead, Major Sinclair follow in support, your objectives have been loaded in your pocketcomps."

He looked carefully out at the group.

“Remember people, by the numbers on this one. It’s fucking over and I don’t want to see any of you in body bags.”

Amen to that, Didi thought.

Entering the Great Hall, Didi felt a sense of loss run through her as the NightHawks swept through the massive lobby. The majestic holographic map of human space flickered erratically sending shadows scurrying across the marble floor. In the dim light a side door stood open light from what was marked on the map as a security office was obscured by the shadowy forms of a squad of Star League Regulars slipping in through the door.

Bypassing the elevators the teams climbed the long stairwells between the high vaulted floors. Emergency lights in the stairwell provided a stark contrast to the hall, the bright lights revealing industrial gray walls. The NightHawk suits were not particularly bulky but the stairs they were in were narrow service stairs not the wider evacuation routes.

As a result Bruce and his ‘MechWarriors out paced the SAS troopers as they filed up the stair one by one, and the Major stopped his crew at every landing. The red haired resistance leaders people stuck behind Didi were getting restless so at the next landing Didi passed them ahead. Hazen nodded a thanks as she passed followed by two big muscle-bound men.

She looked weary but determined. At the third floor sky lobby, about fifteen stories up the crack of an Enfield assault rifle sounded. As Didi and her squad tore into the lobby Blazer rifles, the big Corning jobs, held at the ready.

“DANA!!!!” A voice screamed.

“Cease fire, cease fire, it’s a civilian damn it.”

On the floor across the café that made up the circular level a young woman, a secretary by the look of her was lying in a pool of blood. Iuchi Kei was kneeling over the woman with a medkit. The woman muttered something and Kei shouted out.

“Avalon, frackencrack, you idiots it’s Avalon.”

Didi went cold. Avalon, the mole inside of the lion’s den. Untrained, a little girl when the occupation began as far as League intel could tell, she had been passing info to the resistance for the past four years. For her troubles she got a bullet in the gut.

The shooter in question, a bookish man in his thirties with his foot on the neck of an Amaris Household Guard had the look of a man who just got kicked in the gut. ‘Rat screamed at him.

“What part of by the book don’t you fucking understand?”

Hazen shrugged, stepping past ‘Rat and spoke softly holding her rifle at the Guardsmen, who looked to be all of sixteen.

“Malone get your ass downstairs and hook up with Chen’s people, move it.”

The Amaris trooper at Hazen’s feet spoke quietly.

“I can help her, please let me....”

“Shut the fuck up.”, Hazen cut him off.

Didi saw the medic’s cross on the boy’s shoulder.

Low curses came from a quartet of teenage boys in ill fitting Guards uniforms. Some glowered, others just stared at the floor. A squad of resistance covered the boys and went to give one of the boys a rifle butt caress. Michael Kelso reached out casually grabbing the barrel of the man’s gun. The myomer muscles held the rifle like a vice.

“Son think it over.”

Bruce handed the Amaris medic his bag and nodded over at the fallen agent.

“Do what you can.”

Hazen faced off against him her gray eyes locking on his green one.

A squad of Justine’s troopers caught up and without taking his gaze from Elizabeth Hazen’s Bruce ordered;

“These two are under my personal protection, get a medical team up here now and see to the girl, she’s one of ours.”

As the troopers moved to carry out his orders, the Major addressed the resistance leader in the same voice he had ordered the burning alive of a platoon of Amaris Regulars an eternity ago.

“Guess we read a different book, huh?”

Hazen shook her head, chuckling then.

“Yeah, guess so.”

Looking back up at him she called out to her men.

“Enough laying around people, let’s get this over with.”

No more incidents happened although court staff and Amaris troopers alike were encountered. Over the TACNET, Didi heard Justine’s team resolving a brief hostage situation by virtue of Justine walking coolly into the room with the hostage and her captor, a minor RimJob baroness, and shooting the Amaris woman in the head.

Our book isn’t that different, she mused.

The Amaris soldiers, with the exception of a few regular army officers were mostly teenagers. Orphans and street urchins scooped up and pressed into service. In several cases they had shot their own officers. Most of the time a few quiet words and some smiles disarmed them, to the dismay and amusement of every one.

Fat Boy’s dream ends with a child’s whimper.

Once however, a fourteen year old girl who must have bought Amaris propaganda hook line and sinker held the team up for over an hour. ‘Rat was finally able to talk her down and relive her of the inferno launcher she carried. As he guided the sobbing girl over to a stocky woman in urban camo fatigues, who Hazen indicated was a minister before the occupation, he handed the heavy tube over to Fernando Beria.

‘Rat had safed the launcher, but Fernando shuddered as he showed Didi the loaded tubes.

“All SLDF court commands, Raider two reports control of fire suppression systems, fires suppressed from floors 87 through 110.”

One less thing to worry about.

It would turn out later that the dying Hammerhead fighter had struck the tower only a glancing blow then had spiraled out to explode in the sound. The liberation force had restored the safety systems built into the building and remotely put out the blaze. As the team found themselves mid way up the massive tower they came up to the massive doors of their objective.

The throne room of the Camerons.

“Open it.” Bruce ordered, his voice catching in his throat.

Kelso and Fernando strode up to the doors and cut the seal away with their blazer rifles. Using their enhanced exoskeletons the SAS troopers pushed open the massive carved and inlaid doors. At once the scent of stale air and old death wafted out of the chamber.

“Bastards.” Hazen muttered standing by Didi.

In the center of the room lay the mummified corpse of a man in expensive Court apparel. From the hair and the clothes it could only be Richard Cameron. As they approached, Didi noticed a hole drilled through the dead man’s forehead.

Other bodies, Royal Black Watch, Court Functionaries, and what must have been Cameron’s wife and children lay scattered about in the poses they had died in. The Black Watch squad must have burst in to try and save the royal family.

They had given a good accounting of them selves, coming in through a secret doorway even the RimJobs hadn’t known about. Several of the bodies were RimJobbers, left where they fell. And covering Lady Cameron and her children was a corpse bearing the insignia of a staff General, an empty Stoner 10mm clutched in his hand.

“Dad?”

Standing over the corpse, Didi noticed Bruce was shaking.

As he fell to his knees, she read the name tag on the General’s uniform.

Gilmour, Malcolm J.

“Damn him, he retired, damn it” His voice broke.

Elizabeth Hazen took him by the shoulders then guiding him away from the macabre scene over and up the stairs to the only chair in the room.

She sat him down and spoke softly to him.

“I knew him, Major, Richard called him back to service in a diplomatic capacity.”

“Wha.. Why?”

“Damned if I know, he was a good man, tho”

Hazen strode off the dais then and nodded to Didi to continue with their mission.

As she turned away she noticed somebody putting away a holocamera. Looking up she saw Bruce with his head in his hands, Hazen had her hand on his shoulder and had her back to the Court. Intending to give the photographer hell, six ways to Sunday she was interrupted by a shout from a back room.

“We’ve got eight more back here, fuck this place is a slaughterhouse!”

When she turned back the man with the camera was gone. Bruce had climbed down from the dais by then. He began to issue a stream of orders about securing the room and preserving the evidence.

Hazen, nodded, with a chagrined look on her face.

"Hope we haven't fucked the crime scene too much."

Didi looked at her, horror showing on her face.

"You don't think...?"

"I'm sure some damn fool lawyer will take the case."

"Holy shit." Didi whispered in disbelief.

"Basically, yeah." Elizabeth Hazen answered.

Sarah (Affairs of State, Affairs of the Heart)

In the officers club at the Presidio Sarah Davion poked at her fries. She was starving actually, but worry and restlessness robbed her of her will. Joshua had meant to meet her but was delayed and Gladys was on the job so Sarah found her way to the Officer's Club. The wait staff there was friendly to her as she'd used the corner she sat in now for more than one working meal.

Thinking to occupy herself, Sarah replied to the ever present list of emails, work related and personal that seemed to rule her life. As she worked, she ate wolfing down the burger and fries and a pint of Belgian pale. Part of her mind debating either a second ale or a helping of apple pie (Freshly made with what the cooks assured her was a secret United States Navy recipe handed down over five hundred years.).

Deciding on the pie she turned back to her pocketcomp, linking to a bridal website she had favored. Knowing Bruce had survived the final battle meant she could finally look forward to the future. A future she was determined to be happy in. Besides she had just found the perfect dress.

"Mind if I join you?"

A tall woman about her own age had approached without her noticing. Dark brown hair caught up in a pony tail framed a heart shaped face and sparkling gray eyes flecked with green. Dressed in a stylish skirt and jacket the other woman was carrying a plate with a slice of pie and a cup of coffee.

"Of course, Sarah by the way."

"Amanda."

"Sorry just thinking about....well after."

"That's a lovely dress." Amanda said wistfully, "Is there a man to wear it for."

Nodding around a mouthful of pie and ice cream, Sarah swallowed and answered.

"Now that Amaris is out of the way I'm hoping for a June wedding if we have it New York, next year if Uncle John has his way and we have it on New Avalon."

"New Avalon?"

"I have family there."

Amanda smiled and sipped at her coffee.

"You're Sarah Davion then." A statement not a question.

"Guilty as charged."

"So you're marring one of my subjects."

Looking closely at the other woman Sarah's noble training kicked in.

Yes, there about the chin, and the eyes, more Simon than Richard."

"Amanda Cameron." Sarah rose and gave a formal court bow.

"None of that, the last thing I need is someone else treating me like I'm made of glass."

The bitterness in her voice struck a harmonious chord inside Sarah. As she sat down she nodded in sympathy. Bitter memories of her days as a "guest" of the Amaris family surfaced and she shoved them back into what she called "The Hole".

"I'm surprised actually," Amanda went on, "Years as a captive in New York, I'd not think you'd want to be married there."

"Neither did my uncle, but New York didn't hold me hostage, Stefan Amaris did, and I've spent as much of my life in Manhattan as in Avalon City."

Amanda smiled sadly.

"We had to keep on the move," she almost whispered, "Unity City, Vancouver, and a dozen small towns up into northern Canada, across the sea to Moscow."

She shook her head bitterly.

"Run and hide, while my people died, and I could do nothing but run and hide."

Sarah reached out and covered Amanda's hand with her own.

"It's the past, Amanda, we have a future."

Sarah gestured around the club's dining room which had started to fill with Star League personnel.

"They gave us a second chance at one."

The two were quiet for a time, then they began to talk about hopes, dreams and wedding dresses. No politics, no war, about nothing really. Healing of the soul however is about such things Sarah realized. About cherishing those who you already have, and about making new friends.

After all, she mused, Life goes on.

Amanda shared funny stories about Richard Cameron and Aleksandr Kerensky both from her childhood and tales told to Amanda by the General's wife. The General had always seemed so remote almost godlike to Sarah. Amanda painted a picture of a kindly avuncular man with an exhaustive knowledge of history, always ready with a kind word or a welcome bit of advice, even to a little girl.

Her father had referred to Richard as a fop and "that idealistic milksop". But to Amanda he was a doting father who instilled a sense of justice and chivalry in his children. Through the power of hindsight and too much time for reflection, Amanda saw his faults, but he was still "Daddy". The man who always had time to bandage a skinned knee or banish the closet monster in a loud imperious voice.

Sarah laughed at Amanda's impression as the other woman with an overly serious look on her face intoned;

"I am the Star Lord, master of the universe, and even closet monsters must obey me, now begone!"

Sarah related tales of growing up at court on New Avalon so similar to Amanda's own. Her few memories of her own seat on Chesterton so different from either Earth or New Avalon included her Chesterton Devil Cat Xiang. Amanda listened with rapt attention as she described her pet, given to her a lifetime ago by Martin Yi a family friend. Chesterton Devil Cats grew to nearly eight feet with a thick coat of silvery fur. Loyal to a fault, the felines lived eighty years or more. Sebastian Green had sent her holos of her childhood friend who, he said missed her terribly.

They shared a chuckle as Sarah told Amanda about Bruce and her first kiss and the mud slinging duel that followed. Amanda seemed surprised that Uncle John, after being hit by one of Bruce's missed shots, had joined in.

"Prince Davion always seemed so serious and proper."

To which Sarah replied; "The First Prince of the Federated Suns would never stoop so low, but Uncle John", She lowered her voice conspiratorially, can sling mud with the best of them."

Both women found a shared love of Malcolm Farell's movies and the classic rock band Fortune's Child and a dislike of court clothes, the quasi medieval garb popular in Lyran, Terran and Davion courts. Amanda summed it up with the observation; If you don't dress like normal folk, you can't hope to understand them.

"And if you can't understand them, how can you rule them." Sarah finished.

"Exactly." Amanda agreed. "When I'm Director General, I'll have anyone who wears them tarred and feathered."

That was how Joshua found them, two hours later wired on coffee and sugar and laughing like lifelong friends. Being a perceptive sort, Joshua Davion asked the wait staff to inform him when the women were leaving and went to the bar to have a quiet drink.

The Whole Box of Kittens (One week later)

Unity City is quiet tonight, the dull rumble of military vehicles muted in the rain. The fires are out and search and rescue teams swarm through the path of destruction. The citizens of Mankind's capital congregate here and there, in Churches and Mosques and Temples. In the houses of loved ones and neighborhood bars taking a quiet, relieved pleasure in each others company. And everywhere there are BattleMechs.

Standing burnt and battered watch over the remains of this once great metropolis. Clearing rubble or walking sentry along the edge of the city, in the rain and ghostly light they look like shadowy angels. The Star League soldiers this reporter has talked to come from all over Human Space. A major from Pesht in the Draconis Combine, a sergeant from Alarion in the Lyran Commonwealth, a Lieutenant from the Capellan world of Randar. The paths they took to get here vary but every one of them had they same thing to say Now today, they have come home.

This is William Sheng with the Capellan Broadcasting System on this the 30th of September 2779.

Dido Moran swung Shelley Kimball around by the waist, laughing as the pair got off the elevator in the Unity Hilton. The hotel had been requisitioned as an off duty quarters for SLDF personnel. The best rooms had been held up for lottery and Didi had won one of the honeymoon suites. That the much overworked 71st Light Horse was in town brought the fair Captain Kimball, well that was icing on the cake as far as Didi was concerned.

Shelley, who despite being a veteran Captain in a crack fighting unit never stopped being the small town girl from Coventry, oohed and ahed in delight. Even Didi, who was more at home in the field or the blue collar bars her father had dragged her to in her youth, had to admit the suite was nice. Shelley popped her head out of the bathroom with a glowing smile on her face.

“Didi, this bath tub is huge, come see!”

Dido Moran, who would never be called pretty, flashed the smile that she knew was her best feature.

“Well now honey, I am felling kinda dirty.”

Shelly blushed prettily.

Let the fun begin, Didi thought.

Two floors below, Major Christian Traumintieri shut down the TriD link to his wife. He barely contained the rage building up through his matter of fact conversation with Kaitlin. After all they’d been through, to end it now. And over the fucking vid?

The biggest problem was, of course, that she had the right of it. He wasn’t in love with her. And after being carted across the universe, it just wasn’t enough. Chris stepped over to the bed where his duffel lay open, contents scattered and grabbed the bottle of Jack Daniels.

Before he could take a pull a knock on the door frame brought him out of this reverie. Looking up he found Justine leaning against the doorjamb, her arms crossed, dark eyes haunted.

“You gonna drink that or jerk it off”, she said.

Taking a pull, he handed her the bottle, closing the door behind her.

When he turned back she was in his arms, pulling his head down, her mouth hungry.

“Justine..I.” he stammered.

He realized she was crying, tears leaving hot trails on his own cheek.

“Shut the fuck up Chris.”

He shut.

For a time they found peace.

Sam watched as his son put down the vid link.

“C.J?” he asked.

“Yeah, she’s gonna fly out as soon as they reopen the commercial air lanes.”

His father shook his head and waved off the comment.

“Hell call her back tomorrow, she can ride over on the Cat’s Eye.”

Alex shook his head ruefully.

“True, I wasn’t thinking.”

“What’s the point of being the commander of a BattleMech regiment if you can’t fly your son’s fiancée in for a party.”

“Think there’ll be one.”

“Sure, the biggest, any way the games on.”

“Oh yeah, got the beer.”

“Olympus Myrmidons vs. the Jets.”

“Gonna be tough, the Martians are on their home turf.”

“Hell, we’ll kick their butts.”

“Been looking forward to this, nice of Fat Boy to roll over for us when he did.”

“True, true.”

Father and son sat on the couch, cracked a six pack, and they too found their own peace.”

“I’m not calling you ‘MechRat.” Elizabeth Hazen said flatly.

‘Rat chuckled turning from the bar a pair of jack and cokes in his hands.

“It’s Scott, Scott Mackenzie, Mack turned into ‘MechRat somehow.”

Putting her boots up on the railing, her field jacket pulled around her, Liz swallowed some of her drink, enjoying the burn as the Jack did it's magic.

God I needed this, She thought, sitting in a place like this.

Dempsey's On The Sound had been a popular watering hole for off duty Black Watch before the occupation. It had proven popular with the RimJobs as well, who didn't know that the unassuming bar with it's deck view of the Court and Puget Sound housed a cell of resistance right under their noses.

She nodded over at Lisa Buhalin, who was sitting at the bar with some of their crew. Lisa raised her pint of pumpkin ale and cider, raising an eyebrow at 'Rat...no Scott.'

Liz just grinned.

No worries about RimJobs busting down the door, or if the friend who's late's been picked up by Amaris or killed.

Just a night out on the town.

'Rat noticed the interchange and tuned his attention toward the view. Even with the lights playing over it the Court from this angle showed little of the damage it had taken in the battle. Lights on the bridges gleamed like gossamer webs in the night. It was in a word romantic.

Don't get your hopes up.

Bruce was leaning against the railing sipping at, if 'Rat knew his Major, a Belgian pale with a twist of orange. Hair tied in a pony tail clad in denim and leather the other man was staring off into the bar. He caught 'Rat looking at him and raised his glass in a toast., before downing the last of it and plucking out the orange to eat the fruit.

As he walked out saying good byes to several people on the way, 'Rat noticed a difference in his friend, a vulnerability he'd never seen before. He recognized it.

He doesn't know what to do with him self, we've been at war to long.

"Amen to that."

'Rat hadn't realized he'd spoken aloud.

Liz met his eyes and nodded.

"I think we all have that problem."

Looking away she continued; "We have no clue how to live a normal life, and going through the motions just wont cut it."

'Rat laughed at a thought then.

"What?"

"Hell, Liz we'll figure it out, we were strong enough to live through this."

He shrugged.

"We're strong enough to live after."

Liz smiled and stretched, enjoying watching Scott's eyes light up.

"Hey, it's still not done yet."

Already knowing the answer, 'Rat nodded.

"We've still got to hold everything together."

They sat in silence for a while, companionable, not uncomfortable. Cheers from the bar signaled a change in the fortunes of the football game on Mars.

"Life goes on." 'Rat said with a smile.

"Yep."

"It's kind of a cliché but we've got a second chance, a fresh start....God that sounds corny."

"No, no it doesn't," Liz reached out and touched his hand.

She grinned that lopsided grin of hers, that 'Rat found totally infectious.

"So how's about we stop waiting around and start ours now."

"Huh?"

"I mean your place or mine."

"Oh."

I left Dempsey's a little after midnight the game tied at two touchdowns each. I'd drank just enough to get a light welcome buzz. Zipping up my jacket I wandered for a while aimlessly along the waterfront. Lighting a smoke, I must have caught a glimpse of a familiar face. When I turned to look it was gone.

Walking along for a while, I began to get an uneasy feeling. You know that shiver up the spine you get when someone is watching you? It was too isolated here. Stepping back to the main strip I was struck with the unmistakable sense of having narrowly escaped something bad.

Weird.

A prime mover bearing the markings of the 3rd MID was stopped at the light so I hitched a ride back to the Court. Stopping off in the galley to pick up a thermos of spiced apple cider (The non alcoholic variety.) I wandered over to the 'Mech bay. Hussy stood in her repair cradle silent. Rent armor and crushed endo steel had been mostly fixed, but the fixes were still primer gray. Poor girl looked like a piebald scorpion.

The leg art was miraculously untouched. The buxom brunette in WWII garb cradling a Browning automatic rifle winked saucily at me. Running my hand lightly over the painted face as I had so many times before and climbed up to her cockpit. The clamshell hatch was open and her systems were in idle.

Do you remember what I said about the DI?

As I sat in the linear frame, my boots up on the dash, I must have shivered in the chill. Hussy's cockpit heat exchangers came to life. Warm air blew into the cockpit raising the temperature to an even sixty.

Like I said; Hussy knows me.

With the cell network down I'd wanted to call Sarah from the comm center, but sitting here sipping cider with Hussy's systems chirping and beeping softly, I got lazy. A little wink wink, nudge nudge was in order. Tapping open a small hatch in Hussy's dash I extracted a thin wire. Plugging the link into my pocketcomp's terminal I interfaced with the military satnet.

Hussy's command and control level systems hid my call from official notice thanks to a program supplied by Tommy Lindon. I dialed Sarah's number. After a few rings the cam came on and Sinthya Gilmour looked back at me.

Huh?

Oh yeah, I forgot to mention, I adopted her, the formalities finalized two days ago.

"Daddy!"

The kiddo was practically bouncing up and down.

"Hi punkin' butt, what are you doing up so late."

"Aunt Gladys said I could stay up till she went to bed or Sarah got home, where are you?"

"In my 'Mech."

"Hi Hussy!"

I'm sure it was a diagnostic program ending that caused it, but Hussy decided to chirp and beep at that moment.

Sinthya giggled.

"When will you be home?"

"Soon a week or so."

"Sarah bought me a new dress, its pretty."

We went on like that for an hour or so until Sarah came in with an unfamiliar woman about her age.

"Sinthya honey it's late, who...ohmygodbaby....Amanda this is Bruce."

"Hi."

I exchanged pleasantries, quickly realizing the two were trashed pretty soundly, I'm sure I couldn't keep the knowledge off of my face because Sarah looked at me accusingly.

"I'm not drunk."

Amanda gave a "yeah right" look in the background and made a bottle tipping motion."

I busted out laughing.

"I'm not," Sarah insisted.

"Okay whatever you say honey." I was getting good at this.

Sarah got that look in her eye that she gets.

"Miss you baby."

"I'll be home soon."

Her look promised me a warm welcome.

Aunt Gladys came in then and assessed the situation with one look.

"Sinthya brush your teeth, you still have time for a story before bed."

"Can you finish the one about Prince Alexander and Colonel Gordon?"

"Yes dear, I promise, now..."

"Good, I want to know how they escaped Second Nahoni."

"Yes dear."

As Sinthya left Sarah exchanged looks with Amanda.

"She really does want to know, Bruce, that's quite the little general you've got there."

"C'mon she's seven."

"Seven and knows what a double envelopment is."

I shook my head in disbelief.

"What has your Aunt been teaching my daughter?"

Sarah smiled as Amanda said her good byes.

Turning back to me she eyed me speculatively.

"Never mind that Major Gilmour, we have other things to discuss."

Heh.

As to the rest of our conversation that night, it's none of your business. Suffice it to say I got a taste of what our reunion would be like. Hussy declines to comment. I forgot about the incident in the park though. That would cost me later.

Larry Kingston cursed as a noise behind him distracted him from his target. The set up had been perfect. The pirate looking Major had been alone on the water front. A quick shot and up over the railing. It might be days before he was found, if ever. Up the path behind him a muscular bald man with an Asian cast to his features was strolling nonchalantly through the park. Pretending to zip up his fly he stepped out of the bushes as the other man walked by.

As they made eye contact Larry said; "When you've gotta go...."

The other man smiled and it was then Larry recognized him.

"Fitting words Larry, you've no idea."

"My lord urrk...."

A pain in his chest and a snap hiss were almost simultaneous. The laser bolt that had flash fried his heart killed him instantly but his brain lived long enough to comprehend his fate and wonder why Takeo Amaris was dumping *him* in Puget Sound.

Takeo looked around after Larry splashed into the water.

No one around, good, they're probably still all partying. Gilmour you'd better be careful that's the second Mako, I've shot off your six, I may not be around the next time.

Shrugging deeper into his pea coat he strode casually back to the strip of bars and clubs lining the waterfront and the park. A couple of minutes later he caught up with Kailey Derry. Her cherubic face and blonde hair looked really good all done up. The smile she gave him didn't hurt either.

"Hank we've been waiting, what kept you?"

"Thought I saw an old friend, but...."

Her face fell for an instant but she perked right up.

Perky Kailey, I'm glad you never met my family.

"No need to look so sad, I know just the thing to cheer you up."

"What's that", Takeo said linking arms with the girl who'd fished him out of the water the night his life had changed forever.

"Dinner, drinks and dancing, the three D's."

"Ahh, how could I have missed that one."

"Don't worry, Hank, I'm sure you'll make it up to me."

Changed forever, changed for the better. Thought Hank Jones Jr.

After all, Takeo Amaris is dead.

Bruce (Acamar Dreams.)

I'd gotten in before noon with the rest of 3rd Battalion. Sarah was waiting with Sinthya, who'd been right by the way. Sarah had bought her a very pretty dress. As for Sarah, I saw her about midway down the drop port's walkway. I broke into a run when she waved catching her up in a hug. Burying my face in her hair, I lost all sense of time.

When I came back to myself I reached down and hugged my daughter. She shuddered a bit as she always did. I don't think Fat Boy was very affectionate. Looking up I winked at Sarah.

“So why don’t I drop off my stuff and we go do something.”

“A picnic.” Sinthya said solemnly.

“Cool.”

The day went pretty much like that. A nice although somewhat chilly picnic as the day was unseasonably cool. The sun was bright and the air crisp. Sinthya ran me ragged, somebody please explain how a seven year old child can take my sorry ass down when the entire Empire of Amaris couldn’t?

Anyway, we spent the rest of the day in San Francisco, just window shopping having dinner, It’s a lovely city. Sinthya started to yawn about eight so we caught a taxi back to the base.

Sarah was asleep next to me her skin warm through the silk of her nightgown, the scent of her hair soothing. We were exhausted but I laid there awake, something bothered me and it took a while to pin it down. I’d had a similar thought every summer when I’d been a kid.

I don’t have to go to school tomorrow.

Becomes;

I don’t have to go to war tomorrow.

So what the hell do I do now?

I drifted off then, I guess the chaos in my head unleashed The Dream. It had been a couple of years and I guess my subconscious hadn’t dealt with the problem. They call it survivors’ guilt.

SLDF DropShip *Cat’s Eye*

Inbound from Pirate Point

Acamar System

Empire of Amaris (Formerly the Terran Hegemony.)

17 November 2773

Rachel Miller smiled at me as she pulled her shirt back on. We shared a last kiss as an acceleration warning sounded. I snatched my boots from the stanchion they were tied to outside the door to the chambers I shared with Brian Conner.

“I figured you make your bar’s before me, B.” she said, referring to her lieutenants insignia, as we slid out onto the deck. Crew in the hall hid their smiles poorly. Spend a couple of years in close quarters with people whose lives depend on you and well secrets and modesty are the first things to go.

I shrugged at her comment. Not something I really cared about and I said as much.

“You’d be good is all.”

I shrugged again.

Rachel smiled and shook her head.

“I give up.”

Good, I thought, the last thing I need is to be responsible for anybody but myself.

Ten minutes to spare we took our places in the Cat’s Eye’s small common room, Rachel with Deuce Lance and me with Ace just as Captain Sonny Matos walked in. A squat wide man with large mustaches he seemed harmless until you got to his eyes. Sonny Matos had the squint you got from staring into way to many alien suns. He opened his briefing without preamble.

“Well the reports are true, sensors have picked up radiation and fallout patterns from at least two tactical level nukes.”

The Captain waited for the rumble of angry growls to subside before going on.

“Telescope surveys show much of the capital of Colvannon has been destroyed.”

The map globe in the rooms center narrowed focus to show the city. The circular zones indicative of a tactical nuclear detonation showed up near the southern edge of Colvannon. The space port was untouched but what was marked as the industrial sector was a wreck.

“Our objective along with the rest of Third Battalion is the Grant International Spaceport and its’ garrison which we estimate at an armor battalion backed up by a company of Colonial tech BattleMechs.”

The view zoomed in on the port, a fairly standard layout, some small gun emplacements, and the blurry shapes of at least four BattleMechs on or around the field.

“What we have on the 104th Dragoons has been downloaded into your pocketcomps but to sum it up they’re a veteran unit that has served with the SLDF before the coup.”

Matos looked us over a small smile playing over his face.

“They are good, but they ain’t in our league, none the less be on your guard, no stupid mistakes.”

“We’ve got three hours before orbital insertion so get yourselves strapped in and go over your mission profiles.”

The chorus of yessirs followed Matos' "Dismissed". Heading down deck to the ready room Brian Connor fell in step with me. Barely seventeen the kid was fresh out of training and the boss left his "education" in being a Tiger up to me. He called it on the job training for me.

Annoying as shit at first, Bri had learned quickly in the two engagements we'd fought since. Plus he was still alive, which I guess was a plus. The geewhiz factor about being a MechJock had left him after the first fight and left him scared of his own shadow. The fear had become manageable after the second.

"So an easy one this time Sarge?"

"Fuck you know from easy, Sorrybutt?"

Maybe I'm a little too tough on the kid, but they taught me to fight, not to baby-sit.

"I just..."

I softened my tone a bit.

"Look kid, were going into a fight, you don't call it a cakewalk until it's over."

He started to say something (probably "Sorry but..", hence the nickname.)

"Brian, those Colonial 'Mechs the RimJobs drive can kill you just as dead as any thing else."

I shook my head.

"Plus they used nukes, Bri they know we're not stopping by to have tea, hell you heard Kerensky's orders, the Ares Conventions are not in effect on this one."

The kid's eyes got wide as he considered the implications. The Ares Conventions were rules of warfare that like the Geneva Conventions before them attempted to regulate conflict and minimize the damage to civilian populations. They were so universal that even the Amaris troops on the Hegemony border, far from the core systems and the real fanatics, held to them for the most part.

The use of nukes on a civilian population had the big man himself so pissed he reached for the biggest nastiest tool he had.

Us.

We weren't going in to just liberate Acamar, we were going in to make an example of the 104th Rim Worlds Dragoon Brigade. It's the kind of job the brass always picks us for, especially after New Vandenburg. I guess that's what it means to be typecast.

I was too young to be with the regiment during that earlier part of the Periphery Rebellion but I've seen the after action reports. They don't jibe with either the official statements nor Taurian propaganda but Alex told me the SLDF was more interested in the terror we inspired in the RimJobs than setting the record straight. My first fight, back when I was infantry had been anticlimactic as a result. The 14th Amaris Dragoons had surrendered after the first 'Mech assault. Intel said the RimJobs thought we were genocidal maniacs.

That suit's me just fine.

Changing into my 'MechWarrior combat suit, the full body suit Terran troops wear to offset the heat burden caused by fusion powered vehicles in combat. Slinging my Colt Half Rifle over my shoulder I heard a chuckle from Don Roberto Julio deVega y Harrington. Already knowing what he was going to say I turned one eyebrow raised.

"Once a footslogger, always a footslogger, eh B?"

"In the infantry they teach us to always come prepared."

He shook his head, but the regimental Gunslinger of the Black Tigers checked his own Corning 10mm pulse laser in its shoulder holster. A knight from the Trinity worlds, Don Roberto is tall, dignified, with olive skin and black hair just now beginning show gray. He'd been ready to retire when the coup began and had stayed on to fight and train.

He was the one who'd gone over the test scores of my recruit group and decided I'd make a better 'Mech jock than scout.

"I thought that was the Star Scouts."

"Nah, B was never in the Scouts, he was too busy hobnobbing with Davion royalty."

Rachel grinned from her locker.

"Hell, he even bagged himself a Princess of the blood royal."

"Rae, she was ten, so was I."

"She wrote you for years after, right?"

My frown stopped her, I guess she didn't know.

"She was on Earth, Rae."

"God B, I'm sorry I..."

"It don't mean nothin' Rae."

"Now hear this, Amaris Aerospace engaging our pickets."

Our signal to mount up. Should our ship go boom a BattleMech is better than a life boat, but the fleet wouldn't be able to stop to mount a rescue. Still....

Racked in her egg shaped drop cocoon, *Hussy*, my *Marauder* greeted me with lights and low beeps and chirps. Climbing in I closed and secured the clamshell main hatch as the techs sealed the drop cocoon. Slipping on the light combat neurohelmet I felt the slight vertigo that always comes when the main systems synch with your brain.

Hussy's systems cycled up and her emotionless yet oddly sexy voice came over.

"Systems engaged, Identify."

"Bruce Gilmour, 90th Heavy Assault Regiment."

"Voice pattern matched, security code:"

"Maternity."

No, there's no hidden meaning behind my password, I'd just opened a dictionary and used the first word I'd focused on.

"Security code confirmed, welcome aboard, all I have I pledge to your service."

One of these days I've got to change that greeting.

As the security systems disengaged the linear frame's control members unlocked and I strapped my self in to the command couch. Nothing to do now but wait. Going over the mission profile for the second time killed enough time for the space battle, small as it was to reach the inbound fleet. In their racks on the *Vengeance* class carrier *Paxton* the twenty four *Hammerhead* strike fighters of Gold and Silver Squadrons should be armed but they wouldn't launch until we crossed the atmospheric interface.

Red and Blue Squadrons with their lean raptor shaped Rapier air superiority fighters engaged the Rim World fighters. As I watched one of *Hussy's* secondary monitors six of the Amaris *Hellcats* got through momentarily to snipe at our droppers. *Cat's Eye* shuddered as some cannon fire hit her nose, but our guys kept on them. Between the DropShips and our fighters the Amaris wings lost nineteen craft, the remaining eleven breaking off on afterburner to race for the planet.

Cat's Eye shuddered again as her drives increased her deceleration in preparation for our drop. My feed from the DropShip's sensors cut off as *Hussy's* drop pod was moved into the tube. As Sonny's Lance Second I was in the first stick of two pods to be spit out.

"First Stick clear for drop, check status?"

"Ace Two, all green to go."

"Ace Three all green."

"Drop in ten, nine, eight....."

Here we go again, I thought.

"Two, one, drop!"

My stomach complained as gravity shifted wildly as the egg containing one well built BattleMech and one somewhat fragile 'MechWarrior was spat out of *Cat's Eye's* number two tube. The pod's relatively smooth flight ended as soon as it hit the 'Face. Even the slick, no drag surface created friction as it ablated away while I did my impression of a human meteor.

"Look Ma, a shooting star."

"That's nice son, now make a wish."

"I wish all the RimJobs were dead."

"That's a good one, dear."

Yeah I know kinda nutty, but so is getting spit out of a perfectly good space ship. Right at the appointed moment the pod split open and *Hussy's* sensors lit up. Beneath me the blue white arctic ball that was Acamar filled the view port. It was midwinter on the already colder than Earth world and the snow blinding brightness of the place caused my neurohelmet to dim its visor just a bit. All around me the rest of Captain Matos' Tail End Charlies and our cohorts in the Stalking Tigers were in free fall using short bursts of the massive Rolls Royce booster packs or their own internal jump jets to keep on course.

Fire blossomed again as the main deceleration burn occurred, all forty 'Mechs pulsing out a quarter of their fuel in an automated sequence. One of the *Black Knights*, Vinh Li Duc's *Sightblinder* must have suffered a short then as the booster on his right leg exploded, damaging the appendage, but far more fatally toppling him off his thrust pillar. As the 'Mech tumbled out of control the Amaris air cover made its reappearance.

Our boys took them from above but a few slipped the noose. A *Bombardier*, not sure whose, exploded from concentrated laser fire. Dillon Craig screamed as his *Phoenix Hawk Special* lost its jets at nine clicks.

Hussy beeped a warning as a fighter's targeting sensors attempted to get a lock. The *Amaris Hellcat* was swooping in from above and in front. Not too bright as I don't have to move around much and none of my guns have much in the way of recoil.

Eight kilometers up, me falling at terminal velocity, and the *Hellcat* closing just below the speed of sound, I got a lock. The beeping tone from *Hussy* warned me that the Rimmer had one too.

We fired at the same time.

Both his main 8cm's hit and one of the mediums. As the megajoules of coherent light savaged *Hussy's* armor I twisted in the linear frame to balance out the loss of a ton of armor. My return fire was more effective.

Both Magna Hellstars lived up to their name. Their whips of man made lightning carved into the fighters nose. The M-7 gauss rifle's 250kg slug slammed in after. The force of the impact slowed the *Hellcat* and at the speeds we were travelling it looked like the *Amaris* craft stopped and folded in around it self.

Sucker! I crowed inwardly.

Red and Blue squadrons were chasing the *Amaris* fighter away by now and the second and subsequent burns were uneventful. My chutes popped right on time and I drifted down with a deceptive grace. Elements of the 104th were visible from my vantage point, thermal and magscan picking them out.

They wouldn't reach our drop zone before we hit. Only the garrison onsite was there to resist our first wave. A lance of mediums, *Shadow Hawk*, two *Griffins* and a *Wolverine*. A company of *Vedette* medium tanks and some PBI's.

As I burned off the last of my fuel in preparation to landing one of the *Griffins* must have felt saucy. A particle cannon tagged *Hussy's* chest and some missiles scattered around me. My decent carried him into the arc of my arms and I tossed him some particle fire to keep him honest.

One shot tagged his knee and he booked for cover.

Millie Costa's *Bombardier*, *Suzie Dear*, was hammering the '*Hawk* and a very messed up *Sightblinder* was killing *Vedettes*. Over the TACCOM I could hear Vinh cursing the Rimmers, Rolls Royce and the motherfuckers who tested and installed his jets. He was redlining his *Knight*, not good.

"Vin, chill out bro, you made it down in one piece, don't fuck your self up now."

"B, '*Blinder's* fucked man, no more than twenty kph."

One of the *Griffins* blew up across the field as the second stick landed.

"S'okay, Vinnie, we'll fix her, just chill out, this isn't your fault."

The one thing at the spaceport that I had been worrying about was missing though.

Where are the RimJobs' droppers I thought, their TO&E listed six, three *Excaliburs*, and a couple of *Unions* and a *Dictator*.

Knocking out the last tank in range he pounded his fist against the ground where he lay. Angry because he would be stuck with the secondliners covering the port. His fire, however got far more measured and accurate.

Rachel and her *Mad* pulled up next to me. Lacing particle fire into the last of the 'Mechs standing, the *Wolverine* she opened our private channel.

"Nice work B, Vin'll be okay, these bums are running pretty quick, lets got bag the rest of 'em."

As *Manticore*, Rae's 'Mech, stalked after the RimJob machine, my sensors came alive. The rest of the 104th combat command I'd seen earlier was in sensor range. Captain Matos and Major Singh were spitting out orders and the Stalking Tigers formed up in and around the southern edge of the port.

Two lances swept wide to provide pickets against any flankers.

Brian, Millie and I formed up on Sonny Matos' *BattleMaster*, *Honey B*. Major Lal Singh and his command lance were off to our left and slightly behind. Janine Gerhardt's Bravo Company less one lance on outrider duty was on our right, Thomas Abbey's two Alpha Company lance's were our left.

As the RimJobs began to come in visual range the *Hammerheads* of Silver Squadron showed on our sensors as they began a run. Diving almost vertically the twelve strike fighters dropped four bombs apiece on the 104th. The amount of fire rising up in return nagged at me. Although all our planes pulled away whole, my sensors registered a lot of hits.

A Silver Squadron pilot called over the TACCOM confirming my fears.

"Silver Three Six to all Stalkers, we read fifty two BattleMechs and maybe twenty AFV's"

Lovely, half the damn Dragoons, I thought, gonna be one hell of a day.

Major Singh came over the 'net then;

"Ok people, the Ryukaze are closest to us and they're in bound but we've got to hold for twenty minutes, so hold fast, and on my signal we pull a heaven and earth."

"They out number us and think that gives 'em power, I think we've got them right where we want them."

As the Rim Worlds troops neared weapons range the tearing sound of several dozen artillery rounds ripping through the bright blue sky heralded the heaven part of the Major's plan. 203mm FASCAM rounds split to drop hundreds of mines over the rear of the Amaris formation. The 104th increased speed, probably thinking we'd miscalculated our artillery strike.

We hadn't.

From all along our lines hundreds of Thunder long range missiles rose on smoky contrails. The 104th ran right into the field they laid. Their whole front disappeared in a thunderhead of smoke, dull blooms of flame, and crumps of thunder. It wouldn't be enough to stop them, but it played hell with their unit cohesion.

A *Thunderbolt* its blue and gray paint scheme blackened and burned stumbled out of the smoke half a click away. I engaged slashing particle whips over the stricken machine's chest and shoulders. My gauss slug went low, snapping off the *T-Bolt*'s knee. Two helpings of Magna goodness sent a crippled *Rifleman* down autocannon ammunition cooking off like the gods own popcorn machine.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Rae and her lance engaging an *Atlas* whose warrior had sprinted the machine to within two hundred meters. Their fire had brought the big 'Mech to one knee but it still managed to pop off a shot with the 120mm cannon on its hip and a salvo of almost thirty long and short ranged missiles. Rae staggered back *Manticore*'s armor rent and smoking.

A *Phoenix Hawk* vaulted the smoking corpse of the *Rifleman* slashing a ragged line across *Hussy*'s shoulder. The quick little 'Mech ducked away from my particle fire. Focused on the *Hawk* I missed the *Archer*.

Forty long range missiles shattered armor all over my big bad *Mad*. What I found particularly annoying as I was tossed round *Hussy*'s cockpit like a striker in a bell, was I'd been in the middle of taking a step. Naturally I fell flat on my (or rather *Hussy*'s) face.

Thankfully, Brian Connor hadn't contracted my case of tunnel vision. His *Black Knight* spat a wave of energy at the RimJob *Archer* that rocked the stocky machine back on its heels. Now where the hell was that damned *Hawk*. A flash of light and the appearance of a host of new red telltales answered that question.

Oh, of course, right behind me.

Dodging *Hussy* to the right I used the wide range of motion built into the *Marauder* series. To the surprise of the *Hawk* pilot he found himself in my right arm gunights. The Magna Hellstar PPC raked across the Rim World 'Mech's right arm. The pulse of the 5cm laser mated to the bigger particle gun chewed into the shoulder assembly.

The *Phoenix Hawk*'s right arm fell limp as the forty five ton machine reeled from the loss of a ton of armor. Deciding discretion was the better part of valor, the RimJob pilot jetted up and over a hangar. Lost from sight, I didn't have time to follow.

Shooting a *Jackrabbit* off Don Roberto's back as his *Wolverine* slugged it out with a *Crusader* in a brutal slugfest. The Gunslinger's superior piloting skills dominated the heavier machine which was barely able to land a blow. The heavy Amaris machine fell back with a crushed cockpit and Don Roberto stalked off in search of new prey.

He didn't have to search long. Despite our superior machines and training, there were simply too many of them. Our mines had stripped most of their armor support and their infantry. But we'd only now brought them down to us in numbers.

"Goddamn it Deuce Six here, I need support by the control tower, Warhammer and Thunderbolt on me."

Rachel?

"Deuce Six, Ace Two, hold on help's on the way."

"Hurry B, I can't..."

Hussy sprinted around the corner, A heavily modified *T-Bolt*, Scott "MechRat" Mackenzie from Trey Lance, jetted over the line of hangers to join me. Sorrybutt followed behind, we came up behind

Rae's crippled *Manticore*. A stock blue-gray *T-Bolt* was physically pounding the crap out of her. One of *Manticore*'s arms hung useless, the other fired wildly with each punch the RimJob struck. I'd never gone physical in *Hussy* before. She had way too much firepower, I'd never needed to.

The two machines were too close for me to get an accurate shot, so I did the only thing I could think of. As the *Warhammer* opened up on us and the *Thunderbolt* raised up for another punch I charged. Leaping *Hussy* over Rae's fallen machine I hit the RimJob with her entire seventy five tons. Sending her hooves digging into the ferrocrete pavement I shoved the *Thunderbolt* back away from Rachel.

The Amaris '*Hammer* tried for a shot at my back but Scott hit him with a wave of light and thunder. As the *Warhammer* reeled back, Brian screamed out in pain. My secondary monitor showed a nightmare in the making.

A Banshee.

Obsolete on the modern battlefield, the *Banshee* was still a ninety five ton monster and in these close quarters we couldn't bring our firepower to bear. Brian's '*Mech* was stumbling back from the massive beast. Something was wrong and it took me a moment to realize what it was.

Brian's *Knight* had no head.

"Rat, got that '*Hammer*?"

"On it, Ace Two."

Rachel got enough control of her '*Mech* to snap a left handed shot at the *Banshee*. As the big assault machine turned to face her, my line of fire cleared. *Hussy*'s reactor screamed as I let go with everything. The *Banshee* staggered a bit and then charged in, kicking *Manticore* aside to get to me.

Time slowed down as the monster closed in. *Hussy* a much more advanced design was more fluid and I side stepped the onrushing RimJob. The *Banshee* caught me with a glancing blow and I brought the massive blocky battlefist down on its back.

I couldn't avoid either the return punch nor the triple burst from the *Banshee*'s torso mounted guns. The shells and energy tore down *Hussy*'s centerline and the 90mm autogun tore into my cockpit housing. Shrapnel from the hit tore into my shoulder, the ballistic weave in my combat suit absorbed most of the damage but one needle like shard got through.

It was the overhand punch that did the most damage. The shock of neural feedback washed in through *Hussy*'s nervous system to send a spike through my brain as the *Banshee*'s fist scrapped my gauss rifle. I screamed and tightened down on my triggers in reflex.

The gauss' detonation had wrecked my left arm as well as rupturing *Hussy*'s engine shielding. But her right arm cannon lit up the big enemy machine, shattering armor and carving in on the damage Rachel had done. The armor over the *Banshee*'s autocannon loads failed and my remaining pulse laser followed the particle whip in.

The *Banshee* blew like a volcano. Unfortunately I was right on top of it at the time. *Hussy* was blown back as golden fire and lightning from the fusion core of the Amaris machine flared up. A whip of lightning from the dying machine lashed into my already damaged head assembly.

Hussy struggled back against the damage, her safety systems channeling the destructive energy away but a tendril escaped to flick across my face. The explosion had knocked my neurohelmet loose and the lash carved a thin line across my forehead, nose and lastly my eye.

At least Rachel is safe, I thought before I passed out.

Images and sounds past disjointedly through my brain, I came too briefly when they placed me on a stretcher. Across the way Rachel, her clear blue eyes vacant lay on another one. I tried to get up, to go to her, to say her name, but my body wouldn't work right.

Alex was there looking down at her, why is he crying, wait, why is she so pale, no, don't cover her, she's not....OHGOD....nonononono....

"He's flatlining, CLEAR!!!!"

*Pain, physical and dull shoots through me, it is a spitball against '*Mech* armor. Grief overwhelms it.*

"Rae, I never told you..."

Alex's voice then;

"She knows, she always knew B."

Acamar

Terran Hegemony

20 December 2773

The wind was icy and cut through the standard issue parka I wore unzipped. Acamar's air is clear and crisp though, and I feel less numb out here than I did in the hospital. I lay a single Ice Rose, the blue white bloom native to the world at her gravestone.

Rachel's thigh had been opened up when the 104th Dragoons' *Banshee* had kicked her BattleMech out of the way. While we'd been fighting to save her, she'd bled to death. To boot the RimJob Brigadier, Fenrir, had pulled a fast one. While half his forces delayed us, the other half had fled in the missing DropShips.

Orbital vectors and fuel considerations had kept swift *Tiger Claw* from catching them. Because we'd annihilated the delaying forces with "light" casualties, nine dead, another nine injured, the brass called it a victory. I would fight again, an advanced artificial eye replaced the one I'd lost.

But Rae, who I'd loved, who had been at my side through out our training as 'MechWarriors, was gone. So was Brian "Sorrybutt" Connor, who'd been a pain in my ass, an apt pupil and a brave soldier. We of the Star League Defense Force bury our dead where they fall, so they'd been buried here along with the civilians who'd died in the nuclear attack we were avenging.

Even that was bitter, as intelligence from the site, and both prisoners and Acamar natives pointed to the pirates who'd attacked the Amaris troops months earlier. Pirates with links to the Capellan Confederation. Or at least their wrecked BattleMechs, and the uranium signature on the Nukes used were.

Her tombstone was white marble with veins of blue and gold.

Here lies Rachel Holly Miller
Officer of the SLDF, Friend, Lover.
She was sunshine and stardust.
April 07 2754- November 17 2773

The mirror bright marble native to Acamar caught the Lieutenant's insignia on my collar. As I turned away and walked back to where Don Roberto waited I couldn't help but remember our last conversation on the *Cat's Eye*.

You'd be good is all, she'd said trying to get me to become an officer.
To take responsibility.

The lean dark Gunslinger fell in step with me silently. He'd informed me that I was his new special "project". I don't get it myself, but I'll go along with it. It had occurred to me that I'd been ignoring the advice of those who knew me best for far too long.

As we reached the dark sedan loaned to us for the trip out here, I turned and looked up the hill, with its lonely tree where Rachel was buried.

I hope you're right Rae.

Bruce (Back in the present.)

As always The Dream woke me as it ended. This time however, there was only a dull sense of loss. The Guilt was gone. As I drifted off breathing in the scent of Sarah's hair, I thought;

You were right Rae, I should have listened.

A trick of my mind maybe, but I could swear I heard Rachel's voice.

Yeah, you should have.

Still, you don't have to go to war tomorrow.

Definitely a trick of my mind.

Right?

Chapter 7: Endings

**Fort Hamilton,
North American Administrative District
Terra
Terran Hegemony
11 December 2779**

Ezra Bradley leaned back, blowing steam off of his coffee, before taking a sip. The commanding officer of the Eridani Light Horse smiled with pleasure at the taste of the dark rich brew. The 90th Heavy

Assault Regiment was renowned for its battlefield prowess, lauded for their abilities as peacemakers during the Periphery Uprising, but one of their more endearing traits was this;

The Tigers' always had the best damned coffee in the SLDF, hands down.

"So, he said to Colonel Samuel Winter, any thoughts to our earlier discussion?"

Sam smiled at his old friend and classmate.

"As much as I'd like to Ez, the truth is we just got home, I think I'd have a mass mutiny if I tried to move us to Rasalhague."

Looking out the window at the Verrizano Narrows Bridge disappearing into the fog and rain Ezra nodded sadly.

"I figured as much, rebuilding the Nineteenth is going to be a long hard road and painful to some besides, but including the 90th well, my guys and girls know yours."

Looking up at Sam he went on.

"Besides, you guys have a real shot at any assignment you want."

"Yeah, when the Cameron girl visited New York, she stopped off to see Sarah Davion and Ian Sinclair corralled me."

"He's up to something, that one."

"Sure, he's protecting his state, and his girl." At Ezra's look, Sam chuckled, "It was Sarah who pegged it, they're in love, don't know it yet, and according to Sarah will probably be married in about five years."

Ezra busted out laughing, almost spilling his coffee.

"She's that sure is she."

"When it comes to affairs of the heart, I've learned not to bet against Sarah Davion."

In her offices at the Bureau of Star League Affairs, Sarah Davion finished up a report on the reconstruction efforts in Unity City. Leaning back she sipped at her papaya drink, thank god that Gray's was a block away. Hot dogs and papaya a natural combo, the papaya neutralizing the acidity of the franks.

Gray's who had occupied the same Eighth Avenue location for around eight hundred years had perfected the combo. That the tiny place had such a history was one of things unique to mankind's home. Sarah had spent days before the coup exploring New York City's culture and history, so different from her home on New Avalon.

Along with her late friend Talia, she had visited the positively ancient cities of Rome, Cairo, and Tokyo. This had led to a deeper understanding of the connection Terrans felt to their homeworld. Visiting her own family's reputed birthplace in Gascony had cemented her own connection.

Bruce had called her about their dinner plans earlier, she smiled at the thought. The new dress uniforms authorized by the Star League Defense force as part of the unit's official citation had made him look like a storybook prince. Her fiancée had gone to West Point to receive his honorary school rag and to give a lecture on unorthodox tactics to the first new crop of cadets in seven years.

Privately, he'd confided in her, he was also headhunting for new blood. The losses to the regiment had only partially been made up by transfers and recovered troopers returning to duty. Colonel Winter hoped the sight of a decorated officer in a distinctive uniform would attract interest.

Of course Bruce, being Bruce, the interest would be from a less conventional type of cadet.

With Alex and CJ off duty, she was hoping for a late dinner in Little Italy and dissert at Dante's in the Village.

A soft knock at her door proved to be Elissa Valentin her aide. The slender bookish woman had a distinct look of distaste on her face. Only one thing gave her that look.

"What has he done now?"

Taking time to smooth out her conservative skirt and jacket, Elissa tapped out a transmission on her pocketcomp's wireless. The file popped up on Sarah's holographic display. *Not this again* she groaned inwardly.

"Our boy George has mucked up everything." Elissa said in the Brighton Beach Russian accent she got when she was really mad. "His insistence on using DEPCOM resources and his own cronies in the Tacoma reconstruction efforts, rather than local union labor have led to delays across the board."

"I thought we fixed that weeks ago!"

"His people won't take orders from us and they just don't have the transport capacity needed."

"Damn that idiot, alright I really didn't want to bother John with this but.."

"Your uncle?" Elissa asked a shocked look on her face.

“No John Zazula, he runs the 2005th Royal Support Group, they’re in Vancouver right now.”
Calling up her vid phone widget she dialed the 2005th’s switchboard and was patched through to the workaholic Major. The thin balding officer looked up from his paperwork and smiled when he saw her.
“Director Davion, to what do I owe the pleasure.”
“John, I have a section thirty one alpha for you.”
She went on to explain, and the Major’s expression darkened.
“Very well Director, I will accept the assignment, I’ve got just the guys to handle it too.”
Sarah smiled warmly and typed quickly, “Thanks John, I owe you one, I’ll have the paperwork done, right about now.”
“Got it, oh and tell Alex we’ll get together for New Year’s, I’m taking leave to get back to New York and Linda picked out quite a spot.”
“Of course, see you then.”
Elissa looked at her with amazement as she signed off.
“31A that’ll raise some heads.”
“True, but John knows I’d never dragoon his men without due cause, I’ve had about enough of George Donner’s little games, even with this our credibility with Unity City has slipped, and that will not do, after all...”
“You’re a Davion?” Elissa finished grinning.
“Exactly.”

George Donner was not a happy camper.
“She did what!”
Elias Bruenig gestured behind him. In the background of his holographic image SLDF infantry were escorting local truckers and construction crews onto a job site. And just as efficiently moving Donner’s own contractor’s off.
31A, damn it didn’t think the Princess had it in her.
The BSLA regulation allowed the government to use military assets to ensure compliance of local labor in time of crisis. Used mainly as a strike breaker in the past, it was meant to ensure local politics did not interfere with disaster relief efforts. Since the strife of the Coup certainly qualified as a crisis, the new Director Of North American Recovery for the BSLA was with in her rights.
“Elias we need to talk, get back here.”
“What about this?” He gestured again.
“Chalk it up as a loss, I’ll square it with Malthus Construction later.”
When he was sure he had Elias’ full attention, George growled.
“It’s time to step on that toy soldier.”

The BAE Courier carried me from the heliport at West Point to the South Street Seaport. Settled back in the plush seat watching the INN news I sipped at my Jack Daniels. *Sure beats fighting traffic.*

I was pretty sure I’d attracted the attention of three really good prospects during the lecture. I know as I was talking I saw that look, the one that said “Oh...so that’s how you do it.” A couple of others needed a little coaching but they might just have what we needed.

Peace becomes us I thought But it raises a hundred questions.

I think John Davion had given up on a New Avalon wedding for Sarah. Joshua who had turned out to be an easygoing sort, easy to talk to, had had a hand in it. I’m not ashamed to say that I’d been queasy at the thought of going up against a House Lord.

Joshua had reminded John that he was coming to Terra anyway, so why rush everything. Granted all of this took place over the live HPG link set up between Unity City and New Avalon. The cost was mind boggling, as was the display of power.

The question I kept coming back to was this; Sarah was royalty, bound for Chesterton and her Ducal seat. I was going to have to follow. That meant leaving the Tigers. Something I could barely comprehend.

Even Sarah’s current job at the BSLA was only temporary. The question was what would I be when she did. Who would I be?

Shaking off the sudden melancholy that came with that particular thought, I watched as the lights of Manhattan passed below us. As the VTOL came in for a landing I was looking forward to dinner with Sarah, CJ and Al. The future would sort it self out.

Nicole Osis rounded on her partner.
 “How the hell did they drop out of sight!”
 Leo Devalis shrugged straitening his fedora.
 “Were gonna need CIB on this Nicole, these guys are Makos or I’m a circus clown.”
 Nicole didn’t ask how Leo knew as he regarded her with that sphinx like gaze of his. Sometimes he just knew stuff. The pair usually just went with it and fixed things with the department later.
 Some things about life after the Fat Man were like that.
 “CIB is gonna need more than just one of your feelings bro’.”
 He grunted and then looked at her.
 “Tigers.”
 “Wha...”
 “Remember that body they fished out of Puget Sound?”
 “Kingston, 3rd Mako Detachment.”
 “And before that, the one with the sniper rifle.”
 “Samantha Chu, same damn unit...”
 “What do they have in common.”
 “The Black Tigers, damn, and that crazy ass Major.”
 Her mind thought back to the battle that had liberated New York.
“Pauly see the lynch mob over there?”
The long haired Lieutenant pointed across 6th Avenue.
“Yeah, Eltee.”
“Stop them, send those girls to help our wounded, take Sam and Dido’s SAS squads with you.
The Firestarter, looked at him for a second, shrugs and stalks off.
She’d looks at me puzzled.
“ Enough of us have died.”
She nodded not really understanding.
George Donner got huffy, but you don’t argue on foot with a 35 ton ‘Mech designed to kill
infantry as quickly and efficiently as possible. The girls trudge off under guard.
Donner was seriously pissed about those girls, Nicole thought, Plus Major Gilmour’s girl has
been messing with him for a while now.
 “Leo, I don’t like where this is going, find those RimJobs, do what ever you need to do.”
 “Where you going?”
 “Gonna call an old friend.”
 Leo didn’t ask questions, just left. Reaching out she touched the holographic icon for her phonebook. The line picked up revealing the puzzled face of Rod Singh.
 “Rod, I need you bro.”

Marissa Baker sat in shock in front of the trivid. She and Karen Wells had shared an apartment in the enlisted quarter of Fort Hamilton since the 90th Heavy Assault’s support elements had returned to New York. After their rescue during the Battle of Manhattan, the two had gone on to become fully certified medics.

Doc Wynnndham, the Tigers Chief Medical Officer had been guiding the pairs career ever since. Concentrating on their futures, neither woman had dwelled on the past. The appearance of the man on the news changed that as Marissa heard Kelly’s gasp behind her. She turned and met her friend’s shocked eyes.

.....Director George Donner answered charges of corruption today in front of a panel of DEPCOM and BSLA officials....

“Is that...?”

“Yeah.”

A creaking noise behind her sent a shiver down her spine. Kelly heard it as well. Training took over as Kelly walked casually over to a dresser, shielding her movements she withdrew the pair’s sidearms. As the door to their apartment slid open she spun tossing Marissa her Stoner 10mm.

Two men in astech jumpsuits stood framed in the doorway. The men were raising silenced Baretta M9 pistols. Kelly shot the first in the gut as Marissa fired on the second.

The second shooter ducked right opening a hole for two more, a man and a woman. While the intruders shots were low pops, the loud booms of the medics' 10mms were having a very desired effect. The woman in the doorway screamed as a 20mm laser bolt carved through her chest.

As the survivor of the intruders first wave pumped a wave of rounds at Kelly and Marissa, the second living shooter tossed a grenade down the hallway. Marissa heard a cut off cry next to her that sent a chill up her spine. As the shooter in the hall screamed, she got a shot in.

The man crumpled around her slugs, still alive. Marissa kicked his gun away, shouting "Clear!" Dido Moran's voice came from outside confirming the hallway was clear. Marissa raced to Kelly's side as Didi came through the door.

Kelly had taken two rounds through the chest and Marissa grabbed her medkit. Applying a coagulant and pressure bandage to the wound. As Didi knelt next to her, Marissa was surprised how calm she was.

She looked at Didi as her friend lay on the edge of death.

"George Donner is behind this, you've got to warn Major Gilmour."

Didi nodded.

"Medteam's on the way stay with her."

The SAS commando paused at the doorway, not looking at her.

"Don't fret girl, this asshole will get what's coming, he don't track it yet, but he's in Tiger Country."

In spite of herself, Marissa shuddered at Dido Moran's tone.

Sipping coffee laced with sambuca, I chuckled at a joke CJ made. Sarah smiled, stifling a yawn. I took the hint.

"Al, I think we're gonna call it a night."

"Yeah, It's about that time, we must be getting old."

A line from an old 2D movie came to mind.

"It's not the years, Al, it's the mileage."

Paying the bill, I smiled.

"Besides it's about time we relived Sin from Pumpkin Butt Duty."

"Somehow I can't see Justine babysitting."

I nodded in agreement.

"I know but, Sinthya adores her and I think it's good for both of them."

Walking east on MacDougal we said our good-byes, Al and CJ heading uptown to their new place, while Sarah and I strolled aimlessly for a while. It was then I got that feeling again. Sarah must have picked up on it too 'cause her hand slid into her purse.

The Village was quiet, the city still had not fully recovered from the Occupation and many of the less well established businesses were vacant. Their owners dead, fled or bankrupted. The street we had wandered onto was deserted, except for a trio of youngish guys up the block.

One of them appeared drunk, supported by the other two, harmless. Still I had a bad feeling. My pocketcomp buzzed then, loud in the night. Keeping the trio in my peripheral vision I answered.

"B, its Didi, Makos just hit Kelly and Marissa."

"Wha..." My brilliant response aside, I remembered who they were, and some nagging thoughts I'd had began to click.

"Marissa says Donner, that asshole with DEPCOM was a collaborator, that's why he was trying to have them strung up."

"Shit, Sarah come on, there's trouble."

I'll say this about my girl, as I gave Didi our location and turned us back down the street where lights still shone and people moved about, she didn't question she just moved. That was when they hit us. Splitting up faster than I expected the trio of "partygoers" produced silenced automatics. Sarah's training with Didi kicked in and the side of her purse blossomed with light as she fired a concealed lasgun.

Her shot took one of the shadowy figures in the throat. Sarah's shot surprised the Makos just long enough for me to draw the ivory handled Colt every Gunslinger is given as a symbol. I'd worn it without thought as part of my dress uniform and of course it was loaded with one in the pipe.

The remaining two gunmen and I opened up simultaneously. Time slowed down as I double tapped one in the chest. A choked off cry from Sarah tore at my heart as I shifted aim but a numbness in my chest and a sudden weakness toppled me.

I fell hard and couldn't catch my breath. Sarah one arm across her abdomen was struggling to reach me. My pistol was lost clattered away in the night.
Not like this I thought
 I managed to get a hold of Sarah's hand then and met her eyes.
 "Aww isn't that sweet", the surviving gunman sneered as, out of the corner of my eye, I saw him raise his pistol.
 I focused on Sarah, even in pain, her eyes held only love and I hoped mine replied in kind. A fog overcame me then. Images and sounds drifting in and out of reality.
 The crack of a large caliber handgun was followed by a familiar voice.
 "NYPD, lay down your...oh hell with it, Dispatch this his Lieutenant Osis, Homicide, I need Medevac at my position ASAP, yeah two down and I just dropped some Amaris son of a bitch, That's right, tell them to hurry, one of the injured is Duchess Sarah Davion, the other is Major Bruce Gilmour of the Black Tigers...."
 Hands put pressure on my chest while she was talking and the wave of pain wiped out time.
 "Shit he's out."
 "Major... Major Gilmour, stay with us."
 I mumbled something as light streamed all around us.
 "It's okay Lieutenant, we've got it from here."
Gee, your life really does flash before your eyes, funny it didn't at Acamar.
I guess this means I'm really dead.
 "Shit, we're losing him, CLEAR!"
 "Bruce, baby no.."
 Sarah?
I'm sorry babe, I wish.....

BattleMech Technical Readout

TRO:SLDF

Type/Model: Marauder MAD-3SLRG

Mass: 75 tons

Equipment:	Crits	Mass
Int. Struct.: 114 pts Endo Steel	14	4.00
(Endo Steel Loc: 1 HD, 2 LA, 2 RA, 2 LT, 3 RT, 2 LL, 2 RL)		
Engine: 300 XL	12	9.50
Walking MP: 4		
Running MP: 6		
Jumping MP: 0		
Heat Sinks: 16 Double [32]	12	6.00
(Heat Sink Loc: 1 LA, 1 RA, 2 RT)		
Gyro:	4	3.00
Cockpit, Life Supt., Sensors:	5	3.00
Actuators: L: Sh+UA+LA R: Sh+UA+LA	14	.00
Armor Factor: 231 pts Standard	0	14.50

	Internal Structure	Armor Value
Head:	3	9
Center Torso:	23	34
Center Torso (Rear):		12
L/R Side Torso:	16	24/24
L/R Side Torso (Rear):		8/8
L/R Arm:	12	24/24
L/R Leg:	16	32/32

Weapons and Equipment	Loc	Heat	Ammo	Crits	Mass
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1 ER PPC	RA	15	3	7.00	
1 Medium Pulse Laser	RA	4	1	2.00	
1 ER PPC	LA	15	3	7.00	
1 Medium Pulse Laser	LA	4	1	2.00	
1 Gauss Rifle	LT	1	16	9	17.00
(Ammo Locations: 2 CT)					

TOTALS:		39	78	75.00	
Crits & Tons Left:			0	.00	

Calculated Factors:

Total Cost: 15,655,500 C-Bills

Battle Value: 1,615

Cost per BV: 9,693.81

Weapon Value: 2,616 / 2,616 (Ratio = 1.62 / 1.62)

Damage Factors: SRDmg = 33; MRDmg = 25; LRDmg = 15

BattleForce2: MP: 4, Armor/Structure: 6/3

Damage PB/M/L: 5/4/3, Overheat: 1

Class: MH; Point Value: 16

Type/Model: Bombardier BMB-12SLRG

Mass: 65 tons

Equipment:	Crits	Mass
Int. Struct.: 104 pts Standard	0	6.50
Engine: 325 XL	12	12.00
Walking MP: 5		
Running MP: 8		
Jumping MP: 0		
Heat Sinks: 12 Double [24]	0	2.00
Gyro: 4	4.00	
Cockpit, Life Supt., Sensors:	5	3.00
Actuators: L: Sh+UA+LA+H R: Sh+UA+LA+H	16	.00
Armor Factor: 200 pts Standard	0	12.50

	Internal Structure	Armor Value
Head:	3	9
Center Torso:	21	28
Center Torso (Rear):		9
L/R Side Torso:	15	22/22
L/R Side Torso (Rear):		7/7
L/R Arm:	10	19/19
L/R Leg:	15	29/29

Weapons and Equipment	Loc	Heat	Ammo	Crits	Mass
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2 Medium Lasers	RA	6	2	2.00	
2 Medium Lasers	LA	6	2	2.00	
1 LRM 15 w/ Artemis IV	RT	5	32	8	12.00
(Ammo Locations: 2 LT, 2 RT)					
1 LRM 15 w/ Artemis IV	LT	5	4	8.00	
CASE Equipment:	LT	RT	2	1.00	

TOTALS:	22	55	65.00
Crits & Tons Left:	23	.00	

Calculated Factors:

Total Cost: 14,341,359 C-Bills
 Battle Value: 1,394
 Cost per BV: 10,287.92
 Weapon Value: 2,006 / 1,814 (Ratio = 1.44 / 1.30)
 Damage Factors: SRDmg = 20; MRDmg = 19; LRDmg = 9
 BattleForce2: MP: 5, Armor/Structure: 5/3
 Damage PB/M/L: 5/4/2, Overheat: 0
 Class: MH; Point Value: 14
 Specials: if

Type/Model: Atlas AS7-T

Mass: 100 tons

Equipment:	Crits	Mass
Int. Struct.: 152 pts Endo Steel	14	5.00
(Endo Steel Loc: 1 HD, 3 LA, 3 RA, 1 LT, 2 RT, 2 LL, 2 RL)		
Engine: 300	6	19.00
Walking MP: 3		
Running MP: 5		
Jumping MP: 0		
Heat Sinks: 14 Double [28]	6	4.00
(Heat Sink Loc: 1 LA, 1 RA)		
Gyro:	4	3.00
Cockpit, Life Supt., Sensors:	5	3.00
Actuators: L: Sh+UA+LA+H R: Sh+UA+LA+H	16	.00
Armor Factor: 304 pts Standard	0	19.00

	Internal Structure	Armor Value
Head:	3	9
Center Torso:	31	47
Center Torso (Rear):		14
L/R Side Torso:	21	32/32
L/R Side Torso (Rear):		10/10
L/R Arm:	17	34/34
L/R Leg:	21	41/41

Weapons and Equipment Loc Heat Ammo Crits Mass

1 ER Large Laser	RA	12	2	5.00
1 ER Large Laser	LA	12	2	5.00
1 Gauss Rifle	RT	1	16	9
(Ammo Locations: 2 RT)				
3 Streak SRM 2s	LT	6	50	4
(Ammo Locations: 1 LT)				
1 LRM 15 w/ Artemis IV	LT	5	16	6
(Ammo Locations: 2 LT)				
2 Medium Pulse Lasers	CT(R)	8	2	4.00
CASE Equipment:	LT		1	.50

TOTALS:	44	77	100.00
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Crits & Tons Left: 1 .00

Calculated Factors:

Total Cost: 11,008,000 C-Bills

Battle Value: 2,011

Cost per BV: 5,473.89

Weapon Value: 2,873 / 2,704 (Ratio = 1.43 / 1.34)

Damage Factors: SRDmg = 32; MRDmg = 29; LRDmg = 16

BattleForce2: MP: 3, Armor/Structure: 8/8

Damage PB/M/L: 5/5/4, Overheat: 2

Class: MA; Point Value: 20

Rim Worlds Republic Tech Readout 2784

My Lord, before your rightful assumption of the Imperial Throne you had commanded a series of BattleMechs to truly represent our greatness. These four machines are the end result. It should be noted Great One that with the exception of the ubiquitous dual strength heat exchangers it has been decided to leave out a majority of the advanced Hegemony technology. This was done for one overriding reason. These designs are ready for IMMEDIATE production. Our Glorious Legions may begin wielding these weapons against the rebel Kerensky within six months. By doing so we will take advantage of the rebels' arrogance. For too long they have been the only creators of new designs keeping any real innovation for their own despotic hordes. The appearance of new unknown designs will undoubtedly send waves of fear and uncertainty through their ranks. Your own son, whose input has been invaluable was of course the first to point this out, and has taken the prototype Hecatoncheires for his own use. The 'Mechs are as follows:

Great White GRE-2W-A

Our premiere design showcasing the might of the empire, is equipped with two Mako class standard PPCs which provide long range support for our forces without the need for resupply. Backing these weapons up are no less than six Republic Arms six pack Short Range Missile Launchers with enough ammunition to last a typical battle. These weapons will project a veritable wall of fire that can cripple or destroy any lighter design. The Great White's nineteen tons of armor and ample heat dissipation, coupled with the skill of our pilots will ensure victory against designs of equal weight.

Shark SHR-3K-M

The second of our designs to reach production the Shark is a pure raider. Swift and well armored, this 'Mech uses twin 8cm RA-265 heavy laser emitters as it's bite. Our test pilots tell us that in a pack with other Sharks or leading a lance of lighter Vampires these units have an unmatched flexibility. Lacking the need for resupply and fully capable of projecting their full fire power in every engagement this medium design is a true hunter worthy of its name.

Hecatoncheires HET-7E-H

Our most innovative design was named after a mythological hundred armed giant for a reason. Using a simple universal socket we can, within a few hours completely change the mission profile of this unit. Using the despotic Terrans own work against them we have used the modular design of the Mercury scout as a base, this fearsome design comes in two models.

The 7E design is a brawler armed with the same high velocity autocannon as the Demolisher MBT, backed by a suite of single 8cm and three 5cm lasers and one of our standard six pack short range launchers this unit provides more firepower with maximum armor for it's seventy ton weight than any comparable Terran design and at a far lower cost. The 7D variant swaps the massive ballistic gun for twin Dupre fifteen pack long range multipurpose launchers. With the software upgrades so helpfully provides by the Cameron child these weapons may use any of the Hegemony's advanced munitions and with sixteen packs per launcher it has more combat endurance than the rebels' vaunted Bombardier. It takes approximately four hours to swap out the universal mount and to calibrate the balance and fire control systems. I am confident that with access to Terran software designers we may cut this down dramatically.

My Liege this may be the first of a new generation of BattleMechs. A true testament to your might.

Vampire VMP-3R-L

Our final design's true strength is it's simplicity. Like the Shark, the Vampire is fast well armored, for it's size, and possesses the heat efficiency required of all our designs. Four 5cm RA-154

medium lasers are, ton for ton the most efficient weapons on the modern battlefield, backed by twin Salamander Plasma projectors, feared by both 'MechWarriors and infantry alike, these units are best employed in a pack. Whether providing recon support for heavier units or as counterinsurgency forces these lightest of our new designs are versatile and deadly. Using the same mounts as the heavier Hecatoncheires the 4R variant uses both the Beagle Active Probe and the Guardian ECM suite in place of the flamers and two of the lasers. To my knowledge none of our enemies have a more effective ELINT platform.

This summarizes the new designs commissioned in your Glorious Name. A Battalion of each has been made available to your son's Huscarl Dragoons as per his request.

In Your Honor;
 DR. Eric Hamilton
 Republic Arms
 Type/Model: Great White GRE-2W-A
 Tech: Inner Sphere / 2750
 Config: Biped BattleMech
 Rules: Level 2, Standard design

Mass: 100 tons
 Chassis: Standard
 Power Plant: 300 Vlar Fusion
 Walking Speed: 32.4 km/h
 Maximum Speed: 54.0 km/h
 Jump Jets: None
 Jump Capacity: 0 meters
 Armor Type: Standard
 Armament:
 2 PPCs
 6 SRM 6s
 Manufacturer: (Unknown)
 Location: (Unknown)
 Communications System: (Unknown)
 Targeting & Tracking System: (Unknown)

 Type/Model: Great White GRE-2W
 Mass: 100 tons

Equipment:	Crits	Mass
Int. Struct.: 152 pts Standard	0	10.00
Engine: 300	6	19.00
Walking MP: 3		
Running MP: 5		
Jumping MP: 0		
Heat Sinks: 17 Double [34]	15	7.00
(Heat Sink Loc: 2 LA, 2 RA, 1 LT)		
Gyro: 4	3.00	
Cockpit, Life Supt., Sensors:	5	3.00
Actuators: L: Sh+UA+LA R: Sh+UA+LA	14	.00
Armor Factor: 307 pts Standard	0	19.50

	Internal Structure	Armor Value
Head:	3	9
Center Torso:	31	46
Center Torso (Rear):		16
L/R Side Torso:	21	32/32

Weapons and Equipment	Loc	Heat	Ammo	Crits	Mass
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Calculated Factors:

BattleMech Technical Readout

Mass: 45 tons
Chassis: Standard
Power Plant: 270 GM Fusion
Walking Speed: 64.8 km/h
Maximum Speed: 97.2 km/h
Jump Jets: None
Jump Capacity: 0 meters
Armor Type: Standard
Armament:

Type/Model: Shark SHR-3K-M
Mass: 45 tons

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Engine: 270 6 14.50
 Walking MP: 6
 Running MP: 9
 Jumping MP: 0
 Heat Sinks: 12 Double [24] 6 2.00
 (Heat Sink Loc: 1 LA, 1 RA)
 Gyro: 4 3.00
 Cockpit, Life Supt., Sensors: 5 3.00
 Actuators: L: Sh+UA+LA+H R: Sh+UA+LA+H 16 .00
 Armor Factor: 128 pts Standard 0 8.00

	Internal Structure	Armor Value
Head:	3	9
Center Torso:	14	17
Center Torso (Rear):		6
L/R Side Torso:	11	14/14
L/R Side Torso (Rear):		4/4
L/R Arm:	7	12/12
L/R Leg:	11	18/18

Weapons and Equipment	Loc	Heat	Ammo	Crits	Mass
1 Large Laser	RA	8	2	5.00	
1 Large Laser	LA	8	2	5.00	
TOTALS:		16	41	45.00	
Crits & Tons Left:			37	.00	

Calculated Factors:

Total Cost: 3,715,190 C-Bills
 Battle Value: 910
 Cost per BV: 4,082.63
 Weapon Value: 741 / 741 (Ratio = .81 / .81)
 Damage Factors: SRDmg = 14; MRDmg = 9; LRDmg = 1
 BattleForce2: MP: 6, Armor/Structure: 3/4
 Damage PB/M/L: 3/2/-, Overheat: 0
 Class: MM; Point Value: 9

BattleMech Technical Readout

Type/Model: Hecatoncheires HET-7E-H
 Tech: Inner Sphere / 2750
 Config: Biped BattleMech
 Rules: Level 2, Standard design

Mass: 70 tons
 Chassis: Endo Steel
 Power Plant: 280 VOX Fusion
 Walking Speed: 43.2 km/h
 Maximum Speed: 64.8 km/h
 Jump Jets: None
 Jump Capacity: 0 meters
 Armor Type: Standard
 Armament:
 1 Autocannon/20

1 ER Large Laser
 3 Medium Lasers
 1 SRM 6
 Manufacturer: (Unknown)
 Location: (Unknown)
 Communications System: (Unknown)
 Targeting & Tracking System: (Unknown)

 Type/Model: Hecatoncheires HET-7E-H
 Mass: 70 tons

Equipment:	Crits	Mass
Int. Struct.: 107 pts Endo Steel	14	3.50
(Endo Steel Loc: 3 LA, 4 LT, 3 RT, 2 LL, 2 RL)		
Engine: 280	6	16.00
Walking MP: 4		
Running MP: 6		
Jumping MP: 0		
Heat Sinks: 10 Double [20]	0	.00
Gyro: 4	3.00	
Cockpit, Life Supt., Sensors:	5	3.00
Actuators: L: Sh+UA+LA+H R: Sh+UA	14	.00
Armor Factor: 217 pts Standard	0	14.00

	Internal Structure	Armor Value
Head:	3	9
Center Torso:	22	33
Center Torso (Rear):		11
L/R Side Torso:	15	22/22
L/R Side Torso (Rear):		8/8
L/R Arm:	11	22/22
L/R Leg:	15	30/30

Weapons and Equipment Loc Heat Ammo Crits Mass

1 Autocannon/20	RA	7	20	14	18.00
(Ammo Locations: 4 RT)					
1 ER Large Laser	LA	12		2	5.00
1 Medium Laser	RT	3		1	1.00
1 Medium Laser	LT	3		1	1.00
1 SRM 6	CT	4	15	3	4.00
(Ammo Locations: 1 RT)					
1 Medium Laser	HD	3		1	1.00
CASE Equipment:	RT			1	.50

 TOTALS: 32 66 70.00
 Crits & Tons Left: 12 .00

Calculated Factors:
 Total Cost: 6,694,204 C-Bills
 Battle Value: 1,269
 Cost per BV: 5,275.18
 Weapon Value: 1,552 / 1,552 (Ratio = 1.22 / 1.22)
 Damage Factors: SRDmg = 28; MRDmg = 8; LRDmg = 2

BattleForce2: MP: 4, Armor/Structure: 5/5
 Damage PB/M/L: 4/3/1, Overheat: 3
 Class: MH; Point Value: 13

BattleMech Technical Readout

Type/Model: Vampire VMP-3R
 Tech: Inner Sphere / 2750
 Config: Biped BattleMech
 Rules: Level 2, Standard design

Mass: 25 tons
 Chassis: Standard
 Power Plant: 150 Omni Fusion
 Walking Speed: 64.8 km/h
 Maximum Speed: 97.2 km/h
 Jump Jets: None
 Jump Capacity: 0 meters
 Armor Type: Standard
 Armament:
 4 Medium Lasers
 2 Flamers
 Manufacturer: (Unknown)
 Location: (Unknown)
 Communications System: (Unknown)
 Targeting & Tracking System: (Unknown)

 Type/Model: Vampire VMP-3R
 Mass: 25 tons

Equipment:	Crits	Mass
Int. Struct.: 43 pts Standard	0	2.50
Engine: 150	6	5.50
Walking MP: 6		
Running MP: 9		
Jumping MP: 0		
Heat Sinks: 10 Double [20]	12	.00
(Heat Sink Loc: 2 LT, 2 RT)		
Gyro:	4	2.00
Cockpit, Life Supt., Sensors:	5	3.00
Actuators: L: Sh+UA+LA+H R: Sh+UA+LA+H	16	.00
Armor Factor: 89 pts Standard	0	6.00

	Internal Structure	Armor Value
Head:	3	9
Center Torso:	8	12
Center Torso (Rear):		4
L/R Side Torso:	6	9/9
L/R Side Torso (Rear):		3/3
L/R Arm:	4	8/8
L/R Leg:	6	12/12

Weapons and Equipment Loc Heat Ammo Crits Mass

1 Medium Laser	RA	3	1	1.00
1 Flamer	RA	3	1	1.00
1 Medium Laser	LA	3	1	1.00
1 Flamer	LA	3	1	1.00
2 Medium Lasers	CT	6	2	2.00

TOTALS:		18	49	25.00
Crits & Tons Left:		29		.00

Calculated Factors:

Total Cost: 1,917,500 C-Bills

Battle Value: 642

Cost per BV: 2,986.76

Weapon Value: 469 / 469 (Ratio = .73 / .73)

Damage Factors: SRDmg = 16; MRDmg = 2; LRDmg = 0

BattleForce2: MP: 6, Armor/Structure: 2/2

Damage PB/M/L: 3/2/-, Overheat: 0

Class: ML; Point Value: 6