

THIS IS A STORY BY CANNONSHIP AND BLACKTIGERACTUAL

And I heard, as it were, the noise of thunder: One of the four beasts saying: "Come and see." And I saw. And behold, a white horse.

There's a man goin' 'round takin' names.

An' he decides who to free and who to blame.

Everybody won't be treated all the same.

There'll be a golden ladder reaching down. When the man comes around.

-Johnny Cash, "When the Man Comes Around"

Elbar, 2776/06/18, Running Deer Mountain... 171st Kowloon Volunteers

Colonel Ngo looked at the granite mountain's heavy blast doors. "Intel's wrong. That base isn't inactive." The 171st had made it to ground 400 kilometers northwest of the primary LZ's for the Royal division. Tranh Truk Ngo lowered the glasses. "Trains are running in. We're going to take one of those trains, and get inside."

"What're they carrying?" Dean Vu Nghien asked cautiously, lowering his own glasses.

"Not sure, the boxcar's got open slats on top, but they're angled, can't see in." the Colonel said, "Chan, take Alpha and find out what the Rimjobs need vented cars for, Chao, take your battalion up the slope in squad formations, I want you to put out their eyes when the rest of the Regiment is in position-also see if you can identify the firing ports for that Brian Castle's defense-guns without alerting them, and feed the coordinates to the artillery battalion."

"What do you think's going on in there?" Tranh wondered softly. Whatever it is, it intensified when the task-force jumped into the system. There was a smell in the air...

Rail siding...

Cham Nguyen volunteered after arguing with his young wife about it for months. Two years...it's only two years. He smiled grimly, and motioned the other six men in his squad.

The security measures were familiar to him-too familiar-when the Ia Drang cell stormed the reclamation site at Dinh Diep, the guards had used similar automated sensors to control the perimeters around the worker's barracks.

Angled inward-who do they need to keep inside? He pried the access panel open, and slid in the looping chip.

the rest of the networked sensors pinged back, and consumed the computer virus, looping their outputs.

"Okay, they're looking at refreshing images of what they were already seeing. Let's go." The squad moved up on the first train, watching for the human guards.

Nghien and Cho took up the 'security' position, while Cham slipped up to the actual train.

The boxcars were standard models-corrugated metal utility types.

He hopped up on the coupler, and listened...

There were voices in the cars-and they were soft, worried, and weeping.

what the HELL? The Star-League issue infantry helmet had infrared and multispectral systems built in. He tongued the activation switch, and looked through the cheap aluminum walls of the boxcar.

There were people inside, and they were packed like sardines.

Major Chao...

Major Jin Chao's position on the slope overhanging the Brian fort's entrance allowed her a look into the angled louvers of the railroad cars.

she lowered her binoculars in shock. "what do you see?" Colonel Ngo's voice over the tightbeam asked.

"The train's full of civilians...and they don't look happy to be here." she raised the binoculars again, "They look scared."

"Your engineers got the sensors?" Ngo asked.

"Found 'em. We're going to need about five minutes to get clear before you order in the love." Chao said, adding, "Weird enough, no roving patrols-the footpaths are overgrown or eroded, and the service road's got potholes all over it-if there was Indig resistance in the area, they're not here now-Rimjobs are better about upkeeping shit like that when they've got an active insurgency going."

Sgt. Nguyen...

"there's over a hundered of these cars, sargeant." Lt. Quhon told him, "We're on a time-table."

"We've got to get those folks out." Cham insisted.

"You were at Dinh Diep in '69, right?" Quhon said.

"You know it, sir, you were there too." Nguyen replied, "God knows what they intend to do to those folks inside..."

Quhon nodded. "We'll just have to stop them doing that-inside, we can't have their guards spotting a break-out..."

"They'll open the doors." Nguyen said, "You know they will."

"Point. Good point." Quhon frowned again, "Good point...wait for my signal, then just start cutting locks and opening doors-I want to have a couple platoons with heavy weapons in position to cover the civvies before you start opening doors, and the rest of the Battalion on the way..."

The Train...

Saul heard voices-these weren't the same as the confident bark of the guards, or the sullen grumbling of the railway people.

"Mom, I hear someone outside...and they sound funny." he said.

"Shhh." his mother cradled him close. "quiet now." she said.

He could feel her fear, and she clutched him tighter when the door on the side of the boxcar creaked open.

They were soldiers.

"come-quiet, run." the man's accent was thick, almost impossible to understand. "quick-quick, didee mau." he urged.

Rachel took a chance, and stood up.

she approached the open door, and saw soldiers with weapons out, facing the head of the train, or out away from it.

"Didee-Mau!" the young man insisted, gesturing for her, and the others packed into the car, to come outside.

The young man screwed up his face as if concentrating, and said, "RUN, HIDE. BAD THINGS HERE-you go, we protect! You RUN."

Cham Nguyen

I should've spent more time in english class! the civilians didn't seem to understand, but then, the girl moved, and he saw a pendant.

a six pointed star.

I hope they aren't Reform! It had been years since his mother had dragged him to Synagogue...

In Hebrew, he said, "Get off the train, and run, as fast as you can, away from the mountain-don't let them see you, we are going to shut this place down."

Understanding dawned on the girl's face, and she translated for some of the others, while still OTHERS crowded to the doorway, and started getting off the train.

Okay, mom, you were right-I DID need to pay attention to the Rabbi...

SLDF LZ Linda, near sunset...

"...I don't understand, General, why did you send what amounts to a barely-reinforced infantry division to make trouble around a Brian Castle?" Colonel Studler from the (former) 7th Defenders of Andurien, asked, "Christ, they're going to get chopped to pieces out there!"

Gordon McEvedy shook his head, "No, they aren't." he said, "Most of a Brian Fort's defenses are geared to repelling armoured assaults, and I can't put the 171st on Garrison, do you know why?"

"Explain it to me." Studler said, "This should be good..."

"Three and a half percent of them speak english with proficiency." General McEvedy stated flatly. "Makes it impossible to put 'em on garrison just about...anywhere. ON the other hand, they've been fighting the Rimjobs longer than anybody else-they know HOW to fight them, and the little bastards WANT to fight them...and if they're in that deadspace around that fort, then the Rimmers have to adapt to that fact, or lose the fort-it frees up the rest of the task-force to secure the other zones."

"You're spending them like...god, General, that's a terrible plan! who came up with it?" Studler asked.

"Colonel Tranh Truk Ngo, of the 171st. if we put a 'mech unit to seiging that base, it'll tie up too many of our units, and we can't replace the losses quick enough." McEvedy said, "On the other hand, the Rimjobs either have to chase down or dig out that infantry outfit or they risk losing the fort-it makes them come out, or fold in-and if they fold in..."

"What?" Studler asked.

"See those Ferrocrete trucks?"

Sonderheim Medical Reclamation Center  
Elbar, Empire of Amaris  
May 3rd 2776

A prayer echoed through the dead man's pain fevered brain.

*Answer us, O Lord, answer us, in this time and season.*

Craig Mayer lay in a cot in the antiseptic hallway. The drugs in his system were not, as the Amaris medic had told him, painkillers. The pain from the accident at the munitions plant that had crushed his left leg throbbed without relief. The drug just kept Craig immobile and quiet. In the back of his mind he heard his Rim Worlds Republic "supervisor"; Cole Vincent complaining to the man in the doctors lab coat.

*For we are in great trouble.*

"Major, this unit is one of my best workers," Vincent said with a whining fawning tone, "how are we expected to maintain our quota when you don't limit your selections to the broken ones?"

*Hide not your face from us and forsake not our supplications.*

The Doctor or Major, whatever, had a surprisingly mild voice.

“Mister Vincent, you must understand that in war one can’t always determine which supplies will become scarce. When such scarcities occur we have a duty to the Emperor not to allow them to continue. This unit’s blood type is currently in need so it will provide supplies.”

The man paused and Craig could see his reflection smile in the glass panels lining the hallway.

“Of course if you have a complaint, Mister Vincent, I can pass it on to General Amaris...by the way what is your blood type?”

For you are the Lord who answers us in times of trouble, who redeems us and saves us in all our times of distress.

Vincent’s voice quavered as he demurred and hurried off.

The Doctor looked down at Craig and smiled. The drugs he’d been given had worn off slightly. Craig was able to mumble a question.

“What was that...Ahh no, I don’t hate you and neither does the Emperor, quite the opposite we revere you for the sacrifice you are about to make on behalf of the brave men and women serving our Armed Forces.”

Craig felt himself being wheeled down through a pair of double doors while the Doctor whistled happily. The clean antiseptic room Craig found himself in resembled the cross between an operating room and an assembly line. As technicians rushed over to relieve the Doctor of his burden, the man waved them off.

“No need; I’ll prep this one myself.” Whistling to himself the Doctor adjusted a silvery sharp implement.

“Now my friend; you will feel a sharp pain for a brief moment as we eliminate your higher brain functions. Our harvesting procedures require the donor to be alive and anesthetics can contaminate the supplies so we will spare you anymore pain.”  
Placing the instrument at the back of Craig’s head, the Doctor smiled gently.

“After all,” he said, “we aren’t monsters.”

Running Deer Mountain,  
Elbar, Empire of Amaris  
20 June, 2776

Phan Du’c Lanh lowered his binoculars and looked over to where the faint smell of nicotine betrayed the Tiger officer. The 171st Volunteer Regiment’s “liaison” with 90th Heavy Assault Regiment was kneeling in the clammy muck overlooking this particular road because the Star League regulars wanted their own look at the complex at Running Deer.

Lanh had first thought it was distrust of his people’s abilities that had been the rational for their little jaunt. Colonel Tranh the 171st’s big man had told Lanh to pay special attention to the recent campaign at New Home. While the initial invasion had been a push over, a RimJob counterattack had turned the fight for the world into a yearlong brutal slugfest...All due to a failure in Star League Naval Intelligence.

As a result the Black Tigers didn’t trust *anybody*.

It was an attitude any Kowloonese could respect.

“Lieutenant Gilmour the rabbits are in the pen.” Lanh called out softly.

Far quieter than any MechJock had a right to move the Tiger’s new Gunslinger slid forward and whispered; “It’s your op Lieutenant Lanh; I’m just along for the ride.”

Smiling faintly Lanh clicked his tongue just loud enough for his comlink to pick up. In the distance two squads; one Tiger and one Kowloon slipped out of the night for a diner and rest stop at the edge of the road.

Joey Lynn Shotugama of the 12th Eagle Claw Regulars stifled a yawn as the Major went into the bathroom. Looking at his squad mate Mitch Holloway he saw his own nervousness mirrored in the man’s face. The Major; a doctor in the Rim World’s Medical Corps was just as likely to send an over tired private to be “Recycled” as he was to lecture him on the need for proper sleep and offer him a stim tab.

Adjusting his Rasa-22 assault rifle to a more comfortable grip he heard a muffled grunt from beside him. Turning his eyes widened as Mitch pitched down into the waiting arms of a black clad form. As he opened his mouth to shout a warning a stabbing pain robbed him of his breath. Looking back Joey stared in astonished pain as a slender short woman twisted her blackened blade in his Kidney while grabbing his throat in a crushing grasp.

Didi Moran eased the dead sentry to the ground as her counterpart Trinh Huu Tha’ng one of the 171st’s scouts did the same with his quarry. The rest of the team had neutralized the RimJob’s transport before any calls for help could go out. Reading her HKMP-1 subgun she nodded at her companion.

The officer inside the bathroom opened the door muttering about the filth. As he strode out he actually took three steps before realizing something was amiss. Tha’ng smiled wickedly as he leveled his subgun at the Amaris officer. Didi relieved the man of his sidearm, comlink and pocketcomp while one of Tha’ng’s troopers stepped up with a pair of flexible cuffs and a canvass sack.

“You are not going to put that on me, it’s filthy!” The Amaris major said irate.

Tha’ng just grinned and motioned with the barrel of his gun. Once the man was bound, Didi stepped up to him and patted his face.

“Now sweetie, it’s that or you get what we gave your friends.” The look in her eye quieted their prisoner and Tha’ng’s team swept off into the night with their quarry in tow. Didi turned to the portly man in the apron who’d come out of hiding.

“Thank you, brother, now get yourself gone.” She said warmly. The man smiled back.

“Keep your thanks, miss, just kick those bastards off our world.” He faded back into the shadows. After a second Didi did likewise.

Tommy Lindon, the 90th’s slicer or computer hacker was shaking as he handed over the disk containing his report on the data found in the Amaris major’s pocketcomp. Sam Winters laid his hand on the young man’s shoulder as he took the disk and placed it in his console’s waiting port.

“Bad.” The Colonel said simply.

Tommy composed himself visibly and nodded.

“Yessir I-I’ve never seen anything like it, look under the directory marked Medical Supplies...”

Sam paled as he read looking up at the room’s other occupant.

“This, this is genocide, they’re using people as...”

“Spare parts, they’re using them as spare parts.” Said Colonel Ngo Truk Tranh.

This changes everything, Thought Colonel Tranh, the Castle Brian at Running Deer Mountain had to be neutralized. Its very position could interfere with the rescue of the conscripted labor and the “spare parts” as it were. That Amaris would stoop to genocide, to wipe out the entire Jewish population on Elbar didn’t surprise the Colonel. They’d done much the same thing during the “clean up” at Dinh Diep.

At least Colonel Winters offered up the use of their support. Smiling grimly, Tranh reviewed the orders placing some of his better English speakers to act as forward observers. The thirty six Long Tom mobile guns and twelve Chaparral Arrow IV launchers should give the RimJob’s nightmares. As for the six teams of BlackHearts attached to the 90th...

Well Lanh says they’re worth their weight in gold, so he can have them. The close proximity of so many of the Special Armed Service troopers and their Nighthawk powered armor made him nervous. A twinge went through him then. It was more than young Lanh’s acceptance of the Blackhearts.

Time to take my medicine, he thought grimly.

*90th Heavy Assault Regiment Cantonment, Aftraisa, Elbar*

We gathered in the tent at the center of our company’s billet.

“We don’t have to like it B, we just have to deal with it.” Sonny Matos growled at me.

“Just grousing bossman.” I answered glumly.

“Look kid, I know you’re crazy enough to want to go after a Castle Brian, but I’ve done it before. If these Loonies want to tackle it’s all theirs.” Turning back to the holomap the Captain of Charlie Company; 3rd Battalion (The Stalking Tigers) of the 90th Heavy Assault Regiment highlighted the area around Hills Pointe.

“Okay kids, this is our target an industrial complex fortified and defended by elements of the 63rd Amaris Dragoons.”

On the screen a breakdown of the 63rd based on known intel appeared.

“Now as all of you know the RimJobs have been systematically exterminating the Jewish population on Elbar.” Matos closed his eyes for a minute and took a breath. “This is one of the places they’ve been doing it.”

Highlighting a pair of DropShip pads on the eastern edge of the complex, Sonny speared his warriors with a cool gaze.

"Because of the possibility of a large number of prisoners on site; Command wants this done with overwhelming speed, before the RimJobs can hold hostages over our heads."

On the screen a wave of aerospace fighters went after the anti air emplacements in the complex.

"Once our bombers have nailed the AA here, a force will be downloaded on these pads. That means us people, along with the rest of 3rd Battalion and the airmobile boys from the New York National Guard."

A battalion of BattleMechs and a company of jump infantry dropped on those pads, drawing a portion of the defenders inward. Outside the complex the rest of the Tigers and their attached volunteers from the *Ryukaze* swept in to neutralize the Amaris defenses.

*Gods I love computer simulations, they always look so pretty.* I thought.

"You all know how nasty this will get and I know you all want to hurt these fuckers, well this is your chance, so keep your heads and we will pull this off." Looking at all of us he paused for a second or to then growled at us to get some rest and be ready to embark two hours before dawn.

As we left Gracie Liu my senior lance member came up to my shoulder.

"Once more unto the breach huh." She said. I nodded with a grim smile.

"Surrounded, and if anything goes wrong totally fucked, just another day in the Black Tigers." I answered. In the back of my mind I remembered it was supposed to be a beautiful day tomorrow.

*Guess it really will be a good day to die.*

Running Deer Mountain, 1745 Hours...

Doctrine, is doctrine. The garrison sent 'mechs out to corral the escaping prisoners.

Sending out 'mechs requires opening doors, and while the sally-ports were well camouflaged from electronic surveillance at range, orbital scanning, and reconnaissance aircraft, they're not particularly easy to hide from the mk-1 mod-0 human eyeball at close range.

Those heavy blast-doors also don't close particularly quickly, even with the hydraulics boosted with heavy structural myomers.

"*th?c hi?n cháy.*" The 171st were waiting, and as the first lance of *Jackrabbits* bounded out of their sally port, the artillery from six Thumpers laboriously moved into position, converged at very close range, firing HE shells directly into the open portal and the surrounding hillside.

"BattleMechs, Attack." Tranh Truk Ngo ordered, "Advance and hold that door open for the infantry. All artillery units, execute pre-planned fires. First and second Battalion, advance, third battalion, cover those civilians."

The bulk of the SLDF forces were carrying out attacks more than two hundred kilometers to the south-there was NO reason for the Garrison here to be at more than a slight elevated alert status.

Which was, in hindsight, remarkably poor thinking.

The scarce 'mechs belonging to the 171st were mostly older SHD-2H models gifted to the unit by Their Star League allies-a heavier medium, with a forgiving heat-curve and relatively good armor for its type, the *Shadowhawk* is, however, not a particularly powerful or even, in most views, effective BattleMech.

Tranh's 'MechWarriors weren't particularly gifted pilots either, so in a sense, the matching of mediocre 'Mech to mediocre 'MechWarrior wasn't much of a problem. Less so, since the 'mechs only had to move up, and hold the door.

Light autocannons, medium lasers, and short-range missiles worked just fine to hammer the antipersonnel defense-emplacements inside the entry tunnel. Tranh dropped into his 'command vehicle'-a hollowed out Magi chassis converted to carry radios and comms instead of the heavy weapons and amplifiers it had been designed for.

'Door's open, let's pay a visit." He said casually. "Let's find out what they need trainloads of civilians for."

Corridor P-5, Running Deer Mountain, 0300 hours...

"They're holding the intersection." Ned Phillips said, shaking the empty charge-clip from his laser rifle. "The Commander wants them pushed back out the door."

"We're going to need heavier shit than these, then-you get an Ident off the Opfor?" Tom Walker asked.

"Yeah...you're not going to believe who the enemy sent to us." Ned said.

"Who is it? 'cause whoever they are, they're some crazy mother fuckers to think they can take a Brian fort with infantry." Walker commented.

"Kowloonese." Ned said, "All the way from back home in the Republic."

Tom smirked, "Long way to go to be turned into spares."

"No shit. Have some extra grenades..." Ned said. Walker took the box magazine of micro grenades, and fed them into his automatic grenade launcher.

"Let's kick some slope ass, the-" he never got to finish the statement-instead, the bend in the corridor was filled with an expanding bloom of tungsten wire-fragments moving at several times the speed of sound, pushed by a lump of C-12 in the core of a lobbed and cooked-off hand grenade from just ahead of the jog in which the RimWorlorder guard squad had taken cover.

Ned could see his friend and comrade's shredded, hamburger body as his head rang from the thundering noise-Tom's body and body armor had cast a shadow that protected him from the blast.

In the gloom, figures moved. He pushed aside the remains of Tom Walker, and he tried to stand-only then, discovering that the blast hadn't entirely missed him. wow, I'm in shock...that's going to

hurt as soon as my brain realizes it... his leg, from the knee down, was hamburger and broken bone amidst shreds of nemourlon boot and ballistic cloth pants-leg.

He pulled the lanyard off of his radio, and tied it above the shredding, tourniquet now...they can graft another one on later...

His violated hearing registered the sound of a chemical-ballistic weapon, a slug-thrower... He looked up in time to watch a little man with corporal's stripes lay down a five-round burst from his (Ned's) mid-abdomen up to...darkness.

Cham Nguyen took point around the bend after his squad's grenadier tossed one- using a subgun in 9.8 mm with a suppressor, he was looking for anyone that might put up a fight, to put them down and assure the dead really were.

There was a Rimjob Sergeant trying to tie off his shredded leg.

Cham shouldered the subgun, and let fly a burst into the man's head and torso.

The others weren't moving, breathing, or even mostly-intact. "Clear."

Outside Running Deer Mountain;

Did Moran watched as the Shads attached to the 171st dealt with the wrecked gateway. Waves of the Kowloon volunteers streamed towards the entrance. Heavy weapons designed to kill armored targets reached out and annihilated some, but their ability to stop so many was almost nil.

*Crazy buggers, but if they get enough bodies in...*

Raising her arm she signaled to the rest of her team and at her command nine other Nighthawk armored troops charged forward along with three other squads nearby. Running on foot took longer than jumping would have but it was far safer to go from crater to crater than to be stuck in midair with no cover.

Jumping into the lee of a hill to gather the rest of her team she found herself face to face with a mix of old school Lee-Enfield M36's and man portable 80mm Short Range Missiles.

Ahh fuck me, I hope one of these guys speaks English.

Before she could say a word a familiar voice called out.

"Didi, glad you could make the party, sorry about the reception!"

Phan Du'c Lanh flipped up his visor and grinned at her. As the firepower pointed at her went away, Didi relaxed and nodded at the shattered gate a few meters away.

"So we going in or are we just gonna sit here and chat."

Lanh laughed flipping his visor back down, his voice took on that filtered artificial quality that always came from the electronic speakers. Gesturing with the computer built into his fatigue's gauntlet he sent Didi a short burst transmission.

“Didi, the Colonel would like your assistance in securing the Castle’s computer core.”

Didi nodded and gave Lanh the thumbs up.

“Okay, we’ll lead off give us some cover?” She asked.

A wicked grin was the reply.

*90th Heavy Assault Regiment Cantonment;*

Inside the drop bay of the *Leopard* Class Dropper *Roadrunner*, I grabbed the rungs of the ladder leading to *Hussy’s* cockpit.

“Lieutenant Gilmour!” A voice called out from behind me.

Damn it. I winced.

Turning I forced a smile as Captain Colm McKinney strode up to me all spit and polish in his Mech Warrior Combat Suit.

“Captain, I would stay and chat sir; but I’m pressed for time right now.” I started to turn back to the ladder.

“I’m aware of that Lieutenant, that’s what I wanted to talk about.” The tall black haired officer with the pencil thin moustache smiled amiably. “General Hollis wanted me to tag along and review your operations...” He gestured back at the VTR-9SL standing in the middle of our deployment area.

I’d wondered who was the idiot who left their big fat ‘Mech in the middle of our staging area. *Okay Bruce take a deep breath.*

“Captain I’d love to accommodate you, but there simply isn’t time to get you rigged up.”

“Nonsense, Lieutenant you know as well as I a *Leopard* can easily accommodate six ‘Mechs on a suborbital trip, and I won’t be a bother once you ground your ships...” I had cut him off.

“Our DropShips won’t be landing, Captain.” I stifled a smile at the look on his face.

“You...I mean how?” He stuttered.

“We’re downloading, Sir and unless I’m misinformed you have no training and have never even done an orbital drop.” Being a good friend of the finest slicer in the Star League has its benefits.

“But you’ll be surrounded...how will you evac. That’s insane.” McKinney’s eyes were big as saucers; I forget sometimes what is normal for the Tigers isn’t for even the rest of the Defense Force.

“We’ll evac when we win, sir and hell we’re the 90th being surrounded and outnumbered is what we get paid for.”

As I turned away I heard him mutter; “Bloody lunatics.” Grinning savagely, I tossed back over my shoulder.

“Ohh by the way Captain, could you move your *Victor*, you’re parked illegally.”

Grinning I strapped myself into *Hussy's* linear frame and ran through the start up sequence. Out the closing drop bay I saw Captain McKinney's *Victor* start up. The *Leopard* rumbled and shook as she rose into the air. Plugged into the TACNET, could hear Lieutenant Persaud coordinating with the rest of the 917th Airlift Squadron. The nine Droppers would carry us to the target under the cover of Red and Black squadrons of the 1171st Royal Tactical Fighter Wing. Already Silver and Gold squadrons were in the middle of their attack runs, and I could hear them over the net.

*"Rifter, watch the fire from that tower, heavy SRM fire!"*

*"On it Hellion, giving it some depleted uranium love."*

*"This is Mouse; got a TAG on an LBX battery anybody hot?"*

*"Bugger's got it Mouse; Arrows away!"*

I shook my head. *Drama Queens, the whole lot of them.*

*"Lieutenant Gilmour, five minutes to target."* Geoff Persaud called out.

*"Thanks Geoff, okay gang sound off."*

*"Trey Two here."* Gracie Liu called out.

*"Trey Three; ready to go."* Jack Benning signed in.

*"Trey Four; umm okay boss..."* Scott "MechRat" Mackenzie sounded uncertain. This was his first download.

*"Hey 'Rat wassamatter nervous about getting your cherry popped?"* Gracie teased.

*"Sergeant Liu, stow that shit RTFN!"* I snapped as the first bursts from the surviving flack and AA 'Mechs struck around us. As the doors opened I could see the flash and thunder of *Firedancer's* energy batteries as they suppressed the guns around the port.

*"Mayday, mayday this is Black Betty, mains are out were going down, going dow..."* The crackle of static was sickening as *Black Betty* slammed into the hillside north of the complex taking a lance from Bravo Company with her.

Snarling I rotated *Hussy's* vambraces to grip the drop bay doors with her built in climbing claws. Geoff called out the seconds till we jumped.

*"Three...two...one...Trey Lance GO!!!"*

Yanking on the bay door frame I shot myself into the void.

*"The hairs on your arm will stand up.*

*At the terror in each sip and in each sup.*

*For you partake of that last offered cup, Or disappear into the potter's ground.*

*When the man comes around.*

-Johnny Cash, "When the Man Comes Around"

"...look at what they did to your people, and tell me again what you would do?"  
-Colonel Tranh Truk Ngo, briefing civilian volunteers on Elbar.

*Running Deer Mountain, sub-level six...*

"Fucking collapsed the ceiling on the corridor behind that vault-door." Lt. Hoang said, "I need volunteers to get in using the ducts-pistol and knife work, guys, and probably mine-disarming too."

The fighting had cleared the outer 'rings' of the Brian Fort, and they'd found out why the Rimjobs needed so many civilians. Refrigerated warehousing held hearts, lungs, livers, coils of intestine, and thousands of liters of blood in sorted barrel-vat lots, warehouse levels contained sorted collections of the 'donors' personal effects, and the base's waste-disposal containers were jammed with whatever bits couldn't be re-used.

This wasn't about taking the base anymore, and the Rimjobs in the deeper levels-the command levels with the 'Fortress Keep' system, knew it.

"Can't we just drill in, pump it full of KD-7, and call it good?" Nick Du'ong asked, pulling off his LBE and setting his helmet aside.

"Big boss wants as many officers as we can grab-mostly intact, if possible, he's got something special for 'em." the LT said, "and they've got, or at least, Intel thinks they might have civilians alive in there as human shields, so we're going to secure the vents, pipes and tunnels to pin 'em in there, and dig the fuckers out."

*Sublevel 1, entrance gate...*

Colonel Tranh Truk Ngo managed to make it outside before he vomited-at least, that was the excuse.

Sgt. Thanh and Sgt. Trung made sure nobody was too close or looking too hard, while he rode the first seizures out.

The Neuroin wasn't helping anymore. *Gotta up the dose...son of a bitch....this hurts...* He'd hardly believed the report when the guys from the 90th had shown it to him-but seeing the 'merchandise' firsthand, packed or awaiting packing and processing for distribution...that was something that made all the pixilated data in the universe kind of...

the next seizure wracked him, and everything was white agony.

The two NCO's from the Headquarters unit waited for him to finish...

it took five minutes, and the Colonel was visibly exhausted as they helped him back to his feet inside the now-empty railcar.

"Get a couple details together." Tranh said, "Locate some wooden poles..about ten meters long, I want a long taper to a blunt point on one end, and the other buried about two meters deep using post-hole diggers."

"How many?" Sgt. Trung asked.

"How many Rimjob officers did we capture before the command staff sealed the Keep levels?"  
Tranh asked.

"About forty, sir."

"Cut fifty for the first lot of them. Get 'm spaced about one klik apart." he said.

"What are we doing, sir?" Trung asked.

"We're going to punish those mother fuckers for..." he gestured back at the mountain, "For that." His eyes burned with fury. "Better see to it we've got additional stocks on-hand when the boys break through into the keep levels...and afterward... they don't deserve a bullet."

"Yes Sir." Trung trotted out.

"You know the Terries aren't going to understand, sir." Sgt. Thanh said.

"I don't care-just do it." He was unsteadily drinking an electrolyte solution mixed with meds, "and Thanh, pass the word-once Intel's done debriefing the enlisted prisoners, it's open season on Rimjobs-make a fucking example out of them."

Running Deer Mountain, 1500 hours...

Phuc Duc Lanh wanted to tear his own eyes out, he wanted to wash his memories with acid...he wanted to never remember what he was seeing.

"They...they carved them up for spare parts!!" He looked at Didi's suited figure.

*"Yaweh, làm cho tôi m?t hòn đá.*

*làm cho tôi nhu tê c?ng nhu đá.*

*Đi t? b? nh? c?a tôi nh?ng noi này.*

*Ho?c dua cho tôi tr? thù nh?ng ngu?i dó đã làm di?u này.*

*Lên án tôi vào pit, nhưng cho tôi tr? thù!!"*

Jars of eyes stared from shelves, sightless and preserved in liquid nitrogen.

*Avenge Us.*

He looked at her, and then, he looked at the shelves around him-the dissected remains of thousands.

*Avenge Us, oh Lord...deliver us from this evil and punish the responsible ones...*

"Lanh?" Didi asked, her worry seeping into her tone.

"Can't you hear them?" he asked, "Can't you hear them, all around us?" he walked up to the Nighthawk armored trooper, "They prayed and nobody came...nobody heard them...nobody...they begged and nobody heard them. they cried out, and they were silenced and nobody did anything to stop this."

“We did, Lanh...” Her armored gauntlet rested lightly on the Lieutenant’s shoulder. Lanh was shaking; his eyes red rimmed with both pain and rage. He looked up at her and she raised her face plate with its grinning tiger visage.

“We were too late to save them” she said waving other her hand at the rows of “parts”. “But others will live because of us, as for these we couldn’t save ‘em, but we can do one thing for them...”

The shaking stopped and Lanh looked up at Didi and nodded.

“We can give them vengeance.” He finished for her.

When Dido Birgitte Moran snapped her faceplate down the sound it made was like a steel trap.

*Mahder chhod!* Puram Kishore swore in his native tongue as he raced around the corner bullets and laser fire tearing into the opposite wall. Loonies and SAS, he didn’t know which was worse. The damn Loonies had gone nuts when they’d seen the “recycling” facilities, his squad had killed at least a dozen but they kept coming. Once they got in they seemed to come out of the woodwork attacking from places Singh’s mind knew they couldn’t have been.

If that wasn’t bad enough the Kowloon troops had brought Star League Special Armed Services troops in Nighthawk suits. Kishore’s mind reeled around that fact. A squad of the armored troops had come around the corner taking his sergeant by surprise.

The lead machine, Kishore couldn’t call them men they didn’t look human, ended his sergeant’s life by punching straight through the man’s chest. The rest of the Nighthawks had fallen on his squad mates with weapons meant to punch through ‘Mech armor. Puram Kishore just ran.

The corridor lights flickered as an explosion rocked the complex. Running for the hatchway at the end Puram was surprised to see it slide open. As the lights flickered again a nightmarish figure strode out. Covered in blood and dirt a black armored form gazed at him. A snarling feral tiger’s face stared back at him. His mind broke then and he dropped his rifle.

A tale his grandmother had told him filled his mind. A tale about a demon tiger.

*Rakshasha.*

The demon raised its right arm and fire filled Puram Kishore’s universe.

August Martine, born of the Taurian Concordat and trained as medic had never taken pleasure in the wrecking of a human body. As she surveyed the smoldering wreckage of the Rim Worlder trooper that lay before her she still didn’t. After what she’d seen here in Running Deer Mountain; she didn’t feel anything at all.

Leveling her Corning 20mm Blazer she continued down the corridor. Blinking twice she brought up the TACNET.

“Didi, this is ‘Gust; Sector Twelve clear, Hostiles neutralized.”

*Hills Pointe Industrial Complex...*

Lieutenant Colonel Xavier Derman ran across the tarmac towards the waiting aircar. His visit to the Hills Pointe facility was ill timed as the facility had come under air attack from the avenging Star League Defense Force while a heavy jamming attack cut them off from the outside world. Xavier had no illusions about the fate of anyone who got in the way of the assault he knew was coming.

The defenses were strong and the mixed regiment of 'Mechs from the 63rd Amaris Dragoons and armor and infantry from the Dragoons supporting elements were hardened veterans. Like Xavier they also had no illusions as to their fate.

*If I can just get to the rest of the Dragoons we might be able send these bastards packing.*

A sudden roaring in his ears made him look up. His driver was staring wide eyed up into the air. As he turned a huge shadow fell over him. A blast of intense heat and pressure knocked the Amaris officer over. As he fell he saw a massive raptor shaped form fall on twin pillars of fire. His driver was consumed by the flames an instant before being crushed by a massive cloven hoof.

The battle scarred *Marauder* seemed to regard Xavier for a moment then moved with a fluid grace into the complex. Other BattleMechs landed around him the thunder of their drop engines and the shriek of metal hitting tarmac overwhelmed Xavier. Sobbing uncontrollably he curled up in a fetal ball.

Xavier Derman stayed that way right up to the point Vinh Li Duc's *Black Knight, Sightblinder* stepped on him.

I opened up on a 120mm autocannon emplacement that was targeting some of our jump infantry. The caress of one of Hussy's particle cannon detonated the ammunition bin sending shards of metal and parts of the crew flying. With all the steel around us our sensors were pretty much useless and we were down to the good old Mark One Model One eyeball.

So when the RimJobs finally got their shit together the first warning I had was when a model 6R *Warhammer* stepped out of the smoke from the gun emplacement and laced me with missile and laser fire. With less than twenty meters between me and him his PPC's were next to useless, mine however had no problems with infighting.

A base model *'Hammer* is still a pretty tough customer despite being old school colonial tech (Y'know colonial, those piss poor rejects who can't get their shit together without the Hegemony to hold their hands; they have names like Kurita, Liao or Steiner.). They do have one major flaw, really, really bad armor plating around the legs.

I slashed both whips of particle goodness across his left leg, following up with a spattering of laser fire. I stepped up and kicked out with *Hussy's* right clawed foot and snapped off the limb at the shin as the *'Hammer* staggered back. Once the RimJob was down I stepped on his cockpit.

Sounds coldly clinical doesn't it? Well it is, after the word came down on what the RimJobs were doing here, it had to be. If I went into this all hot headed, I'd be dead.

As I turned a *Thunderbolt* in the Dagoon's distinctive blue and grey scheme stepped up to get a shot on Alex Winters' *Black Knight, Elmo*. The dickhead was obliging enough to offer me a clear back shot. By way of thanks I sent a gauss slug into his spine.

*"Thanks B, these guys really wanna party."* The Colonel's son and Captain of Bravo Company sang out as he carved chest armor from the stricken *T-Bolt*.

"No problem Root Beer," I answered using the nickname I'd hung on him when we'd first met back in Albion Prep on New Avalon (His initials are A&W after all.), "looks like it's gonna be a long day."

It was as it turns out, but not for the reasons I expected.

*"Hear the trumpets, hear the pipers.  
One hundred million angels singin'.  
Multitudes are marching to the big kettle drum.  
Voices callin', voices cryin'.  
Some are born an' some are dyin'.  
It's Alpha's and Omega's Kingdom come.*

*And the whirlwind is in the thorn tree.  
The virgins are all trimming their wicks.  
The whirlwind is in the thorn tree.  
It's hard for thee to kick against the pricks. "*  
-Johnny Cash, "When the Man Comes Around"

*Command Sublevel VII, Running Deer Mountain, Keep area...*

Colonel Gregory Von Strang-Hillard heard shouts and gunfire, and knew the Keep was now exposed. took them eighteen hours...at least there's that. He regarded the holo on his desk, his Marie, back home, his two children Franz and Galois, proudly wearing their Republican Youth Vanguard uniforms.

*Don't they understand, this was...we're making a better world. All of them...*

The sound of fighting grew closer to his office. He drew out a pen, and a piece of paper-the message could've been more conveniently dictated to one of the computers, but somehow, hand-written was more...appropriate.

*My Dearest Marie,*

*I will not be coming home soon. In the next few months, perhaps even years, you will no doubt hear all sorts of infamy spoken about me. Know that these are fundamentally un-true... our work here was necessary to improve the lot for all mankind...*

"That's cold, man." Gregory looked up in alarm. "Lying to your old lady like that? cold." The young woman standing beside him wasn't a Rim-Worlds soldier, or even one of the Locals. tigerstripe fatigues, no helmet...and asian. Kowloonese. "Keep the hands where I can see them." she instructed, "you can put the pen down, or you can try an' stab me with it, I have orders." she said in passable, if heavily accented, english.

Bianh Vu Lao had her orders-whenver possible, take officers alive.

"My orders say alive, not un-harmed." she said. "you give me trouble, you'll live just long enough for me to hand you over before you bleed out."

He put the pen down, and his palms flat on the desk. "I see." he said.

"Nope. You don't." Bianh pistol-whipped him, dragged his arms behind his back, and zip-stripped his wrists together before dislocating his shoulders and zip-stripping his elbows. "You will, though-I might even vid the trial for your kids, so they can watch their daddy standing erect one more time."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You're going to be made an...upstanding resident of Elbar." she said viciously,  
"Permanently...assuming you don't share something REAL juicy with the Intelligence section."

The blows and the rough treatment hurt. As she dragged him, stumbling, by the collar out into the corridor, he saw them bayonetting enlisted men who were wounded.  
The thought *we taught them that*. occurred to him...

*Running Deer Mountain, 11 hours post-battle...*

"Locals at the entrance again, sir." Sgt. Thanh said.

"Not hard to figure out why-did the KP's set up kitchen services for the 'fugees?" Colonel Tranh Truk Ngo was having a good day-which is to say, his day wasn't going so badly as yesterday. The pain was managed and a change in dosages had the siezures under control-he'd even relented to a delay in executing the Rim-Worlds officers until they'd been properly interrogated.

"Not about that, sir." Thanh said.

"I take it the Duty-Officer thought it was important?" the Colonel asked.

"See for yourself." Thanh said.

Tranh got to his feet, and followed the NCO through the maze of corridors to the southeast entrance.

"You're not going to tell me." Tranh asked.

"No sir." the Sergeant said firmly.

"If I order you?" Tranh asked.

"Then only, sir...but it'd be disappointing as all hell..sir." the Sergeant said.

They reached the gate, and it opened.

There were about a hundred, at first glance. All men and boys between fourteen, and...old.

They looked serious, and they were quietly standing in lines.

"What's going on?" Tranh asked.

one of the oldsters stepped forward, and in Hebrew, said, "We want to enlist, we want to fight the monsters, we want revenge."

Tranh looked at them, then at his NCOIC, "Sergeant...hell with it, Sergeant-Major, get a couple of our corpsmen broke loose to look these folks over, then see about setting up some kind of training area with a draw of cadre-do we have enough hardware from the capture to arm 'em?"

"You're saying yes?" Thanh asked.

"They'll have to meet minimum physicals, and pass a basic literacy, but yeah, I'm saying 'yes'. WE lost four hundred men taking this dump, with another three hundred who're not going to be fit for combat operations for another ninety days-and the rotation's not due until next month on the eleventh. They want to fight, and damn right they've got a motive and the right to, so we'll take 'em in, train 'em up, arm them, and give 'em a leg up. Get with the S-3 for Second Battalion and his NCOIC, we don't have twelve weeks, so we have to 'amend' it down to the bare basics."

*"One of the goals of training in a wartime situation, is to objectify the enemy, removing the taboo against murder so that a soldier can do his job. The RimWorlders serving Amaris had done such a superb job that they were willing and able to part out human beings not only to fill their military needs, but also for use in civilian hospitals on other worlds.*

*They Started It."*

-Lt. Colonel James Qua, 171st Volunteer Brigade, 11 April, 2783 (Court Martial statement)

Headquarters Area, SLDF Taskforce Elbar One...

"...heavy casualties, but the fort was taken." Lt. Colonel James Qua of the 171st was acting liaison, and filling in for Colonel Ngo.

"Heavy Casualties? Jesus, man-you lost seven hundred combat effectives!" Colonel Sam Hallis of the 331st Division's strike regiment said.

"Heavy casualties." Qua shrugged, "Not as heavy as we took at Eagle's Nest. Over all, we're at around seventy percent, which makes it not bad." the Kowloonese officer's manner was formal, but his eyes were empty.

"What about reports of...um... what's with the stakes?" Major Jim Apone from the 7th asked, "I'm getting weird reports..."

"The stakes are not a problem." Qua said simply, "Redecorating."

Apone stared at Qua, and then looked around the table at the other officers at staff-call.

"Redecorating." he tossed a holo on the table among them. "You're impaling them."

"They got a fair hearing first." Qua said off-hand, "it's very popular with the locals." he added.

"You're Crucifying People!! sweet Jesus, man, you're going too far!" He was pale, and shaking with outrage.

Qua shrugged, "They deserve it. I suppose you're going to tell me it's wrong to train the local auxiliaries who've signed up using available materials too?" his tone remained absolutely conversational, and his expression was utterly neutral, as if he were commenting on the quality of morning chow.

"available materials?" Hallis asked.

"Available Materials. We've got something like six weeks to train them in, assuming everything stays positive in terms the timetable, and the Rimjobs don't pull something clever out of their asses." Qua said, "So...we're using what's available to train the locals who've signed on." He remained absolutely cold, "Given how they treated the folks who live here, there's been very little in terms of complaints about that."

"What are you doing?" Hallis asked, "What 'local materials'?"

"Captured equipment, enemy personnel, we've been careful to vet out the ones with useful information first, given the rate of enlistments, we're going to run out of targets pretty soon." Qua said.

"Targets?" Hallis pressed.

"Bayonet Practice, sir." Qua stated evenly, "It helps weed out the ones that will freeze up-the rest should perform adequately after they're distributed for tactical training with their units. One of the hardest things to overcome in training, is the natural inclination of a man NOT to kill another man. After the first time, we found that it becomes somewhat easier-once that taboo is overcome, the rest of the training regimen is somewhat simpler to implement." Qua leaned back, "And after what we found at Running Deer Mountain, the Rimjobs deserve it."

*After staff-call...*

Colonel Apone felt like he was in a nightmare-trapped in a nightmare. *Monsters...they've been turned into monsters!*

It wasn't so much the revelation of what the savages from Kowloon were doing-other units had shoot-on-sight orders for rim-worlds troopers who hadn't surrendered, and even the 7th Volunteers had a few cases of...vigorous interrogations...

It was the matter-of-fact, commenting-on-the-weather agreement by Lt. Colonel Qua on the subject of...

It was enough to make any good man sick-bad enough what the enemy was doing here, they've compounded it!

Crucifixion? Impalement? using human beings as bayonet practice?

The seeming unconcern by the 90th's man wasn't so bad-he'd heard about Them-and reports showed they were only shooting prisoners-a measure that, while a violation, wasn't up to the standards of...horror.

His staff-vehicle stopped at the CP for the 171st. Maybe I can talk some sense into Ngo...he tried to show the RimWorlders on his own planet some mercy...

Apone averted his eyes from the gasping, grisly 'gate decorations'-still in their uniforms, slowly suffocating in agony on the stakes.

He found Ngo in the back of a tracked vehicle-the Kowloonese officer had declined to take up residence inside the Mountain.

"Hey, Jim, nice weather." Ngo commented without looking up.

"Tranh, you've got to stop this." Apone said, "It won't bring them back."

Ngo looked up, "Is that what you think this is about?" he asked, "Bringing them back?" he gestured to a camp-stool chair.

"Isn't it?" Apone asked.

"Jim...nothing can un-do what they did here-I'm not that crazy...." he set aside a map-reader, and leaned forward, he shook out a no-smok, popped the end, and drew in on it. "We must make a friend of horror, Jim, horror, and moral terror, we have to make Horror our weapon, our companion, because it's with us whether we want it or not-and if we try too hard to resist it, it will overcome ALL of us...besides, this way some of the prisoners might actually live to see the end of the war-if I ease up, I'll have a million civilian-driven incidents of revenge, I'll end up having to put most of my men on MP details going after the people we're supposed to be helping." He gestured at the open door of the APC, "We go more extreme than they can conceive and maybe they won't be going after their neighbors for not being rounded up and used for slave-labor and spare parts."

"Politics?" Apone was even MORE horrified by the logic Colonel Ngo revealed, "You're...that's sick."

"Sooner or later, the locals will think so too-and they'll ask me to stop...and I will-when they ask me to." Ngo said, "When it's too horrible for them, when seeing it makes them sicker than remembering friends, sons, daughters, brothers, and uncles who were butchered out like a used car for spares...I'll stop then."

*Yesterday, Hills Pointe Industrial Complex*

The prisoners had been gathered off on the grasslands surrounding the factories. The graves they were digging were they had been told; for the SLDF and civilian casualties. That there were far too many holes in the ground for the thirteen dead Tigers and twenty six civilians was not lost on the RimWorlders.

I sat on Hussy's foot eating a bowl of ramen. Amazing how a fight makes you hungry, and horny. I snorted, that Lieutenant from the Andurien volunteers was cute, but I think she was too much into the "badass" image the 90th had.

*If she could see us now, I bet she wouldn't be so hot to trot.*

Major Singh and Sonny Matos had left me in charge of my lance and a short company of infantry. Captain Weintraub should have been pissed, but I was the Gunslinger. Anyway he knew I would let his troopers do their own thing and wouldn't make waves.

Gracie plopped down on Hussy's opposite claw and groaned laying her head on my shoulder. I looped my arm around her shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze. You'd think with our reputation and after the horrors we'd seen little would affect us but that's a load of shit.

When it stops getting to you, that's when you cease to be human.

"Hell of a day; huh?" Gracie asked.

"Yup, how's it going with the turtles?" I asked using the Tiger term for civilians.

"Doc Wynndham, you know the new girl from the Magestry?" I nodded; we'd picked up a lot of volunteers recently. "She's got them calm for now; she's not too thrilled about the arrangements for the prisoners."

I nodded, seems like an eternity ago when I joined up neither would I. There was no emotion in it though, no righteous fury. The RimJobs were guilty; no court would bring any measure of closure greater than a bullet to the back of the head.

A familiar voice cut through the background noise; "Lieutenant Gilmour, a word please?"

Damn, somebody upstairs must hate me.

Colm McKinney, one of Hollis' aides strode up with a sandy haired officer a full bird Colonel. Not one of ours though, Andurien. Colonel James Apone; then boss of the 7th Volunteers. I stood and nodded to them.

"Lieutenant, your salute..." McKinney started but the Andurien officer stopped him.

"At ease Captain, were in a war zone and I don't feel like making myself a target." Apone had an open friendly manner probably made him a popular leader. Still a squad of New York National Guard paused around us.

"Sirs; how may I be of assistance?" I asked.

"Orders from General Hollis, my troops will be relieving you here." He held out his pocketcomp and I fumbled at my belt to let him transmit the orders. Looking them over I looked up puzzled.

"Running Deer? Why are we going... The 171st declared the area secure."

"That's the problem Lieutenant, we've gotten some disturbing reports about what is going on there and Colonel Winters authorized me to borrow your lance to accompany my command lance and check it out."

The look in my eyes must have spoke wonders, because Apone chuckled. "No rest for the wicked...eh Lieutenant?"

"Yessir," I turned to the rest of my gang and gave the order to mount up.

In the background the snap crack of Terran Mausers and the outraged cries of the prisoners made both of our visitors jump.

Apone turned to me shocked; "Lieutenant what is the meaning of this!" He demanded eyes wide.

Tossing my empty plastic bowl away I shrugged and said simply;

"Pest Control."

Colonel James "Call me Jim" Apone watched the Terran officer climb the six meters to the cockpit of his crouched *Marauder*. Looking over at the stunned Captain McKinney he shared a glance before the Defense Force regular turned away swearing softly. Apone caught the end of it..."*Kerensky's Sledgehammers, should have known better...*"

As the men walked back to their BattleMechs the Andurien officer asked what McKinney meant. The slender young man looked away for a moment then began to tell the tale. The retreat from New Vandenberg. The 90th going to ground and waiting. The brutal series of assassinations and campaign of terror that had shattered an entire rebel division. While the capture of over twenty members of the Rim Worlds Republican Army shed light on how Amaris had planned his coup. There were darker rumors. A half dozen Star League bureaucrats had been shot as spies with little or no documentation.

While no action had ever resulted from the battle, ever since then the Black Tigers of New Vandenberg had gotten the roughest assignments, cracked some of the toughest nuts on the long bloody path to Terra. Every dark and questionable mission in Army Group Davion's theatre of operations was considered Tiger Territory.

As the Tiger Gunslinger's Lance fell in step with his own troops Apone could see the Tigers' infantry dumping bodies into the waiting holes. He shook his head sadly, this madness needs to end.

### *Running Deer Mountain, Same Day...*

Inside my guts were in turmoil, threatening to spill out the noodles I'd just eaten. Outwardly I kept a mask of calm on my face. Impalement is not a pretty sight nor is easy on the nose. Across from me one of the not quite dead men slid down a little on the wooden shaft releasing yet another waft of fecal matter and blood over the tooth pick forest.

Apone saw the battle armored figure of Dido Moran and started towards her. Seeing the look on his face I cut him off waving her over. From the other side of the field I saw Lanh, the liaison officer assigned to us. The boy's eyes were dead and cold and he looked over the bloody field with satisfaction.

Dido snapped to attention and raised her visor. Her own face was haunted, dark rings around her eyes. Her armor was spattered with blood, dirt and other less identifiable substances.

"Report Sergeant", directing her attention to me rather than the other officers; this was not the time or the place for their sensibilities.

"Colonel Tranh's orders, an example needed to be made. B you didn't see, see what those miserable bastards did in there. So many people...reduced to *fucking parts*."

She staggered and I reached out, hoping she wouldn't fall on me. Dido's tough as nails, but we all have our limits

I understood at least in theory, nothing could stop an enemy or even one's own people from committing atrocities, no law held out for ever. But the justice on Elbar, that at least would make people think.

For a while anyway...nothing lasts forever.

"Lieutenant...LIEUTENANT!" Colonel Apone growled.

"Sir?" I looked up.

"Round up your lance we must stop this!" Apone gestured around.

Looking over the macabre forest, laid out in military precision I turned back to the Andurien officer.

“Nothing to stop, Colonel, it’s already done.”

The chill in my voice silenced both men, and they silently walked away.

*Alex; Today, 3rd Battalion (The Stalking Tigers) on approach; Last known position 3rd Brigade (Mixed) 89th Amaris Schutzstaffel Arbeiten Division...*

Captain Alex Winter watched the sensor readings being relayed by Puma Company’s *Mongoose*s and *Talons*. The events of the past week lay heavily on the young officer. His best friend, Lieutenant Bruce Gilmour, had always called him the sensitive one.

*Guess that’s true, but damn it we can’t fall into the trap of becoming like the RimJobs, if we do we’ve lost. B has got to get that, he’s the damn Gunslinger.*

Even more so than in standard Star League commands, in Terran units the Gunslinger was the soul of the unit. His or her voice spoke with authority on matters of Regimental Honor and Conduct. That Don Roberto had handpicked Bruce to succeed him had surprised Alex. His friend’s devil may care attitude had diminished since the death of his friend and lover Rachel Miller on Acamar.

*But he’s still the craziest fur ball in the whole bunch. And Don Roberto’s death hurts him almost as bad as Rae’s had. But if Bruce is our heart and soul what does that make us.*

A fleeting red blip caught his attention and he smiled with an almost savage relief. The coming fight would provide some relief from the issues plaguing Alex. Bringing *Elmo*, his powerful alter ego to its full sixty five kph speed he called out orders. Lal Singh, the Stalkers battalion commander brought the rest of the unit in line with the two battalions of Kurita volunteers comprising Isokoru Satoh’s *Ryukaze*.

As the red blip resolved into a heavy mixed company, Alex couldn’t help thinking; *Screw what the rest of the Defense Force thinks, this is who we are;*

*Predators.*

*Bruce...*

Major Singh had gone down, his ‘Mech riddled with fire. That was the thing unleashed the beast. I would carry that moment with me for the rest of my life.

The RimJobs hammered back at us after their initial shock, their armor and infantry working with their ‘Mechs to present a wall of fire. I isolated a Rhino Assault Tank and cored it with both Magna Hellstars. Something broke inside the blue and grey machine and it shuddered to a halt. As our assault closed in under the missile boats minimum range the tank shut down in surrender.

*The snap crack of Terran Mausers and the outraged cries of the prisoners made both of our visitors jump.*

It was then Gracie shot a particle stream into the hole my fire had created. I’d moved on to engage an aqua colored *Archer*, lashing it with more particle fire when the tank brewed up. The coldness of the act shouldn’t have bothered me but it did.

*"Pest Control." James Apone's shocked face rose in my mind.*

I lashed more particle fire at the fire support 'Mech carving into its legs capitalizing on damage already done. Seeing the weakness in the RimJobs' motive assembly I rode out a swarm of anti armor rockets that stripped armor from all over Hussy's frame.

*One of the not quite dead men slid down a little on the wooden shaft releasing yet another waft of fecal matter and blood over the tooth pick forest.*

Shifting slightly in the linear frame that controlled the big *Marauder* I pulled into the gauss trigger. The chunk of ferrous metal snapped the *Archer's* shin. The Amaris machine slammed into the ground, its pilot shaken.

*"Nothing to stop, Colonel, it's already done."* The coldness I felt yesterday caught me like a jagged claw.

All around us the Amaris troops were falling the brutality of our assault had overcome their initial counterattack vicious as it was. We were taking casualties as well, instead of the cold calculating and unrelenting attack we were known and feared for; our blood was up. Rage was taking over.

*Don Roberto lay in the MASH ward on New Home. His sickly pallor clutched at my throat. My mentor and friend knew he was done and was accepting it better than I was. Looking at me he chuckled.*

*"Hell kid, you know damn well life is fatal in all known cases." He coughed then and wiped the pink froth from his lips. "Have something for you..." Beckoning me closer he pinned something to my collar. A pair of crossed white handled pistols. I tried to protest but the Don cut me off.*

*"Told Sam already, there will be a vote, it won't mean crap, you're my successor." He grabbed my hand and looked me in the eye.*

*"You need to listen to me, B, this war, it's gonna eat up the Tigers if you let it, You're the Gunslinger now, they'll look to you for their conscience, for their Honor...Don't let them become the New Vandenberg lie..."*

*Don Roberto Julio deVega y Harrington lost consciousness then.*

*He died two days later.*

Spotting an *Atlas* that had to be the Amaris commander, it was then I made a decision.

"Gracie, 'Rat, Jack arrow point target AS7-D target to disable."

*"Disable...Loot are you nuts!"* Gracie's voice was almost feral.

"Execute your orders Gracie, DO IT NOW!" My howl had the desired effect, Gracie's discipline kicked in and she opened up with deadly accurate ranged fire at the big assault 'Mech. 'Rat and Jack Benning joined in their fire staggering the *Atlas*.

Pushing *Hussy* past her safe operating speed I closed the distance shouldering a *Griffin* out of the way and vaulting a Manticore heavy tank, my charge surprising them and their fire went wide.

*"B, what the hell are you doing!"* Alex called out furiously.

“Ending this, Al just back my play.” I spat back as the *Atlas* slammed a stream of autocannon fire into my poor girl’s armor plate. Reaching the right point I launched my seventy five ton monster into the air. At top speed you can get a good fifteen or twenty meters straight forward from a ‘Mech in top condition. Not much, nothing like jump jets but it was enough.

The *Atlas*, stricken from the fire it had received from my lance mates wasn’t up to the punishment dealt from Hussy’s charge and it went down. Kicking down I snapped off the heavy barrel of the Deathgiver cannon. Before anyone could do anything else I pointed my right arm at the Amaris machine’s skull like head. At this range I couldn’t miss.

I was a Tiger, I would do what needed to be done.

Alex...

*“Amaris Commander, order your troops to cease fire and surrender or you will be destroyed.”* Alex couldn’t believe his ears, what the hell was Bruce doing?

*“You just kill us any way...”* The shaky voice of the Amaris commander came over the open channel.

*“I give you my word as an officer of the Star League Defense Force and as the Regimental Gunslinger of the 90th Heavy Assault. You will be treated according to the Ares Conventions as Prisoners of War.”* Bruce’s voice rang out.

*“What the fuck...”* Gracie Liu growled, *“Boss we’re here to kill them, not coddle them.”*

*“No Gracie, we are here to defeat them, and we have...we’ve made our point now let’s get back to the business of winning this war.”*

The shooting on both sides had petered out as every eye was drawn to the exchange.

Mitch Sovino, one of Alex’s troopers strode his *Bombardier* forward to face the blackened and burned *Hussy*.

*“Gunslinger or not, they’re RimJobs, vermin, they’re not even...”* Mitch dropped off uncertainly.

*“...Human, Mitch, that was the mistake they made, People will talk about Elbar for decades, it’s done, enough already.”* Bruce cut in. The RimJobs were quiet, but that wouldn’t last, Al walked past Mitch and turned to look over the battlefield.

*“It’ll never stick Bruce!”* Gracie yelled.

*“Gracie, it’ll stick or I’ll make it stick, you shitheads selected me to carry our honor, so if any of you wants to challenge me, now’s the fuckin’ time...”*

“B’s right, I’ll back him.” Alex heard himself say.

*“As will I.”* The calm voice that came from the *Ryukaze Dragon* striding across the ground. Chu-sa Isokoru Satoh came to stand up next to *Hussy*. *“As I am the senior officer on the scene, that about settles it.”*

The Amaris commander came on line then.

*“Alright Lieutenant, we surrender, All units 3rd Brigade...it’s over, lay down your arms and dismount your vehicles.”*

And as Alex watched in amazement, they all did.

*Okay, maybe Don Roberto knew what he was doing after all.*

*35 Kilometers N. NE of Running Deer Mountain...*

Major Ilse Strange of the Elbar Imperial Militia sidestepped her Warhammer as the treeline exploded with missile and autocannon fire from what Intelligence insisted was a light infantry formation with very minor 'mech support.

She raked the treeline without a better target than the smoke-trails from the SRM fire to aid her-someone's running ECM! Her fellows were doing the same.

In the snow-blur of her sensors, she caught a glimpse...

2nd Battalion, Companys D and F, 171st Kowloon Volunteers...

Captain Dinh Trac watched as the Quisling Militia unit hit the trigger line. When they did, he reached over, and flipped a switch, and the Guardian ECM on-loan from the 331st spun up to full life, blinding the sensors of the Rimjob-quislings' BattleMechs, and jamming their comms to their infantry vehicles and tank support.

The weapons platoons tripped their rockets, and opened fire with the towed antitank cannons-drawing the attention of the Rimjob outfit downward, while the signal went to Charlie Battery.

The Quislings still had the advantage in armour, and if they closed the gap...

The first wave of artillery shot dropped along the correct vectors-and he could see the Quislings' armoured carriers-open topped half-track vehicles common throughout known space, erupting as bomblets dropped down among them.

The enemy's 'mechs were disordered at first-but they got their act together quick- forming a flying-W with the remaining tanks, they drove forward into the steel rain, firing with each step.

Combat distances closed in seconds, and the Kowloonese units found themselves at point-blank range as the rimjobs tried to find the source of the jamming.

Dinh left the vehicle, as a warhammer crested the ridge at a run-plowing into trees, mines, and objects.

He fired his grapple at the machine's hip-joint using eyeball windage and leading the target.

It yanked him from his feet, along with six other members of the Headquarters section.

Above him, shell casings from the Whammy's machine-guns rained down as the zip-line hauled him upward. Treelimbs battered him.

Major Strange

She bulldogged through the treeline, up the ridge, and into a clearing, firing her antipersonnel machine-guns and blazing away with her torso-mount lasers, while looking for a target for the PPC's.

Sensors indicated several objects-of-drag had suddenly appeared on her 'mech. External cam feeds showed men, on fast-ropes, coming up. This is new... She'd heard stories about elite Star League infantry that were trained to take down 'mechs, and rumours about what happened at Eagle's Nest and Kowloon...

she stepped down hard on her control pedals, turning violently to dislodge them, and flailed with her arms. what did the Advisors say?... she dropped the 'mech to the ground and began rolling-thrash-and-bash, when there's no water, thrash-and bash...

Twenty minutes later...

Lt. Truk Nghien looked over the tags. "Captain Trac, how much of him is left?" he asked.

"Not a lot-the 'mech's legs are covered in most of him, we found these and...enough of him to be pretty sure it's him, sir." Corporal Phung Li said, "the quisling Pilot's over there." he gestured.

"Okay, they sent a mixed battalion, and we've got a platoon left-I think we can safely say the Rimjobs are pissed, and coming." Truk said.

"What about the Quisling Prisoners?" Li asked.

"We're getting a lot of static from the allied units." Nghien said, "I'd as soon not kill these-at least, not until they've been vetted. Contact SLDF command and get a team of MP's from the Seventh to come fetch 'em-maybe Apone's people can use the experience of handling prisoners to ease their achy consciences."

"Right Sir...who've we got left speaks english?" the Corporal asked.

" I don't have a clue-the Whammy went right through headquarters platoon..."

October 27, 2776, FOB Wilma, SLDF Landing zone Two...

"You've got a unit that's gone way off the reservation, General, care to explain that?" Aleksandr Kerensky looked decidedly grim, "Thus turning what should've been a simple liberation op into a bloodbath."

"Sir, all due respects, have you seen what they found? what we found?" Hollis asked, "The bloodbath was already here-the Ninetieth is just draining the tub."

"I'm not talking about the ninetieth and you \*\*\*\*\* well know it, I'm talking about your savage little auxiliaries." Kerensky said, "I'm really starting to regret letting Gordon recruit them. First that \*\*\*\*\* on Eagle's Nest, now they're committing atrocities for revenge."

"It's under control sir." Hollis said, "there haven't been any more impalements or crucifixions since the initial batch."

Kerensky shrugged, "Get your savages under control, General Hollis, get them under control before I get to Elbar with the second-wave forces. I don't care if you have to arrest everyone in the

171st, you're going to put an end to that insanity before it spreads, you understand? I will not have that kind of action going on under Star League colours."

"Did you read the data we uploaded, or not?" Hollis suddenly felt too angry to be deferential. Apone's to blame for this...

"My staff's still sifting it." Kerensky said.

"Talk to DeChevalier, then, sir, he's already digested it." Hollis almost snarled.

"You're edging on insubordination there, Hollis." the supreme commander said.

"There's remedials for that, Sir-a whole stack of regulations to deal with that. There's no reg to deal with what we found here." Hollis didn't bark, or snarl, but his eyes smouldered into the two-way's vid pickup. "Either you didn't see it, or you don't believe it, it's real, Sir-over forty million people were carved up for spare parts-and that's just in the files we've finished sifting. Not even mentioning the ones that were worked to death, starved to death, used for experimentation, target practice, and just outright murdered...how the hell do you even begin to work out a punishment for that, sir? Even figure out what charges? The 'Loonies executed forty-three Rim-Worlds officers using inhumane means, and they've probably killed another five hundred Rimjob prisoners in ways that are probably not the most humane. You tell me, from ninety lights out, over HPG that you're more concerned about those than about millions of civilians who weren't just killed as collateral damage, but systematically murdered in the most gruesome, horrific, evil way possible?" Hollis scowled, "You need to get your \*\*\*\*\* priorities in order, sir."

"General Hollis, you're relieved, inform the commander of the Ninetieth that he is now task-force C.O. for Elbar, and report to your quarters until I arrive." Kerensky said.

"Aye aye, sir."

Sam; 90th Heavy Assault Cantonment...

"Understood General Hollis, please report to FORCOM-ELBAR we'll need you in strategies and planning..." Samuel Winter said tiredly

"Colonel, General Kerensky has relived me of command..." Hollis interjected.

"And as Operational Commander I have the authority to use any and all assets at my disposal to complete our wave one objectives, and your experience and knowledge of our mission are too important to be wasted. Do I make myself clear?" Sam smiled to take the edge off of the force of his words. The foot high holographic image of General Hollis chuckled and nodded.

"Crystal clear, Colonel."

"Good if the big man wants to act like a bureaucrat, let him, we'll win this thing in a way we can live with." Sam said fixing the General with his gaze.

"From your lips to God's ears, Sam." Hollis smiled back.

"Carry on then." Signing off Samuel Winter leaned back against the concrete support column in the school cafeteria that the 90th was using as a command center. Looking around at the various aging and peeling posters on nutrition, school spirit and one for a long ago school formal he closed his eyes and shook his head.

Where were the children who'd eaten here, laughed and joked and obsessed about dates? Sam was afraid he knew the answer for far too many of them. Looking across at Majors Isokoru Satoh and Justine Sinclair he made a decision.

"Ko, you've got the command here, Justine back him up." The commander of the Ryukaze Volunteer Regiment looked surprised, but Justine the newly promoted combat commander of the Hungry Tigers just nodded. Before the Kuritan officer could speak, Sam explained.

"With Dan Garrett sidelined with neurofeedback damage and Chris busted up from that engagement with the 89th SSA two days ago, you're the senior Tiger."

"But I am not..." Isokoru started.

"After New Home; the hell you aren't; everybody respects you, the gang will take orders from you. Justine and Bruce will help. Keep pressure on the SSA and use the plan as a guideline." Turning to a waiting aide he gave an order moving the staff meeting up two days.

As the Tiger's command center bustled with activity, Sam watched for a moment then turned and headed for his BattleMech.

19th Amaris Dragoons Headquarters...

"Colonel Bronson, this just in from the ELINT section." Captain Jeffery Collingsworth referred to the Dragoons electronic intelligence section.

"More bad news?" Kevin Bronson the 19th's commander said, his Rim drawl more pronounced than his aide's.

"Maybe not, sir. We think we've broken the 7th Andurien's ciphers, here..." handing over the datapad he stepped back and summarized the information.

"There has been a command shake up in the Star League forces; Hollis has been relieved of duty. The new commander is the 90th's top dog, Samuel Winter." Bronson looked up worried.

"Yeah, sir I know...but" Collingsworth held up his hand grinning, "wait there's more; the Butcher of New Vandenburg has moved up a staff meeting to Wednesday and..." Collingsworth pointed to the end of the intercept; "We know where."

"How sure are the computer geeks about this?" Bronson looked at his aide; keeping his hopes carefully shielded. After all it wouldn't be the first time information like this would be used to lay a trap.

"Pretty sure, boss the 7th Volunteers don't have anywhere near the technical sophistication of the Defense Force or the Terran troops."

"Okay, call in Major VanZandt's Makos; this is right up their alley."

HHC, 171st Volunteers, 22 KM north of Running Deer mountain, October 27...

Sgt. Thanh hated this part, as he and SFC Noi held the Colonel down, and forced the injector against his rock-hard, spasming neck.

hhhsttt! The antiseizure meds were cut with the most powerful painkiller known to man (and the most addictive, dangerous, and illegal narcotic known to the Terran Hegemony.)

"How long?" Noi asked.

"Hopefully a few minutes." Thanh said, "He's been shorting his doses, so I don't know how far he's progressed...he's had to-someone intercepted the last shipment."

"Any ideas who or where?" Noi asked.

"Yeah...one of the supply pukes with 331 mentioned that a medical package was impounded by some of the MP's with the Seventh, the Colonel hasn't let us make a supply raid to get it back." Thanh said, "Though he should...we need his brain working and able, not wrapped up in chronic agonies and occasional seizures."

"I'll get Linklater and a couple of the kids on it, then-just don't tell him what we done until we've got the meds back." Noi said quietly.

"NO" Tranh Truk Ngo managed, with difficulty, to sit up in the exhaustion after this latest seizure. "No, if you do it, you'll end up putting your men at risk of charges for drug-trafficking." he said, "Further, that means someone has to explain why you did it, which then puts a spotlight on the Unit, and I can't let go until Jimmy Qua's back from being patched together after that \*\*\*\*\* last week. I'll \*\*\*\*\* DEAL with the pain, and the seizures, until I've got someone to replace me, you don't go putting MY men at risk for MY problems."

Trauma ward, SLDF 1144th MASH...

"...imagine what the universe would've been like, if, after beaiting the everloving snot out of the Reds, Washington turned up as dying of a fatal disease?" Major James Qua commented idly.

"Who's sick?" Didi Moran asked the Kowloonese S-3.

"Colonel Ngo. He's stage one Cholmann's, and late into it." Qua murmured, "It's an open secret in the unit that teh C.O.'s not healthy, but there's only a few on the Command staff that know how not-healthy he is."

"Cholmann's?" Didi asked, "what's that?"

"Terminal, degenerative, he's either going to get shot, or he's going to die in agony-they can't even make him comfortable when he hits stage three-hell, we can't do much more than dope him to the gills now..." Qua sighed, "Need him, though...man's magic, wihtout him, no leaders...who can sit on the feuds or keep the men in line... hard to help him keep it secret..."

Tuesday...

Sam Winters wasn't real happy. "General Hollis, did you know there's a drug problem?" he asked.

Hollis looked up from the terrain map. "Drug problem, Sir?" he asked.

"Apone's people just came back with test results on a suspicious package they picked up on the Medical shipment-it's Neuroin, about nine Kilos of it-street value alone's about six hundred thousand Star League Dollars."

"Oh. Shipment for the 171st, right?" Hollis asked, "I'll go secure it-"

Sam wasn't buying it-"You know about this?" he asked.

"Colonel, let's take a walk, this is classified." Hollis said, scooping up his field jacket and heading for the door.

They went outside. "Talk." Sam said.

"Colonel Ngo must be further along than he told us." Hollis said, "If he's already using Neuroin to control the pain."

"Pain-what the hell is going on?" Sam demanded.

"Tranh Truk Ngo's a dying man, Colonel Winters, and yeah, I know about the drugs- Colonel Ngo has a...call it a birth defect, it's commonly called Cholmann's Syndrome, he doesn't know that we know." Hollis said quietly.

"Cholmann's.. syndrome-what is it?" Sam asked.

"Means he's going to die in a species of agony that makes what he did to those Rim-Worlder officers look like a mercy shot." Hollis said, "and nobody can do anything to stop it short of killing him. In the short term, the pain can be controlled using drugs, but they eventually lose effectiveness. When we found out, he was using Coupron."

"Coupron? that's..." Sam paused, "Coupron's strong stuff-they use it for cancer cases..."

"Yeah. If he's using Neuroin, things must've gotten a lot worse." Hollis said, "If it gets too far around, we'll have to bounce him back to civvie-street."

"Brief me." Sam said, "What did I inherit, and why're you covering for him?"

"Tranh Truk Ngo led the Kowloonese uprising against the Rim Worlds back in sixty-nine, you know what that means? it means he's their \*\*\*\*\* hero, James McKenna, George Washington, you tracking? His soldiers follow orders because HE follows orders. They're still bitter about Dinh Diep."

"That's...that's the city that Chivington blew up in '29, right?" Winters asked.

"That's the one." Hollis said, "In '29 the SLDF was used to keep the Amaris boot on their necks, and they haven't forgotten that...Everyone else, the Seventh, the other Volunteer and rallier units, are with us because they believe in the Star League, the 171 is with us for one reason-they want to punish their old oppressors-they want revenge. Tranh keeps them from going too far off the reservation." here Hollis stopped, shook out a cigarette, and lit it, "SO, yeah, I'm covering for the little bastard, and I let him get away with shit I wouldn't let my own men get away with-and now, you do to. Tranh's a rarity, he isn't just in this for Rimjob blood."

Hollis took a deep drag on the smoke, "He's in this to mend fences, and they'll follow him, so we keep him functioning so that they WILL follow orders."

SAS Team room...

"...still pissed about Dinh Diep, at least, Lanh thinks they are-Ngo keeps the lid on it and the men follow him, if he's outed, or he drops down too far sick, we are going to get stuck cleaning up the blood." Didi said.

"Let me get this straight- the guy's got a frakkin' Terminal Illness, one that the docs in the Hegemony still haven't figured out how to beat-and he's commanding an overstrength Regiment, of vengeful psychos?" Sally Leonards was 'The New Guy' on the team-a replacement brought in prior to the Elbar Mission launching. "What's the problem with letting them run loose?"

"You saw the 'toothpick forest', right?" Didi said, "Well... I found out it's not the first time for the 'Loonies, not one bit-when they threw off the Rimjobs on Kowloon, rioters hunted down whole families before Colonel Ngo put a stop to it..some of them grumble about him doing that, but they obey-he's like...like an icon, he's their James McKenna, if you catch the idea."

One of the other SAS spoke up, "So we tell the old man, right? he can get it released..."

Didi shook her head, "If we tell OUR Colonel, he's going to be duty-bound to put Ngo on patient status and ship him out. We tell Bruce, maybe... better if it stays under the radar."

"Shouldn't be too tough-the Seventh's MP's aren't that good, they're eager, and they're good troops-just not all that professional, we can get in and out with the goods and they won't know anything happened, just their evidence locker's light. Tough part'll be sneaking the shit into the 171's AO and getting it into the right hands without tripping some of the hotwires running around there." Grimsby commented, "The little \*\*\*\*\* are psycho, but they're damn good about perimeter and site security-probably from generations of playing blood-tag with counter-insurgency units."

"I think I can arrange the hand-off." Didi said, "Major Qua's decided he can get back to the unit."

"I thought he was supposed to be laid up for another three weeks?" Grimsby asked, "I mean, he was \*\*\*\*\*' hamburger when I carried him in."

"He's supposed to be-he thinks he's fit." Didi replied, "Doesn't make it so, but it's not worth posting a guard to keep him in bed, so..." Didi took another look at the map.

"Why do I get the feeling we're doing something batshit insane for someone who's batshit insane, to prevent insanity from overtaking everyone?" Leonards asked. "There's a kind of...poetry to it."

HHC 171st Volunteers...

"...come." Colonel Ngo wasn't feeling good, but he wasn't on the floor, groaning, and he wasn't laid out on the desk, too exhausted to stand. a good day. he mused.

The tent-flap moved, and a small, gray-haired lady stepped in.

"Colonel?" she asked.

"That's me, Mrs. Meier, My aide told me you have a request?" He asked.

"y-yes, Colonel... It is god's work you're doing, fighting the occupiers, but...well, some of your actions-" she tried to look up, but he could feel her fear.

He stood up, and walked up to her, "Look at me." he said, "Don't be afraid, I won't hurt you."

She glanced at the floor next to his desk, then, slowly, she raised her eyes.

"You want me to stop?" he asked, "Stop the torture, the crucifixions, the impalement?" he asked her gently, "you want me to stop being a monster?"

She nodded.

"Then I will." he said, "I will stop being a monster for you. Tell the others-the ones that were too afraid to come here, that I will put a stop to it."

"God bless you." she said.

"God blesses His people, Mrs. Meier, he blesses the innocent, and he blesses the good-He will have nothing to do with the likes of me- it isn't possible for me to be redeemed-I would have to love Him, and I don't-I was born Damned, and that's how I will die, but I won't drag anyone down with me if I can stop it." He smiled at her, trying to hide the stabbing pain behind his eyes, "Tell them that I will do as you have asked. No more atrocity."

She left, confused.

Tranh watched her go. "Sargeant Major, pass the word- Regulation 2251A is back in force-we handle any further POW's under Ares Conventions, and make it stick." He said.

Sgt. Major Thanh Li nodded, "Sir, I think that's a great idea." he said.

Colonel Ngo looked over at the man, "Then get your ass moving, S'maj, those orders won't communicate themselves."

After Thanh left, the ache jumped up a notch, and he smelled...cinnamon. oh shit.

Colonel Tranh Truk Ngo barely made it into the 'safe' position before the seizures took over-and with them, the agony...*They asked me to stop!* the triumph of the thought held back his despair...

Redstone Bluff, Afrasia Continent, Elbar, 51 KM north-northeast of Running Deer Mountain, 0330 hours, Wednesday...

The Rim-Worlders had the area sown deep with vibrabombs and mass-sensors, and crisscrossed with trench lines. With the artillery pre-plotted to 'pot' anything that managed to avoid being ensnared by the minefields, it was the best defended point north of Running Deer Mountain.

The best part, of course, for Colonel Hugh L'Saunne, was that there weren't the penetrations of railways carrying civilians into the sequestered zone, and he didn't have to devote men to guarding/suppressing a civilian population that had been slated to be used for raw materials, slave labor, and test subjects.

He marched his way along the defense-line, pausing to watch as the Galahads and riflemen assigned to ADA duty engaged another enemy fighter sortie.

"We're holding the door closed on Peaceful Valley, boys. We'll only have to keep them bottled in a little longer." He'd said the words, but Colonel L'Saunne's gut told him that the promised reinforcements from the rest of the Empire weren't coming.

He parked his Orion at the Regimental CP and climbed down the kneeling 'mech's central shaft.

as soon as he got to the ground, he turned to an aide. "Report?"

"Second Battalion held off the 7th Volunteers at Goldstone Gorge, sir-they're asking for reinforcements, Third Battalion is deeply enmeshed in fighting the lead Assault company from the 331st Royals...and our perimeter reports all-quiet except at station nine."

"What's Station Nine reporting?" He asked, interested.

"They aren't, sir."

Station Nine...

L. Corporal Truk Cao Ky wiped his knife on the shirt of a Rimjob sentry, then signalled his team silently to finish what they were doing.

Colonel Ngo ordered us to treat prisoners under Ares conventions...well, if we don't have prisoners...

The assault on the perimeter outpost had gone rather well-the Rimjobs here had been relatively lax-they'd missed the risk of un-armoured men filtering in with weapons that don't make any sound-it had been knife work.

"Cards?" Lieutenant Chu'an held out a hand. Truk handed the officer a deck of playing cards emblazoned with the Kowloon Republic's national flag, while the rest of the team arranged the Rimjob guardsmen in entertaining, if sometimes disgusting, poses.

"make sure they know who did this, and why."

The enemy would concentrate on this portion of the front-hopefully, enough to create an opening for one of the allied "Heavy" units.

Truk turned, and finished wiring in the timer. "Okay, sir, we've got...thirty minutes to be clear of the area before their minefields go off-they'll Have to put a stopper here?"

"That's the plan." the LT said, placing the last card in the mouth of the OP's commander. "Let's go, People!"

The Rimjobs had the same prejudices they'd always had-they left the river, too shallow to hide a 'mech, practically unguarded.

Alpha Company, Kowloon Coast Guard Marines, was headed deeper into enemy territory, and they were doing it with rubber "Innertube duck-hunter" floats.

HQ Task Force Elbar (90th SLDF Regiment...)

Lt. Commander Anh Cu'ong sipped tea in the orderly room, and waited for Colonel Winters to arrive. The Coast-Guard's mission here was to provide air and logistical support-but she'd brought a company of Marines along-And now, I have to explain that... she thought ruefully.

She hadn't had much experience dealing with the CO of the 90th. I hope he's more reasonable than Hollis was.

The chronometer on the wall clicked another minute gone.

"Ma'am, you could wait until morning..." the Duty Officer told her.

"I'll wait here." Anh said quietly, "Patience is...a strong suit with folks in my profession." she checked her wrist chrony, and imagined the spot on the map that Alpha would be right now. They should be back on the move-if everything went according to plan.

The only way to be certain, of course, would be to watch the northeast for a series of large explosions-the Marines were sent out under communications silence with the specific mission of creating a distraction on the front to relieve pressure on the line units at Goldstone and Ridge 36-Colonel Ngo's plan, her assets, but while she was confident that the Coast Guard would, as always, carry out the mission, she wasn't certain of it.

Next time, I'll tell him to use his damn Rangers for this kind of thing. she resolved silently-knowing full well she wouldn't tell him any such thing.

It was like waiting for an assay on a new Rock-either there would be something worth the fuel and time, or there would be an expensive bust.

0400, Wednesday Morning...

Colonel L'Saunne did not just hear it when 2.5 kilometers of minefields went off all at one time, he Felt it.

"What the-?" He tumbled out of his rack, hauled his pants and boots on without buckling, and rushed out. "Are we under Attack?" the CP of the Able Regiment of the 656th Rim Worlds Combination Division was still intact, though the ground-shocks had shaken some of the trucks, and his *Orion* had toppled over onto one of the porta-potties.

"Sir! Remember when I said that Perimeter Nine hadn't been reporting activity?" Major Olslew shouted, coming out of the CP.

"Yeah! What the \*\*\*\*\* was THAT??" L'Saunne demanded, "I told you to send someone out there."

"We got vid-feeds, sir..." they went back into the Command-Post vehicle. "Luckily, the EMP from the blasts wasn't strong enough to fry more than local systems..."

"EMP? WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT??" L'Saunne demanded again.

"The minefields along Section nine, sir,including EMP, Vibrabomb, and Command-det fields-we think. Seismic sensors for about fifteen, maybe twenty Klik radius are flatlined." Olslew answered, "We got vid-feed from the relief team sent out to nine...you're going to want to see this."

"Show me." L'Saunne had his 'calm' back, "And send a Battalion out there-if those fields are down, then the trench-lines and prepositioned fighting positions are trashed-we're wide open."

"Already on it, sir, I've dispatched First and Fourth Battalions to cover the area." Olslew said, as a technician brought up the imagery taken right before the blast.

everyone inside the bunker was dead. Everyone at their post was also dead. Someone had taken the time to pose some of the bodies in...disgusting positions. "Closeup on the Lieutenant." L'Saunne ordered. The Tech froze the video, and increased magnification.

Colonel L'Saunne slumped visibly. "Cancel all passes and all leaves, start sweeping waterways." he said, and turned to Olslew. "I should've known that They would be coming."

"Who, sir?" Olslew asked.

"You did your pre-war time at Outpost 23, and on Apollo, Olslew, I guess it's okay that you don't know about Kowloonese maritime terrorists." L'Saunne said, "I was garrison on that hell-pit for six months back in '61, one of their little 'games' was to sneak in and butcher a Militia or Police outpost, leave calling cards, then vanish up or down the river systems-we're going to have to chop resources to waterway control."

Colonel L'Saunne then sighed, "I guess, if the blast didn't wake him, I'm going to have to call General Beauregard..."

"...few armies in the modern day use bayonet training for more than simple aggression-conditioning. Fewer still consider issue of blades to be a priority, even among infantry forces. Aside from the Draconis Combine's use of Vibroblade Swords, most armies consider such training to be borderline irresponsible. Properly trained soldiers don't use knives in a gunfight..."

-General Dexter McKenna, Survey of Modern War and Weaponry, Penguin Interstellar books, 2633 A.D.

Training Cadre Area, Running Deer Mountain Control zone...

Moshe was fourteen. He was fourteen, an orphan, and now, he was a killer. The Rim-Worlder had begged him, but the drill instructor said, "Buttstroke!" and he'd driven the rifle butt into the trussed-up man's face, making a crunching noise that turned the pleas for mercy into wet, sobbing bubbles.

Strike, Parry...he'd beaten the man to a pulp, then finished him off with the blade.

That was a week ago.

Some of the recruits had refused-they'd been sent home. Moshe understood that they hadn't wanted to do this-to kill a man in cold blood...

Moshe felt nothing. He felt nothing, because he'd been shown his mother and father's name-on a list, of people who'd been 'selected' by tissue-types, carved up, and converted from the warm, loving parents he'd known his entire life, to stock-numbered organs stored in a dozen or more warehouses under Running Deer Mountain.

When word came down that 'the old man' had ordered all future and currently-alive enemy POW's spared, he'd only felt a faint sensation of annoyance.

Well, I'll just have to kill them before they can surrender. he'd decided.

Moshe's world was made of the Blade now.

I am the Bayonet.

Properly trained soldiers don't use knives in a gunfight..."

-General Dexter McKenna, Survey of Modern War and Weaponry, Penguin Interstellar books, 2633 A.D.

What crack was this guy smoking?... K-BAR, gun, rock, 'Mech it's all the same, you use whatever you've got at hand to kill the other guy.

-Lieutenant Bruce Gilmour, Gunslinger 90th Heavy Assault Regiment.

HQ Task Force Elbar (90th Heavy Assault SLDF Regiment...)

Sam walked into the orderly room at the High school retasked as the SLDF command post. He idly noticed the sign on the door proclaiming it s the teacher's lounge. A slender woman awaited him calmly sipping at a cup of tea. The duty officer brought him a cup of the Tiger's dwindling supply of Kona.

"Commander Cu'ong, I'm Colonel Winter." He held out his hand, waving off the woman's salute.

"Colonel" she replied coolly.

"Let's get too it, the 7th has registered the detonation of a large portion of the minefield fronting the 656th's perimeter, I'm assuming that's you?"

She nodded taking a breath, Sam smile inwardly knowing what she was expecting. He cut in before she could continue.

"Nice, just do me a favor, keep us in the loop, I've released the 171st to engage in harassment operations all over the front, but if we know where your people are we can provide support and exploit any opportunities they provide...how are your marines extracting?"

Bringing up the mission plan on her pocket comp, Ahn Cu'ong projected the map and mission plan in the air between them. She said a silent prayer that the 'Mech officer wouldn't try to make any alterations.

Tracing the Marines' path Sam nodded to himself.

"Alright here are the frequencies and authorization codes for Three Battery, 2005th Royal Support. Six Long Tom guns...If your people need help extracting give us yell, Lieutenant Beauchamp speaks Vietnamese so we won't have a language problem."

Ahn nodded slowly, a small smile growing on her face as the Terran Colonel stretched out his six foot two frame and yawned.

"Thank you sir, you okay?"

"Yeah, just playing fast and loose with the photon budget, " he grinned, "Just get your crew home safe, I've got a job for them down by the Mier River Delta after the 7th finishes up at Goldstone." Sam transmitted a mission plan to the Kowloonese naval officer.

Straightforward, simple, Gods of my Ancestors, these Tigers actually trust us... She looked up at the big Colonel with a grin.

"This Lieutenant Gilmour, your Gunslinger, he'll take orders from infantry?"

"B? Yeah no problem's there he was a scout with the New York National Guard before he ever touched a 'Mech."

"Then I don't see any problems here, Sir we're on it."

"Thank You Commander" An aide stepped through the door then and signaled Colonel Winter.

"Sir the senior officers are assembled for the Staff Meeting, you asked to be advised."

"Thank you corporal", Sam turned back to Ahn "Carry on Commander, with any luck we can finish this crap and secure Elbar before the brass gets here with the second wave."

Ahn chuckled, "Aye, aye sir."

Mess Hall, HQ Task Force Elbar...

Major Hiram Van Zandt nodded as the Leaguer cook handed him the list of foodstuffs for the Staff meeting. Looking around he stifled the urge to gut the cook and go rock and roll on the cafeteria.

Nobody above a Major here and Dom has the explosives in place, no point in ruining the op, still...

Pushing the cart past a long haired lieutenant with a eye patch, he smiled.

There's no way we can win here, but if this strike goes off...well maybe we can get off world. Make a run for Taurus or the Free Worlds League.

The Amaris Empire was finished, Hiram had no illusions there, but when you had the Mako officer's skill set and ample motivation. Well there were plenty of opportunities to make good. But first things first, cripple the Terries here on Elbar, before their second wave troops could arrive. In the resulting confusion anything was possible.

Anything at all...

Hiram's grin got a little wider.

Highway 28, 5 KM out...

"Where did it come from?" Colonel Ngo asked.

"Better not to ask, sir, just be damn glad it showed up." Major Jian "Jimmy" Qua said, "You'll be okay for a while?"

"Long enough." Colonel Ngo said, "I've double-dipped the antiseizure meds, and a muscle relaxer. We're too close to HQ to open that crate, just get it back to camp and under guard."

"What happens if you pitch during the meeting, sir?" Qua asked.

"That's a very interesting question, Major-just make sure things are sorted out, if I have to hand-off to my XO, or to the Coasties, they're going to need everything up-dated and current." Tranh said, "I mean everything."

The truck started up, and the Major headed back to the 171st AOR, while Colonel Ngo, driven by Sgt. Thanh, headed down to HHC 90th SLDF-now reflagged as HHC Task Force Elbar.

"If worse comes up, you sure they can handle it?" Thanh asked.

"I'm confident in Commander Cu'ong to handle the staff and Jimmy's a decent tactician-besides, Anh's probably the only human being in three hundred lights that most of the kids will follow as well as they do me." Ngo said, "She's got the hero-status, and if nothing else, I can pass the baton knowing she can handle the rougher side."

"She won't like having the double-duty." the NCO commented.

"So what? I didn't really want this job-it's just that we needed it to be done." Ngo said, "as things stand, Cu'ong's my choice for successor if I'm forced out, that and Jimmy, so they should between them be able to handle the crazier elements."

Staff Call, 0800 Hours, Wednesday...

"...someone robbed our Evidence room last night, and made off with nine kilograms of PanhaxlNeuroin." Sam Apone said with a scowl. "That's about twenty six thousand Star League Dollars in street value, after it's cut-or so my Provost tells me, and I think someone in the 171st did it."

"That's a serious accusation, Colonel." Tranh Truk Ngo replied, "What makes you think it was my people?"

"It was on a shipment of supplies mismarked, someone's using your supply system to move drugs, Colonel." Apone said, "You've got a drug-ring problem."

"Nine kilos...uncut?" Tranh asked.

"Uncut-there were also twenty seven liters of Sudoxin-which isn't a typical military drug." Apone added.

"Let me guess-an antiseizure med used for treating severe epileptic cases, it's also a muscle relaxant." the Kowloonese colonel said.

"Yeah...how'd you know that?" Apone asked.

"I put in the order for the Sudoxin." Tranh said, "It's useful for treating certain types of chemical exposure-seems to buffer KD-7 exposure cases until they can be brought into a proper facility for treatment. The Rimjobs like to use KD-7...a lot."

Nine Kilos? Tranh did the math-that's a lot more than just my use-maybe someone IS dealing... "At any rate, now that I'm made aware of it, I'll have to look into your accusations-maybe see if I can find your drugs."

"What are you going to do if you find out I'm right?" Apone asked.

"Probably hang the dealers, Colonel-we can't have rot in the regiment like that, and while gambling, intoxication, and whoring are all strong military vices, Neuroin Heads aren't good for much tactically, and dealers can make virtual slaves from junkies-I'd as soon not have that-if it turns out

I've got a ring of dealers, they'll be kicking air after their trial-and I'll have to put the junkies in some kind of rehab."

Apone motioned for one of the Stewards to come over and refill the coffee.

"Sir, is this-" Tranh gestured at the stewards, "Really necessary? I can get my own Coff-"

Colonel Apone, of the 7th Defenders of Andurien, moved like a rattlesnake, catching the 'steward' by the arm, as he shouted a warning. Someone hit Tranh and knocked him over, as Winters moved and the other officers drew sidearms or took cover.

The Mako team were pretty good-but they'd been 'had' by a small detail caught by the Leaguer, and now, instead of a nice quiet bombing, there was gunplay as the assassins tried to fight their way out of the room before the 'main course' went off.

Lance Corporal Li Nghien, Kowloon Coast Guard, had come as Commander Cu'ong's aide and assistant (read: Bodyguard and briefcase carrier). He saw the direction that the enemy operatives were shying from as they drew pistols-and the officers around him drew pistols.

He didn't think, he just rushed the breakfast cart, years of playing 'dirt league' rugby causing him to blunder in such a way that several officers were shoved to the ground, he made a capture-dive.

There's something a bit un-nerving, seeing a man jump onto a bomb, tackle it to the ground, and curl around it.

It's like the emergency action drill for stepping on a land-mine, \*(leap fifty feet in the air and spread out over the battlefield in a fine, pink mist...)

Li Nghien was suddenly all over everything in the room. Pieces of him were embedded in the walls, the ceiling, the broken windowpanes, the door...and the shattered furnishings.

one of his boots landed on the hood of Colonel Winters' staff-car-the foot inside had been rendered gelatin by the shock, but the boot itself was intact, still laced with the interlocking style that the Kowloonese Coast-Guard chose as a 'signature uniform element.'

One of his dog-tags embedded itself in the opposite direction-in the cheekbone of a junior staff-officer from the 90th who, miraculously, managed not to die from the shattering of his ribcage by the shockwave, or the shrapnel from the bomb and breakfast cart.

the boot, and the tag, were all that could be recovered of the Lance Corporal.

"...small units can accomplish things far out of proportion to their theoretical abilities. A defense that can hold off a division of 'mechs can be breached by seven guys with wire-cutters, if they're the right seven guys."

-Lt. Commander Anh Cu'ong, recorded training discussion with SLDF planners, 2778

2nd Platoon, Company A, 1st Coast Guard Marines...

The mud along this riverbank was the kind of thin, nasty muck that hides quicksand and sucks the boots right off a man's feet.

Therefore, it wasn't much of a surprise when the Rimjob patrol stuck to the firmed-up roadbed on top of the dike, instead of coming down to the water to look at the vegetation.

Corporal Duk Winn watched them as they waved electronic sensors and chattered about how shitty a detail it was, having to come out here in the smelly, organic rotten stinking river-lowland swamps to look for infiltrators.

The weapon of choice for Duk, and the others, is a tool designed and fabricated on Kowloon during the long struggle. Based on the design of a twentieth century weapon, the silent carbine fires a subsonic pistol round through nearly a meter of buffer and suppressor assemblies. The loudest sound it makes, is the firing pin contacting the primer, the trade off being that one needs to be within fifty meters to use it.

The rimjobs stopped almost directly parallel to Duk's squad, and waited for their vehicle-an Ignis to catch up in the cold air of early morning.

Patience is a virtue. The Tank rolled up, and the personnel hatch opened, the enemy soldiers clustered around the tank, warming their hands and bitching about the cold and the wet, and the mud.

The shots would be so easy, right now...

the enemy served their men coffee and some kind of baked sandwiches out of mermite cans, the enemy's leader (at this range, he could make out the tabs of a sub-officer) had a smoke with the two senior guys on the patrol by the rear of the track, while going over maps and instructions.

Then, he gave them the password for the next four hours.

Patience is a virtue...

the driver opened his hatch for some fresh air, and sat on the coaming, trading stimpaks and cards with the infantry squad.

The mist rolled up the lowland, cutting visibility unaided to thirty meters.

It was time.

water rippled, and the fireteam had their targets...

tic-tic-tic-tic-tic-tic. The officer went down, the driver's throat opened as a 200 gr. slug chopped his windpipe, the two NCO's spasmed.

Lian's fireteam, hidden by the fogs, had moved up onto the road, and announced their presence by lobbing a thermite-grenade into the open hatch of the tank, where it burned through into the driving compartment, and into the lines for the track's vehicle-grade flamers.

The enemy wasn't, at least, cold anymore.

tic tic tic tic tic tic tic

The machine-gunner and assistant gunner were next-trying to set up their squad-support gun, only now they had other things to worry about-like being shot in the face, neck, and hands.

Three more grenades from Lian's fireteam, then, from the bank above Duk's sniping position, the ratcheting zipper sound of the machine-gun, raking the burning vehicle, and the men trying to take cover beside it from the danger to their front, with 8mm bullets.

Duk stood up in the water, and opened the zipper pouch for the enemy radio. He turned it on, keyed into the net, and, using the morning's code, announced that they were under attack by a lance of Locust class battlemechs that had somehow gotten through the perimeter.

the the ammunition cooking off in the tank made a racket like a 'mechs machine-guns, and the occasional 'whoosh' of the tanks' SRM packs cooking off, lent additional credibility as he begged the enemy commander for assistance.

Duk dropped the radio into the water, with a scream that gurgled.

"Alright, lads, let's go-they're sending 'help' to deal with the 'battlemechs'-let's get moving to the rally point to tell the Ell-Tee the good news."

"..sometimes the best decision takes too long to make, so even a mediocre decision is better-if it's made quickly."

HHC, 171st Volunteers, 0845...

"...been an incident, we don't have the status on who survived and who died." Captain Vu set the report down. "Sir? I guess that unless Colonel Ngo survived the bombing..."

"We attack." Major James Qua said, "We stick to Colonel Ngo's plan, but we attack-the Rimjobs will assume that their decaptiation strike will cause the task force to be indecisive...so we attack, we attack NOW, and we hope the others don't lose their nerve if the worst is true." He paused, "if it isn't true, I think Colonel Winters will approve it, but in any case, we can't let the Rimjobs think they've knocked out our stuffing- cut frag-orders to all Battalions to execute movement to contact by noon, artillery and reserves are to hold at five kil'meters behind lead elements, our objective is a front running from the Orden River dam to Hill 129 and the rail tunnel junction at Bridegrove-I want those railheads in our hands by eighteen thirty, no later-Armour and Battlemech forces to lead off, with Mechanized infantry in support, Airmobile companies are to provide forward scouting and close-support to mechanized units ONLY-no haring off to pursue, we're playing this one by the book."

He paused, thinking furiously fast..."Oh, and tell whoever's in charge with the nine-oh that the one-seven-one's going on the offensive- make sure it's a cold hand-off, no emissions, they knew where the Staff meeting was, and about when, we don't need their crippled guys getting free info."

Headquarters Command Section, 7th Defenders of Andurien...

"...one-seventy-first has just gone hot!" Lt. Colonel Dwight Reasoner looked up, "What?"

"They're moving-they're attacking." Major Haskell said, "Sir, what do we do? The Colonel was in that blast at HQ 90th!"

"Well...we advance, Grover. We advance, and hope to hell that bomb didn't get our C.O., and that if it didn't, then that he won't want to skin me alive for changing the plan." Dumb sons of bitches are going to get themselves killed off, time to go rescue our allies...

"Shift Charlie Battalion four Kilometers left, and advance along ridgeline 17 to point Delta, get Bravo and Alpha running Flank, and assign all indirect fire tubes to company-grade nets, I'll get on the phone to Nine-Oh and tell 'em we're moving in support of the one-seven-one, so that they can assign someone to cover the protective line at objective Gold."

"Yes Sir!"

HQ area, Task Force Elbar...

Typically, after a decapitation strike or assassination, it's hell getting units to coordinate anything more than a static defense-htis was General Hollis' experience.

The TOC (tactical operations centre) wasn't showing that at all, as a runner from the 171st informed everyone that the Volunteers would be attacking now, and that they hoped the rest of the task-force was ready to back them up.

Five minutes later, the land-line to the 7th's command post rang, informing Headquarters TF Elbar that the 7th was abandoning the siege at Goldstone, and moving to support the offensive.

This probably would have been a shock to any unit other than the Tigers. "What's the word on the casualties?" Hollis asked.

"Colonel Winters has some bruises, and he's going to be hearing bells for a while, Colonel Ngo..well, he's not so good." Lt. Abercrombie was assigned to work with Hollis in the TF headquarters' S-3 office. "They're trying to find a sedative that works now."

"Excuse me?" Hollis asked.

"He's in some kind of...seizure state, sir. Doc says he's in a lot of pain, said some other choice things too. Tone I got is he might not make it-something about letting a terminally ill man play soldier, sir." Abercrombie reported, adding "Commander Cu'ong's already being looked at by her own docs, and Colonel Apone's...sir, he died."

"Bomb?" Hollis asked.

"Gunshot-one of the assassins popped him in the gut-the bomb just finished the job..sir." Abercrombie said.

"Get a runner to go tell Apone's people that he's not coming back to them, then...after they've taken their objectives."

"Yes, sir." Abercrombie turned and hurried away. Hollis turned to one of the Com-Techs, "Tell the Three-thirty-one to move lateral and cover the Goldstone objective with First and Second Battalions, Third battalion, the artillery, and their vehicle forces are to move in to backstop the Seventh and the one-seven-one as they advance. Pass warning orders to the forward elements of the ninetieth to stand by for orders and be ready to move in at flank-but stand by until Colonel Winters is in here or out there giving orders himself. Let 'm know their boss-man's not dead or even real crippled."

Bruce; in the field...

*"Alright Didi, just what the hell was that crap you stuffed in Hussy's cockpit?" I'd asked.*

*Dido Moran looked away a smirk on her face.*

*"Don't sweat it B, 'twas nothing...let's just call it a favor, okay?"*

*I opened my mouth to reply when a loud flat bang sounded from the school. A cloud of smoke and debris billowed over the roof of the corner store we had just come out of. Without a second glance we ran towards the headquarters of the 90th Heavy Assault Regiment.*

Hussy's powerful frame surged forward into the 69th Amaris Dragoons' repair and resupply area. My rage was channeled into one tightly focused thought.

*Kill them all.*

The Mako attack had gutted our command structure and good friends of mine lay dead and crippled. Snarling, I dodged a line of tracer fire from an Orion in the blue and grey of the Dragoons. *I really have no time for this, I thought, it's your commanders I'm after.*

Seeing what lay behind him I triggered one of Hussy's Magna Hellstars. The whip sliced past the RimJob a few tendrils scoring armor on his left leg. The J-37 prime mover half buried in rubble went up with its cargo of 80mm short range missiles.

At least half were inferno rounds. The jelled gasoline bathed the Amaris heavy even as armor piercing rounds rended it's back.

*"Damn it B you keep making a mess of things, how the hell we supposed to find their fucking HQ?"*

*"Pop another drone...damn it Al I'm busy!" I snapped back. The memory of the scene at our HQ stood out behind my eyes fueling a cold deadly rage.*

*Lanh had met us just outside the High School main entrance, without words we charged into the smoke and chaos. Medtechs and security troopers were converging on the site and one called out to us to wait for them to secure the structure.*

*We rushed in heading for the gymnasium where the big meet and greet was taking place. The smoke cleared in an eddy of wind from a broken series of windows. A man dressed in a ragged stewards uniform staggered out of the gym.*

*I started towards him until I spotted the pistol in his right hand. Not only was thier no reason for a steward to be armed, he wouldn't have an Amaris side arm. As the man spotted me and turned to raise the RAAs-11 9mm, I pulled the ivory handled Colt from the cross draw holster at my waist.*

*I fired pumping two .45ACP rounds into his chest with the symbol of the Terran Gunslinger. As the man fell I saw the blue shark tattoo under his left arm.*

*Fucking Mako, figures...*

*Rounding the corner I stopped dead in my tracks.*

*Gods, the blood!*

*The gym was an abattoir, blood bodies and things less recognizable hung off shattered tables and chairs. Lieutenant Martin Deane was the first person I recognized, moaning on the ground. What looked like a broken dog tag sticking out of his cheekbone. A young woman dressed in the uniform of the 171st with the look of an Elbar native lay next to him. She would have been pretty if she wasn't missing the right half of her face.*

*A familiar form rolled over and I rushed to Colonel Winters' side. After my father returned to Terra before the Coup, Sam who'd been his best friend had agreed to watch over me. He was like a second father to me and I went cold at the battered sight of him. I sagged with relief as he waved me off.*

*"Just bruises kid, check the others, Apone spotted the Sharks, see if he's okay." I looked over at Didi, who looked up sadly and shook her head. Sam caught it and sighed sadly. A commotion from the far left corner caught our attention as Lanh cursed furiously.*

*I spotted Colonel Ngo writhing in agony. I started over to help and was shocked when Lanh pointed his sidearm at me.*

*"No! You stay away!" His accent thickened.*

*Didi caught my arm and looked at him.*

*"Lanh, it's okay, we know, I got his medicine to Jimmy Qua, Bruce helped." Sam's head jerked up and he glared at us.*

*"Didi, get Colonel Tranh to his people, Bruce give her a hand", he coughed, "And when you get back...you've got some explaining to do..." The noise from the rescue crews got louder. "Now go, I'm gonna collapse now."*

*He did, and we did as ordered.*

*As we carried the Kowloon Boss Man out I hissed at Didi.*

*"The hell you get me into little sister..."*

*Vaulting the burning Orion, I stopped just long enough to pop a UAV from Hussy's dorsal mount. I figured it was the least I could do for getting snappy with AI, after all Root Beer did outrank me. It turned out to be the right thing as a flurry of activity near the center of the cantonment revealed the Amaris Headquarters staff preparing to bug out.*

*Thanking the Kowloon Marines who'd in the middle of harassing the shit out of the RimJobs had stumbled on to the encampment, I stalked off calling the rest of my Lance. Using the TACNET to ping the target of our mission, I alerted the rest of 2 Battalion to its location. The effect was immediate.*

*Our Bombardiers lit off several hundred LRM-71DP Phoenix Dual Purpose Missiles in a mortar trajectory. The drone caught the image of smoke shrouded flashes and shredded humans. The imagery strobed like a nightclub's lights.*

*FLASH.*

A RimJob MechWarrior climbed the leg of his Awesome, struggling to reach the dubious safety of the 'Mech's cockpit.

FLASH.

A red smear colored the Awesome's leg, the shredded remains of a human arm dangled in the exhaust port of a heat sink.

FLASH.

A group of technicians sheltered in the shadow of a coolant truck.

FLASH.

The coolant truck explodes, flash freezing the technicians and then shattering them.

It was then I spotted the Banshee.

There was only one spotted in the Dragoons. The personal BattleMech of Colonel Kevin Bronson. This was the guy we knew ordered the headhunting mission. That was one reason to hate him. The 'Mech he piloted was another, god I fucking hate Banshee's. One had cost me my eye on Acamar.

Gestimating the angle I lit off both Magna Hellstars. At just over half a klick one hit the big assault machine in the center mass. As he turned towards me a stanza from an ancient Terran song came to mind.

*Whoever is unjust, let him be unjust still. Whoever is righteous, let him be righteous still. Whoever is filthy, let him be filthy still. Listen to the words long written down, When the man comes around.*

"The man hath come around, bitch" I whispered.

Patrol III, Alpha Company, 2nd Platoon...

Some of the LRM fire from the 90th scattered close, and Truk Tranh had to duck flying bits of building. "That's close." He huffed, "Jennings, Radio?"

"Still on it. Nice datalinks these Rimjobs have." Minh Jennings was a Nguo?i lai whose grandfather had come to Kowloon with the occupation, only to have her father switch sides and join the Đ? kháng chi?n after Dinh Diep. She had a degree from the University of Apollo in computer sciences, and joined the uprising as a tech-specialist. NOW, she was a Coast Guard Radioman First-Class. "Really nice..." she said, "They're setting up an ambush ten k'lometers Northwest, just the other side of Ridge line Twenty Gamma North."

"Relay it to our big friends, maybe their Bombardiers can reach it."

"Not likely, Corporal-I'd advise calling in Tac Air from the Leo." She argued-a habit more accustomed to her time as a Resistance fighter in Ia Drang, battling the Rimjobs as an insurgent, than the discipline of a 'line' soldier.

"Tell 'em anyway, so we don't lose 'em to that ambush." Truk said.

"Aye Aye..." She brought up the Tac-Com freqs. "Tigers, this is Orca Three-two, Advise Sharks are circling Ten Kliks North-northwest on the saddle of Ridge Twenty one and Hill forty, Estimate Battalion Strength with spudders and Flashlights, Data feeding on subchannel nine, I'm relaying data to the Eagles simultaneous, Ball's yours, we're Didee-Mao from this zone, Over."

Jeep-Stealing has always been a forte' of the Kowloonese resistance, and with the offensive kicking off earlier, staying ahead of the main body required more mobility. Minh disconnected her laptop from the stint driven into the land-line, and the squad jumped into 'liberated' Jeeps to move out.

"Got the location on the next one?" Truk asked.

"I do indeed." she said.

"Gonna be a busy day."

Squadron 1, Kowloon Coast Guard...

the SB-27 Sabre is probably the most produced Aerospace fighter of all time-everyone with a flight line has at least a few, and just about every statelet in the Star League, from the Taurians to the Rim Worlds (and all points between) has produced, or is producing, a variant, with the possible exception of the Terran Hegemony itself.

As a "Superiority" fighter the Sabre has a vast many defects, running from its thin armour to short-range weapons, and it certainly is no Cheetah for speed-though it IS considered quick for its size.

The Sabre's singular virtue, is that it's common, and therefore dirt-cheap.

Now seven years into their "independence" from the Rim Worlds, Kowloon's taken to operating the Sabre rather aggressively-for one thing, they can buy parts just about anywhere, from any arms dealer, far less expensively than just about any other design built in the last five centuries, and as a result of the phasing-out of older designs as the Great Houses have increased their own militaries, the tooling to produce the dirty-little-fighters also came in fairly cheap.

The end result being that 1st Sqdrn, Kowloon Coast Guard is composed entirely of SB-27 Sabres, at a strength most other militaries would consider adequate for a aerofighter battalion.

The role the SB-27 excels at isn't air-superiority, and while a mediocre interceptor with good speed (nearly matching the Hegemony's own Trident), it's a superb design for delivering point-ordnance in a Tactical situation. It's highly maneuverable in atmosphere, carries a fairly decent bomb-load for its size, and it's quick, making it hard to maintain an ADA lock on when it goes into a strike posture.

Coordination with other assets helps here-a Sabre pilot has very little time to react when delivering payloads, direct data is crucial during strike missions.

"Target data recieved, proceed with 'wagon wheel' strikes."

The 'wagon wheel' is an old, pre-spaceflight air-to-ground strategy in which a group of strike aircraft attack the same target or target zone from several opposing angles to confound enemy air-defenses.

Each flight path forms a 'spoke' on the 'wheel', with the target at the hub, and the breakaway forming the 'rim'.

Over the last seven years, Coast-guard pilots have adopted a "Low and fast" approach, sometimes flying as low as thirty meters at maximum velocity using terrain to screen their attack vectors and breakaways-this is because of the fragility of the Sabre's airframe-the thin armour makes "High and slow" approaches that would be more suitable for larger craft quite a bit less useful.

One result, unfortunately, of this technique, is that Bruce Gimour's company wound up having four aircraft moving at transsonic speed pass overhead-with accompanying sonic booms, right in the middle of the fighting. For the rim-worlds troops they were engaging, this was more than a mild annoyance-the shockwave from those four aircraft being sufficient to burst unprotected eardrums and disrupt equilibrium in enemy troops not safely ensconced in 'mechs or vehicles.

The second problem being that a pilot really doesn't have much time to correct if something goes wrong.

Coast-Guard 11 (callsign "Orca ONE-one") didn't, for instance, have time to pull up when an enemy Archer stepped one step too far, and wound up directly in his path on the crest of Ridge 20.

Two pilots, one an Aviator, and the other a 'mechwarrior, got enough time to register 'Oh-Shi-' before impact.

Twenty five tonnes of airframe, plus bomb load, moving at multiple mach numbers against seventy tonnes of missile-bearing 'mech?

Not even a contest here. The centreline bomb went Through the enemy's engine-core after the nose and cockpit of the fighter was simultaneously crushed and sublimated-incidentally sublimating the upper torso and head section of the Archer in the process, to bounce twice before detonating. The other two bombs bounced, tumbled, and detonated shortly before it.

The wreckage (what remained) of both 'mech and fighter blew back across the ridgeline, damaging an Orion and a Thunderbolt, the latter knocked off its feet by the tumbling debris. Ironically, the Rifleman in the lance was untouched by either the bombs, OR the Wreckage. (other than needing new upholstery and a change of shorts, that is.)

The other three fighters continued to the target point, and delivered their ordinance.

1st Battalion, 7th Andurien, Hilltop Kilo...

"They're as \*\*\*\*\* crazy as the goddamned Infantry!" A pair of Coastie fighters slammed past-running below the crest of the hill at decidedly risky speeds, leaving a small fountain of dust and overspray behind them in their shockwaves.

The fighters jinked upward-and-over, dashing westward, as the bombs they released continued to the target, retarder-panels spread open wide to drop their speeds.

"Good bombing run, though." Captain April Martinez commented, "Let's go hit us some Rimjobs, kids- Looks like the airstrike's at least damaged some of those 'mechs."

"Not done yet, Ma'am." Sargeant Juan Esperanza said over the company channel. "More inbounds at high mach-you should see 'em right about...now."

In the distance, barely above the rim-worlders' confusion, two more pinpricks of light did the same nose-up, sharp-turn-and-dive, this time from the East.

"Count the seconda-" she stopped. The blasts were similar to the first volley-but her battle comp told her there were fewer...

Seizmic suddenly reported something vibrating the ground, as the ridge the enemy was holding burst open-  
Bunker-busters... "Maguilas, what's mister Beagle telling you?"

"Um... echoes show collapsing bunkers, ma'am...secondary, brace for the shock."

"Inbound from the North, ma'am..."

This time, the fighters streaked south instead of turning-and a few seconds later, the enemy concentration was on fire as inferno bombs released their spray of Gel to ignite.

"Okay, so we go in and paint the lines." April said, "Keep your systems on hot, guys, anything survived that is one tough son of a bitch, we'll have to kill it the hard way..."

00:15 hours, Thursday Morning, TOC vehicle, 656th Combination Division, en-route northwest...

somehow, in spite of losing their commanding officer, most of the escort 'mechs from Headquarters company, and the bulk of the armour...somehow...they were still alive.

Dillman Grantzinger the Third was happy about surviving. "Shouldn't we call in, sir?" Private Norman Richmond asked.

"No. Everybody who's sent a transmission-at least, everyone we've heard, has been visited shortly thereafter by overwhelming enemy forces, air-strikes, artillery strikes...we do NOT switch on a radio, laser-com, Satcom, nothing until we find a friendly unit. NOTHING." Dillman said, "I have exactly zero desire to share the fate of our late commanding officer-hell, his 'valiant stand' went vapor with a twelve-fighter airstrike followed by artillery, followed by battlemechs and Tanks!" he shook his head, "We roll straight for Flaudersberg, and hope that the enemy hasn't got there ahead of us."

"But the Division-our orders sir!" Richmond insisted.

Dillman actually stood up, and grabbed the young coms-tech by the collar. "THE DIVISION IS DESTROYED YOU IMBECILE! GONE!! OUR ORDERS ARE MEANINGLESS NOW!!"

He tossed the tech back into his jump-seat, "Be glad you're still alive-that WE are still alive, and pray that we manage to find friendly forces in fighting trim before the enemy figures out where we've gone."

Dillman sat back down in his own jump-seat, "I wish to \*\*\*\*\* that the bastards never sent me here-sent us here, Private. I wish to GOD that we weren't on the planet they decided to use as a larder for the Medical division, and I desperately wish I'd done as my older brother and dodged the conscription act by going into the bloody Navy."

"why, sir? what don't we know that you haven't told us, sir?" the Private asked warily.

"If they catch us, Private, they're going to crucify us all, and part of me..." Dillman looked at the truck's deck, "Part of me thins they're right doing so. The trains weren't relocating refugees, they were sending people to be cut up for spare parts, to be worked to death in industrial 'camps', to be experimented on...a crime against humanity, and I knew, as the S-2, as did so many, many others in the Intelligence group, that it was going on..and we did nothing to stop it."

the Private was apalled, "Sir, you're serious? that wasn't propoganda??"

Dillman looked up, "It was not propoganda. I wish to god it was."

"We are all dead men." the young tech said. "Dead even in the eyes of god..."

"We're not dead yet. There is still a chance to rede-" He never finished the sentence. The TOC vehicle's wall flashed white, before the concussion crushed everyone inside.

Above, two FWL built F-90's from the 7th Defenders of Andurien passed by, doing a quick victory roll after hitting the convoy with full bomb loads.

Headquarters, Taskforce Elbar...

"...force multipliers, though we're going through stocks of air-to-mud bombs at a pretty fast clip, we'll be running out in a few days at this rate." Commander Cu'ong said, using a 'scratchy stick' on her broken leg.

"We can afford it, Commander, We busted two divisions and routed a couple of heavy regiments yesterday-as bad as our resupply situation is, I think-I suspect, that is, the Rimjobs have it worse." Colonel Winters replied, "You sure you don't want our docs to look at that?"

"I'm certain." Cu'ong said, "No slur on your doctors, but I'm what they call...of advanced age? it wouldn't look good if the Corpsmen got wind I was second-guessing them after all the efforts I went to to build them up as a supporting arm. It's just a broken leg, it's not brain surgery, and while I can't sit in the flight deck of a smallcraft, or pilot a fighter, I'm fit enough to do the job I'm supposed to do, which is running the show for the kids who ARE in the flight decks and ARE in the cockpit." she laughed, a surprisingly musical tone, given her usual 'bray', "this at least keeps me 'humbled' some so I don't go haring off for enemy scalps."

Winters shared the chuckle, then asked, "How bad, exactly, were your personnel losses yesterday-Bruce mentioned one of your fighters rammed an enemy 'mech by accident..."

"out of what we brought on three dropships and two transports? Fourteen." she said, "enough to make getting into the cockpit an attractive option."

"Fourteen...jesus." he shook his head, "that's what? one in eight? one in ten?"

"One in nine pilots who won't be making the trip home." Anh confirmed, "Three to accidents, four more to enemy air assets before the 331 shut down that landing field, the rest lost to ground fire during the daylight phase attack runs."

"That's a lot of pilots, Commander..." he said.

"Lots of enemy ADA sites. I understand your aerospace people are running wild-weasels tonight, maybe we won't lose so many this time."

HHB, 171st Volunteers, 00:45 hours...

"...we keep pressing until we either run out of artillery and bombs, or we run out of ground." Tranh Truk Ngo, drugged to a level that would likely kill a normal junkie, didn't even have so much as a buzz. Instead, he was sitting in the hatch of a personnel carrier, giving Major Qua the "This is how it's going to be" speech, "We've got 'em running, we keep 'em running because if we give 'em time to turn and stand, they've got more 'mechs and bigger tanks than we do. Jesus, Jimmy, couldn't you have waited until the BDA was finished before kicking the football?"

Jimmy Qua, now back in the "XO" slot, grimaced, "Sir, it seemed like the right idea at the time." he said, "I guess we COULD have waited a day or so until the supply runs got here..."

"Nevermind, get with the S-4, see if you can't get those trucks with our ammo moved up a bit faster."

Task Force Furball...  
Gracie

Gracie's Lynx shuddered around her as the last Crusader went up in a golden fireball. The Rim Worlders weren't even trying anymore she mused, somewhat disappointed. The disintegrating remains of the 69th Amaris Dragoons had tried to fight back initially but after losing most of their senior officers in the initial strike on their cantonment there was little or no unit cohesion.

Good thing too cause if they did get their shit together we'd be in a world of hurt. Colonel Winters had his hands full bringing some semblance of order to the head long charge by Task Force Elbar. The Rim Worlds troops had tried a counter assault with the First Brigade of the Six Five Six in attempt to shatter the 7th Andurien.

What the Allied fighter bombers and arty called in by the Task Force's advance scouts hadn't taken out the Anduriens had done a number on. For the most part anyway... The volunteers were blood mad about losing Apone. During the madcap assault several of their companies had outpaced even the fast paced Kowloon marines and as a result ran headlong into the Second Brigade of the Amaris Division.

The collision with the much larger unit splashed the Andurien Third Battalion all over the place. The arrival of the "Bloody Paws", the Black Tigers' Assault battalion and their fifty two Pillager and Devastator assault 'Mechs had put a stop to the Amaris units stand with massed gauss fire. Stragglers from both sides however still roamed the leading edge of the advance.

In response Samuel Winters had ordered the Tigers to begin collecting stragglers and to form ad hoc task forces of their own. Bruce's Trey Lance had formed the core of one such unit. Six 'Mechs from the 7th Volunteers and five Goblin Infantry Fighting vehicles with their squads of infantry made up the rest.

Ohh...yeah let's not leave out our 'Loonie marines... Patrol III, 2nd Platoon, Alpha Company Kowloon Coast Guard ranged out in front. They seemed to be having fun bird dogging for the group B had christened the "Furballs".

Even though no one could see her in her cockpit Gracie shook her head. Having a Sabre bust mach not ten meters above Bitch Queen's head was enough to make a girl mess her tighty whities. Not that Mimi and Charlie Liu's little girl from Flushing, New York would ever do such a thing of course...

“Furball Six to all Furball elements orders from above the boss is calling a halt.” Bruce’s voice came over the TACNET.

“Gotcha Loot, any idea how long?” Gracie stretched in her cockpit.

“For the night Gracie, The Hungry Tigers and the Ryukaze will relieve us and take up the chase.”

Leaning back in her linear frame, Gracie grinned.

Scott

Good, thought Scott “MechRat” Mackenzie as he sat in the silence of Boom-Boom’s cockpit. The only noises were the pings and creaks of a hot BattleMech cooling down. His muscles ached, one of the byproducts of the Black Magic Linear Frame the Terran BattleMechs used. Scott had seen representations of standard Star League and Colonial cockpit layouts which resembled fighter cockpits.

Terrans; Royals mostly and a few select formations like the Tigers used a far more advanced control system. Advanced linear frames and waldo gloves built in to each pilot’s MechWarrior Combat Suit allowed far finer control of the humanoid combat machines. They were however very physical in their operation, Terrans the joke went wore their BattleMechs.

“Rat you and the guys from the 7th’s Beta Company set up camp, then get yourselves fed, Sergeant Miken get us a perimeter set up we’ll fix up a guard rotation. Everyone else I want your BDA’s and supply states.”

Setting his neurohelmet on the rack behind him, Scott grabbed his field jacket and undogged the cockpit hatch. The breeze, cold as it was, was heavenly, but Scott was glad for the warmth of his field jacket. Climbing down the chain ladder to the ground he met us with Sonia Raventree the Orion jock from the 7th.

“So we get some down time huh?” The dark haired woman said. Dark circles under her eyes spoke of the stress of the past few days.

“That and some chow, sorry no showers tho” Scott quipped noticing her sniff and wrinkle her nose. The Andurien pilot grimaced and gestured to where some of the Andurien infantry were dragging out a field tent.

“Shall we?”

Grinning Scott followed her, as they walked a low rhythmic rumble came from behind them. Turning they watched as the blood red BattleMechs of the Ryukaze, mixed with the Tigers’ SLDF olive drab moved past. A reptilian Dragon class ‘Mech strode up to Hussy.

Major Satoh, Scott grinned, who’d have thought the 90th would ever be run by a Drac.

Still Scott hadn’t heard of any banzai charges or duels with samurai swords since the Combine volunteer had taken charge. Then again the man had been in charge of the Sun Zhang Academy.

Bruce

“Lieutenant Bruce!” A pair of way to cheerful voices called out over my shoulder. Iuchi Kei and Hatchiwara Yuri; The Terrible Two; Isokoru Satoh’s craziest and most effective ‘MechJocks. They were also perpetually cheerful and right now seriously annoying.

“Ladies.” I greeted them noncommittally.

Yuri sniffed me dramatically and wrinkled her nose.

“B, you stink.” She said deadpan.

“Shoo, you two, you can play with him later...” Isokoru growled from behind them. The Two pouted and then spotted Scott Mackenzie. I grinned at his look of dismay.

Be warned ‘Rat; the invincible Attack of the Cute But Psychotic Kurita School Girls is about to mess with your life now.

Looking back at the Kuritan Major I found him shaking his head.

“What’s the word, sir.”

“The word is good, Chu-I, the Six Five Six is history, fighters from the 7th caught their last remaining units in transit and wiped them out.” He smiled with satisfaction. “We should have the 69th Dragoons done over the next two days or so. Colonel Winters sends his compliments and respectfully request you bring your ass home to rest, repair and rearm.” He paused then said; “His words not mine.”

“I kinda figured sir.” His formal and serious demeanor was cracking slowly as he was exposed to us, it wasn’t totally gone, but we were working on him.

“By the way Lieutenant Commander Cu’ong wants to know when she can have her Marines back.”

I grinned at that.

“Well sir I was kind of thinking maybe sometime next year.”

Patrol III, 2nd Platoon, "A" company 1st Kowloon Marines...

“Furball Six to all Furball elements orders from above the boss is calling a halt.” Bruce’s voice came over the TACNET.

"That'd be us, right?" Jennings asked.

Truk nodded, "Yeah...hell, you saw the orders."

"They're going to give these guys to Hu's people?" she commented, "That's going to be like a fart in the temple, that one! Cham Hu's crazy."

"Word has it they've got a Drac covering the relief." Tranh said, "Should be interesting to see how that shakes out-from a safe distance...here they come."

Four helicopters nut-cut along the side of the valley at 150 KPH-which isnt' as fast as an SLDF Ripper, and the birds were never designed to take a Ripper's punishment, but unlike a Ripper, they had pontoon floats, and could land pretty much anywhere.

"Airmobile back?" Jennings asked.

"Only as far as the rally-point, we're supposed to get to know our customers on the way home." Truk said.

"You know this how?" She asked.

"Same way you'd know it, if you hadn't been burying nose-to-books the night before our predeployment brief-since the Commander didn't send alternate orders, we're riding back to base with our allies...it's supposed to be 'team building' or some touchy-feely shit." He said it with a distinct expression of discomfort.

"You blew your English test again, didn't you?" Jennings asked.

"Thirty percent." he said.

"wrong?" she asked.

"No, I got thirty percent right." He told her, "The grammar and pronunciation are...impossible."

"Oh. I take it you want me to do the talking, then?"

"Yeah."

Encampment, Task Force Furball...

Nobody'd really seen their Marines. They'd heard from them during the advance, they'd known the Marines were out there-somewhere in front, and they knew the codes, callsign, and heard them chattering in the background during the operation, but the Marines had deployed using a cold-drop with parachutes during a series of air-raids several days ago, then lurked along using waterways, swamps, and terrain-masking far ahead of the front-line.

Many of the collected Andurien troops had definite ideas of what they'd look like-ideas formed by years of watching holovids and recruiting ads featuring what some publicist thought a Special Operations team would look like.

It didn't help that the SAS, who'd been seen in-garrison enough (and during transport) actually DID look like the Heroes of a thousand holovids.

"That's them?" Corporal Francine Zenger asked, as the 'loonies disembarked from the modified SAR choppers. "Where's all the gear?"

What she was commenting on, was the lack of stealth-suits, or powered scout armour, the relatively small number of light weapons, the apparent lack of special equipment. These marines carried small arms not too different from what a Tanker or MP carries, they wore ordinary-looking 'windproof' pattern camouflage fatigues and ordinary leather boots, with almost depressingly standard-issue web gear. Only the large packs-clearly designed to carry a lot of ordinary gear, and the lack of visible rank marked them as anything different from ordinary infantrymen you might find on any back-end world in the outer edges of the Inner Sphere.

More disappointing than that, was how the little sneaky bastards didn't even fit the physical stereotypes-only two were of above average height, and all of them were, at least from thirty meters distance, a bit on the thinner side...

Except the big, Blonde brute who wasn't carrying any weapons-not so much as a holstered sidearm. The Brute was checking bandages on one of the Marines who'd been wounded sometime earlier today.

"Their bloody medic is the biggest guy in the unit..." Francine heard Sargeant Espinoza comment, "the rest of 'm are little, tiny guys...except the gal with the radio."

"I wouldn't pick a fight with those little, tiny guys-word has it they greased a Rimjob company with knives, then set off the Rimjobs' minefield." an infantryman in full Terran Hegemony kit with the shoulder patch of the 90th interrupted, "Just a rumour, mind you, but ya might want to not try tugging to see if it's really real."

The chopper ride to where the Furballs were gathered was a bit less bumpy than the jeeps they'd stolen from the enemy, but disembarking wasn't as easy. Truk dropped off the chopper, and helped Moskowicz assist Phung down. "Get you to a real aid-station, they'll get that arm in a cast." Moskowicz muttered.

"I wonder if they've got hot chow?" Truk mused aloud, "I mean, not MRE's heated with watertabs, but a damn honest field kitchen with powdered eggs, salt beef, maybe actual biscuits..."

"I'd settle for clean water and soap-even if it's out of a buffalo." Jennings commented, "My legs itch and it'd be nice to wash down with clean water-even if it IS luke-warm..."

Truk sighed, "Right, okay, first we get our gear together and go talk to the Boss-it's some guy named 'Gilmour' I think, isn't it, Minh?"

Jennings nodded, "Yeah, that's the name..."

"Then, we get some chow, a couple hours to clean up to almost-human again, and some rack-time."

"I gotta check in with the Doc, sure as shit there's guys need a hand with the wounded." Moscowicz announced.

Truk shrugged, "That's fine, take Phung with you, I'll catch up later."

"B what the hell you doing?". The tall Japanese officer in a kuritan mechjocks jumpsuit asked the lean young man in fatigues and a battered motorcycle jacket.

Glancing over as he pulled his hair into rough pony tail the man with a patch over his left eye shrugged and said: "Shower."

The Terran infantry major with the patches of an engineer just chuckled.

"Okay Chu-i I give, how is having Pauly's Firestarter poke its flamer in the ground gonna get us showers."

"Underground spring less than four meters down, plasma cuts down and makes the ground go all glassy, like a tube, Pauly ain't gonna use any incendiary fuel in it and we can cap it off with yea...". The lieutenant's voice was dead tired as he pointed to a portable water purifier used by the SLDF to cap wells.

Truk looked over at Minh Jennings with wide eyes as Lieutenant Lanh from the 171st came over.

"Yeah, I know, sounds weird Corp, but it works. They'll be hooking up a 'mech to provide power for the camp, so expect hot showers..."

"What about food, sir?". Truk cringed inwardly, but it had just slipped out.

Lanh grinned and pointed to a spit being set up.

\*\*\*\*\* MREs. Didi potted a couple of ellbagators..."

At Truk's puzzled look Lanh shrugged and said;

"Dont worry, tastes just like chicken."

Overview: Organizational structure, Kowloon Marines 2770 to 2791...

The basic element of a Marine unit, is the fireteam. a Marine fireteam is five to six men, and is led by a Lance Corporal or above.

Two fireteams is a squad of eleven men, usually led by a senior Lance Corporal, though Full E-4's were sometimes available in sufficient quantity to fill the slot.

Two Squads is a Patrol-half of a Platoon. Each Patrol's 'designator' (Patrol 1, 2, 3, 4, etc.) is in relation to its position at the Company level.

Standard SOP for leadership in a Patrol is an E-5, with two E-4 squad leaders, however, in the time period of the Elbar Liberation, insufficient senior NCO personnel were available to lead all Patrols. As a consequence, promotable Corporals (E-4P) were often employed in this position.

While, technically, a full Platoon should be led by an Officer (O-1 or O-2), there was as much a shortage of Officer-qualified personnel as there were shortages of fully-qualified NCO's. Most Coast Guard Marine Platoons, therefore, were led by the Platoon Sargeant (E-6 Staff, or E-7 Gunnery Sgt.), or by Warrant officers with Enlisted Backgrounds (where available and appropriate).

While most military organizations (and the "Army" or 171st Volunteers) would employ 'rank inflation' to cover the shortfalls in senior Officer and NCO ranks, the Marine component of the Coast Guard stuck rigidly to theoretical standards originally designed by their Pre-Rim Worlds constitution (when Kowloon was independent the first time), requirements for time in grade and experience directly feeding into what rank, and pay grade, a Marine would bear and receive. Unfortunately, even as late as 2776, the formal training schools were not fully established, and there were still too few with the legally required time-in-grade. As a result, the first 'whole' battalion deployed (1st Marine Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment) was deployed to Elbar with NCO's, Warrant officers, and the few Junior, middle, and senior officer ranks handling responsibilities well above what their nominal pay-grades stated. The result being that of the four companies of Marines deployed to support Task Force Elbar, three of them were led by Non-Comissioned Officers or Warrant Officers, with platoons led by Sargeants, and Patrols by Corporals, and squads by Lance Corporals or even Private-First-Class (E2).

Assistance by the units working with the Kowloonese helped solve this problem by mid January of 2779, with many of these experienced, but still junior NCO and officer candidates going through in-the-field "Shake and bake" NCO and Officer Candidate programmes to fit the constitutional requirements necessary for promotion. The continuing "Feeding in" of recruits up to 2783 filled out the units, and by 2785, the Coast Guard's Marine complement was able to reach their planetary constitutional limit of four Divisions-this peak would degrade in the post-war era after Kowloon's annexation by the Lyran Commonwealth.

Standards for recruitment, however, did NOT degrade, and even as late as 3067, Kowloon's best joined the Coast Guard, and the best of those, joined the Coast Guard Marines.

### Emphasis

Pre-selection to the Marines involved fairly strict psychological, and intellectual, rather than physical, standards. High standards of personal judgement, personal integrity, 'common sense', and attention to details rank higher than metrics such as physical strength or endurance, as these can be (and are) trained into a recruit along with tactical proficiencies and military skills.

In the 2770's, Marine training focused heavily on stealth, field survival, and low-input/large-output techniques including sniper operations, demolitions, booby-traps, and silent weapons, as well as reconaissance and infiltration. The same sort of skillsets are often found in 'special forces' groups fielded by other powers. Tactical techniques resemble the "LRRP" schools of the 20th century, combined with Ranger and some SEAL training, adjusted for the technological milieu of the Star League era.

### Rank Structure:

(Promotable indicates a half-step up in pay and increased responsibilities. Annotated on paperwork with "P" in parenthesis, for instance, E-4(P) would be a Promotable Corporal and would handle the responsibilities of an E-5, O-4(P) would be a Rear Admiral, Rear Admirals wear a Commodore's rank with a border on their uniform to indicate promotable status.)

- E-1: Boot Private or Private
- E-2: Private First Class
- E-3: Lance Corporal
- E-4: Corporal
- E-5: Sargeant
- E-6: Staff Sargeant
- E-7: Gunnery Sgt. or Chief Petty Officer
- E-8: Master Gunnery Sgt./Master Chief Petty Officer
- E-9: Sgt. Major
- E-10: Sgt. Major of the Coast Guard

Enlisted ranks above E-7 were not, in 2776, filled yet, as there were insufficient organizational billets to support them, as well as insufficient qualified personnel to hold those ranks. The slot for the Sgt. Major of the 1st Marine Regiment was held by an E-7(P) pending activation of the other three Battalions.

- WO1: Warrant Officer
- WO2: Senior Warrant
- WO3: Field Warrant
- WO4: Chief Warrant
- WO5: Chief Warrant of the Coast Guard.

In 2776, there was no Chief Warrant of the Coast Guard due to a lack of organizations of suitable size.

O-1: Ensign

O-2: Lieutenant, JG

O-3: Lt. Senior Grade

O-4: Lt. Commander

O-5: Commander

O-6: Captain/Colonel

O-7: Commodore, if promotable, Rear Admiral/Brigadier General

O-8: Admiral/General of Marines (the Marine Corps Chief of Staff)

O-9: Admiral of the Coast Guard

R-10: Secretary of the Coast Guard (Civilian rank, reports directly to the Speaker of the Assembly and/or the Duke or Duchess, responsible for overseeing all aspects of the Kowloon Coast Guard per the Constitution. The Secretary of the Coast Guard in 2776 was Li Cao Kyi.)

In 2776, ranks above O-5(P) were empty, due to both lack of ships and lack of personnel and subordinate organizations. (Only 1 Regiment was even beyond authorization for funding on Kowloon, and that regiment was not fully formed!)

Chellis River, 157 KM from the start line...

"They blew the bridges, Colonel." Marine Warrant Lucy Haines reported.

"Well, I guess we've run out of dirt-for the time being." Tranh Truk Ngo said flatly, "Get your people in, Warrant, hot chow and rack-time, we're going to have to dig in here and wait for the Engineers to catch up." He spat a nasty oath next, "I despise letting the enemy get a chance to breathe though."

"Plan, sir?" Major Qua asked as Tranh stepped down from the personnel hatch of his "Command Post"-a modified Personnel carrier.

"Get Cu'ong on the horn, see if she can't wrangle some airstrikes to keep the rimjobs from getting a good night's sleep. Position our artillery batteries for harassment and interdiction fires on targets of the battery-commander's choosing-we're going to make the other side of the river a \*\*\*\*\* moonscape before we send people across, have our chopper assets-what we have, anyway, running FAC and fire-direction missions until zero-nine or so. I want our enemies either running, or hiding when the engineers get that bridge up. ideally, we'll be able to counter-batter any artillery they've got on that side ahead of time, but if we can't do that, making it decidedly unsafe to be in weapons-range of the river's going to have to do for now...and send a letter to Sam Winters, tell 'im we're on the southwest bank of the Chellis, and not averse to having some company from the rest of the task-force."

"You don't want to send the 'mechs ahead?" Qua asked.

"Unsupported? Hell \*\*\*\*\* no. find something that can keep up with 'm as they cross, and I might consider it-at least, to support a bridgehead, but by themselves is a no-go. The Rimjobs still have units with Hegemony advanced-tech gear, we're running early reunification war garbage, I'd as soon NOT squander our few battlemechs for a harassment mission when we're going to need them to hold the other end of that bridge later."

HQ 181st Amaris Imperial Volunteer Guards...

"...do you know who's over on the other side of that river?" Lt. General Dwight Dillenger asked rhetorically.

"No, Dwight, I have no idea that five thousand Kowloonese are waiting for us to try and re-take that side of the river, nor that seven thousand Anduriens and a Star League heavy Division reinforced with another brigade, plus sundry assets. None what-so-ever." General Milton Quarrell replied, "Not including artillery batteries, plus a truly disgusting and alarmingly accurate force of bombers." Quarrell gestured at the map, "Please to notice, Lt. General, they've broken three divisions in the last forty-eight hours, and advanced very nearly two hundred kilometers right through some of the most heavily mined and fortified territory on the planet...nevertheless, we're going to have to go in, and rescue the 63rd before there IS no 63rd to rescue, then, we're going to have to figure out how to keep them from taking the major cities, or everyone who's supported us so far is going to wind up with a tree shoved up their ass like those poor bastards at Running Deer."

"What's the long term plan, sir?" Dillenger asked.

"We evacuate officials and their families first, followed by Regular Army units and survivors, then supporters, anyone we can fit, then US." Quarrell said, "We can't hold Elbar now-we can't even hold it long enough for victories at the other worlds in this region to send us reinforcement-I'm not going to let those \*\*\*\*\* savages do any more crucifixions if I can help it, and Emperor Stephan can go ahead and have my head cut off and piked, but I'm not wasting any more of my men fighting a losing battle."

171st Area of Operations Chellis River front, Saturday Morning...

Battlmechs could wade the 1.5 kilometers across the Chellis River-they'd be under-water for most of the trip, but they could do it.

The Coast Guard's boats could run right up the river, across it, do loops and never get the crew wet. Unfortunately, there were a grand total of eight Coastie hydrofoils, not one over sixty tonnes-they couldn't ferry any significant force across-though they could deploy 1st and 3rd platoons of Charlie Company, 1st Marines, to do reconaissance on foot.

IF the boats weren't already 91KM northeast and delivering the Marines into the enemy's rear areas already.

"We're going to need pontoons." Jimmy Qua said, "The rimjobs blew the bridges North and West of here, there are no bridges East, and they scuttled the ferries."

"Must've known we were coming." Tranh Truk Ngo commented blandly, "How long to get a bridge capable of handling our heavy armour up?"

"About...two days." Qua said, "Assuming enough materiel can be found to build it."

"Make it a day." Ngo ordered, "Grab whatever the engineers need, we need to be on the other side of that river to-morrow night at this time."

"Aye aye, sir." Qua said doubtfully

Bruce....

The rest, hot food and hot showers had done wonders for morale. Add to that the feeling that we were in the home stretch had everyone stoked. It was this last feeling that had me uneasy. We'd felt much the same way on New Home just before the hammer fell.

As a result Task Force Furball was still on ready alert status. "Mechs and Fusion powered vehicles had their reactors primed and idling, two lances and a mechanized infantry platoon were on watch. Truk, the Kowloonese Marine everyone was calling Mr. T., much to his chagrin had pulled in several other scout teams to give us decent frontage.

The language barrier hadn't been too much of an issue between Jennings his radio humper the unassuming Lanh who Didi was in the process of acquiring and Vinh one of Alex's Black Knight drivers. Plus while his spoken Anglic wasn't great, both his comprehension and knowledge of military terms was top on.

The man himself was sitting on his haunches devouring a piece of grilled elbargator tail. Where 'Rat had scrounged the garlic I don't know, but it really enhanced the flavor. I did notice he was watching as I cleaned the connections on my Colt Half Rifle's power supply. The Colt is basically a block of highly durable polymers with no moving parts. Even the lenses were practically unscratchable.

Firing a burst of coherent X-rays it was capable of one hundred and fifty man stopper bolts at a thousand bolts per minute, four minutes of beam that could cut through most standard armored hatches and doorways or one shot that had a good chance of piercing a 'Mech cockpit (Not that I wanted to try what was known as the \*\*\*\*\* You' shot at its effective range of ten meters). At just over six pounds and with a six inch barrel it was my weapon of choice if I had to get into a dismounted gun fight.

"Why you shoot a flashlight, B?" Truk asked.

I shrugged, safed the Colt and passed it over.

"She's light, punches through just about anything and don't beak. Dunk her in mud or water an' she'll still say doom on you."

He looked up from his inspection and chuckled, correcting my pronunciation. Then a call came in on his comlink. He tensed and I could read that something was up from his body language. As he finished a stream of rapid fire Viet, he tossed me my Colt.

"They come, now; the RimJobs." He said grimly.

"How many?" I asked, knowing the answer already.

"All of them."

The Sharks...

Ryan Huntzinger brought his Guillotine out of the river sending a flight of SRMs at the source of fire coming from the riverbank. The rest of the Rim Worlds Imperial Volunteers 1st Battalion Combat Team stormed across the river. Overhead the first ripping tear sound of dozens of artillery pieces unleashing devastation on the Star League line.

A Shadow Hawk in tiger stripe colors staggered out of a stand of trees its armor riddled by cannon fire. The Amaris major grinned recognizing the scheme as one of the Kowloon 'Mechs. Pulling in on his triggers he spat laser and missile fire at the enemy machine.

Caught in a web of armor melting energy and high explosive warheads the Shad crumpled, its own SRM ammo detonating in a firecracker series of flashes that shattered the 'mech's upper torso. Sue Ellen's Champion pressed forward running her Royal model machine's dual purpose autocannon over a series of infantry positions.

Broken bodies and wrecked support weapons littered the ground in her wake.

Huntzinger bit down on the warm satisfaction revenge brought him. Time to gloat later, after they were off this mudball. It amused him that he had been born here, but now considered this place as alien a world as if he were on Luthien or far Taurus.

At least it's Quarell in charge, real military objectives, no political officers or considerations, just get the 63rd out, kick the Terries in the teeth and run like hell.

And maybe, just maybe, a chance to show up both the 'Loonies and Kerensky's Sledgehammers.

As the first olive drab SLDF machines joined the fight, Major Ryan Huntzinger grinned as his HUD magnified the unit insignia. A black stalking tiger on a cobalt field.

Here kitty, kitty. He chuckled as he called in an artillery strike on the Terran machines.

Feathers Plucked...

The flash and concussive force of a half dozen runway cratering bombs had been enough to throw Captain Jake Milendez off his feet a mile away. Outside the Rakshasa's runway was useless and though the widely spaced Rapiers and Hammerheads were largely unharmed they were, until the runway could be fixed, useless.

Worse was the loss of personnel. Red Squadron along with Lieutenant Colonel Ethan Rayne were just gone. Just one transport had done more damage than all the RimJob fighters and bombers. When the Planetlifter transport had come in on an approach course, no one had thought anything of it.

The hijacked unarmed transport had overshot the runway dropping bombs and at least one of the RimJob crew cut the cargo ramp in the back. The overwatch Rifleman had downed it after the fact, but the plane's pilot had done a death dive ending in the civilian airport's administrative building.

The Rakshasa's top dog had been giving the morning briefing to his personal squadron for the wild weasel mission slated for that afternoon. Their demise left Jake the senior flyer.

Calling in to central command he reported the situation to Brevet Colonel Satoh, who dispatched John Zazula's Combat Engineers and field promoted Jake to Wing Commander. Clamping down on grief and rage, Jake asked only one thing from the Kuritan officer.

"Colonel, find out who got those RimJobs into our supply chain, they had our codes and flight plans, if there had been one real flyer among them we'd have lost the whole damn wing."

With his own anger barely contained, Isokoru growled;

“Hai, Sho-sa we’ll find out who screwed the pooch on this one...” The Kuritan looked off screen and cursed.

“Sho-sa, sit tight, looks like the eta are coming out to fight in force, sit tight the Engineers are on the way.”

The Kuritan officer signed off abruptly and Jake was left with a blank screen and a feeling of helplessness.

Sam in a bind...

“Move the 3rd of the Three Thirty First to cover sector eight, have ‘em take up positions around that hill that looks like a tit...hill one thirty two.” They can back stop Jimmy Qua’s line from there. A month ago the thought of commanding more than a division of troops in a major campaign would have filled Sam Winters with trepidation, while confident in his skills as a regimental commander, and like any Star League officer he was trained to jump in and take over if necessary in any operation, this was different.

Now however thoughts of failure and fears were locked away in a little box in the deepest darkest recesses of his mind. The Rim Worlders had attacked right at the worst possible time; while the SLDF was prepping to attack them. They were pulling out all the stops on this, burning covert assets they’d had in place like water to throw the League troops off balance.

A call came in from the 171st’s Headquarters;

“Sam we’ve got a breakthrough. The Dragoons came out of their hidey holes and hit our rear.”

Colonel Tranh sounded tired, but the holographic image’s eyes were sharp and bright.

“It’s about two clicks wide, the Impy Volunteers shoved a heavy advanced tech battalion in with a regiment of Manticores.”

On screen Ngo highlighted a corridor through the League lines running from the river to the 171st’s rear. The 171st’s own ‘Mechs mostly obsolete medium machines couldn’t stand up to that kind of punishment. Sam cursed inwardly. Plugging that hole was going to nasty, but he knew who to have handle it and how.

“Colonel, I’m routing the Hungry Tigers towards you their the closest full unit, Lieutenant Gilmour and my...Captain Winters are in your OA, so relay to them this; as soon as you can go cause trouble, they’ll know what you mean...”

On screen Ngo nodded grimly as they hammered out a series of stalling attacks designed to contain then crush the Rim World salient. Spending heavily from their dwindling supplies of arty rounds and bombs and holding the Rim Worlds troops until the heavy formations like the Tigers’ own Assault Battalion the Bloody Paws could be brought up.

It was not lost on Tranh Truk Ngo that Colonel Sam Winters had just committed the two people closest to him; sons one blood the other for all intents and purposes adopted to bear the brunt of the RimJob assault. Right along with Ngo’s own Kowloonese.

Alex; on the sharp end...

“Jo-Jo, need some help here...”

“On it boss, pop over sixty meters to your left!”

Alex ducked to the left as the Rim Worlds Flashman chased after him salvoing 8cm laser bolts. Two scorched armor off his right side. The ravenous energy found a chink in his armor plate silencing one of Elmo's own heavy lasers.

Jo-Jo stepped his Bombardier up and hammered the enemy 'Mech with 60mm Phoenix missiles. As the Flashman reeled back smoking rents in its armor Alex speared it with his Kinslaughter particle cannon. Before the pair could do more the Amaris heavy ducked into the lee of a hill, apparently having had enough.

As his heat level dropped Alex took stock of his company's status. Mitch Sovino and Dominic Santieri were both down but alive. The warriors were playing possum as the Rimmers were less interested in killing Terrans than actually accomplishing a full scale breakout.

They were at the moment being very successful. The Flasher made another appearance and Alex spat laser and particle fire at it as a pair of T-Bolts also came out to play. Elana Suarez stepped her big Marauder up to add her machine's firepower and together they brought down the Flashman and crippled one of the Thunderbolts.

"Boss, I'm Winchester ammo..."

"Okay Jo-Jo head back to the rear, see if you can load up and tell Kelly to bring up her lance to the ridgeline."

Just then warning lights flashed and the oddly sexy female voice of Elmo's computer sounded an artillery warning.

"Crap, Lion Company, cover and evade! Now, Now, Now..."

The thump of the ranging rounds sounded as flowers of smoke cored by bright white flashes lit up the river valley. Alex remembered the first time he'd seen the big guns in action he'd been struck by how different it was from the HoloVIDs. No bright greasy gouts of flame billowing out unless it was from a hit internal combustion engine, the crash and thunder made up for it with an almost primal shock.

The earth opened up around Jo-Jo as he ran for the dubious cover of a low hill. The blast sent the sixty five ton machine tumbling tearing off its left arm and leg. Mercifully Jo-Jo's ammo bins were empty otherwise even its cellular storage equipment would not have saved it. Alex called out to his pilot, but the only reply that came over the TACNET was a low continuous stream of; "Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit..."

As if in response to Jo-Jo's mantra the next wave of Rim Worlds 'Mechs and Armor formed up.

"Lion six to all Lion units, here they come, don't let them get by, by God above, hold them here!"

All around him his remaining men and women acknowledged his order as did several lances of the 171st Volunteer's 'Mech support. In his mind Alex Winters saluted them grimly as he and his comrades steeled themselves to once again throw the Amaris foe back.

To once again hold the line.

Chellis River front, Thursday...

"...contact with 3 Batt, but the Charlie marines say they're still fighting, send Bravo and Alpha First Battalion through this forested area..here- we need to close the door on these \*\*\*\*\*." Tranh ordered.

"We're taking heavy losses on Second, sir." Qua said.

"We can't pull out of there-the second's cornered against the valley wall, Send in the Elbar recruits to backstop 'em." Colonel Ngo said it with frost in his tone, "Those tanks got across the river somehow, put Charlie 1st Marines on finding the goddamned crossing, and task Golf and Echo batteries to hammer it when they find it."

"The Elbar recruits aren't ready-" Qua started to say.

"I Know That, but if we don't put them on the line now, we probably won't have a line to hold later. It's going to be like Eagle's Nest again, and I'm sorry to have to do it-they're about as unready as you were." Ngo said, "You can take direct charge of them if you think it'll help."

Qua frowned, not liking the order, "I'll be going to collect the meat for the grinder then, Sir."

"Make 'em count, Jimmy-make 'em expensive for the rimjobs."

"B this is Fu king insane; yo!"

"No shit Rat, these bitches are serious!" I answered juking to avoid a particularly annoying Griffin sending PPC and missile fire at me. The little RimJob shit just wouldn't quit.

"Gimme a minute guys I need to teach this peckerhead a lesson." I growled.

\*\*\*\*\* mel thought, I just had to become the \*\*\*\*\* Gunslinger, shit being an ossifer was bad enough, but now I'm responsible for a goddamn battalion.

No sense in bitching 'bout it now. This RimJob needs to learn why you dint take on a machine twenty tons heavier than you. Especially when your tech ain't up to the task.

Twisting Hussy around I ducked under a particle whip he tossed after me. Bitch, seriously that was weak sauce, a PPC is a \*\*\*\*\* whip, not a goddamn laser

To teach him the error of his ways I tossed a cyan snake of charged particles to his left, twisting Hussy's vambrace slightly to lash the fire across his chest.

Predictably the Griffin pilot ducked right instead of riding the hit he was gonna take no matter what. He then ran right into the last Gauss slug I had spat downrange.

Oops did that hurt bitch, I crowed as the 250kg slug released enough kinetic energy to shatter the ultra tough cockpit assembly.

I felt bad for the 'mech. Colonial tech or one of ours a Griffin's a great machine. I chuckled at the ludicrous nature of the thought. It happens some times when your life is on the edge for hours on end.

You think of the wierdest shit.

The majority of my brain was focused on the battle, don't get me wrong, but you try being in a 'mech fight for eleven hours.

Well shit you do better.

The rimjobs were pressing to the east, near where we rubbed up against Tranh's boys and girls. The 'mechs were bad enough but what was bugging the shit out of me was the goddamn armor. Everybody yaps their heads off about this BattleMech or that BattleMech but a battalion of Hunters and Manticores is one hell of a force multiplier.

Just when I thought I had a handle on things a wave of missile would drop on my ass. I set up a counter charge and we ran into a company of those PPC toting \*\*\*\*\* the RimJobs loved so much.

Spotting Jimmy O'Keefe's gang of Mongooses and Talons running on the edges of our formation I sent him a tightbeam message.

"Jimbo; do me a \*\*\*\*\* favor, end run these dickheads and find out how they're getting their armor across the river."

Now mind you; Jimmy hates my guts, probably because his sorry ass is getting bald at twenty three. Genetics what can I say.). But regardless he came back quick with the affirmative. If we could close the door on their armor our technology would come to the fore. Until then there was only so much we could do.

Like the Russians always said; quantity has a quality all its own.

32 KM NE of HHC 171st, Thursday, 21:40 Hours...

"damn clever of 'em....damn clever." Ensign Anh Li Sook watched the enemy's 'fording' technique. The Rimjobs had a lance of 'mechs that were assisting their armor across the river-the tanks were being floated by having large, empty fuel-blivets filled with air lashed to the sides and front. The 'mechs took up the remaining "Weight" in the water, two per vehicle, and almost certainly, there was a submerged roadway bed-probably five to seven meters under the surface. On the near bank, a crew of support pukers removed the bladders, which the 'mechs then carried to the far side-it was like an assembly line.

"Sargeant, what's the count upriver?" she asked.

"Looks like two companies of infantry with the 'mechs, plus a security element of Rhinos, both shores. probably another three companies of service-and-support pukers on the northeast bank. They've sunk a HELL of a lot of assets into this." Sgt. Trung's tinny voice replied, "Bad news is, I'm counting twelve 'mechs in groups of four along their fording route, and they ain't lights."

She raised the 'scope again, and watched.

"Confirm, they're heavy loader 'mechs?" she asked.

"I count eight loader 'mechs, but there's four Assault class Battlemechs on the final leg of their chain-um...let's see...two Orions and two Archers. You get the same count?"

"I've got an Archer, an Orion, and two Thugs from my side." she answered unhappily, "Makes eight Battlemechs and probably two lines-what do you figure they're using for a roadbed?"

"Maybe the gas pipeline-there's a natural gas site sixty one k's southwest of here, Somewhere in the AO for the 90th, it feeds out to Davenport City's chemical processors-feedstock for composites and lube. It'd be set low enough for ships to pass over, and Star League spec on a natural gas pipeline like that would require buku heavy structure to prevent accidents." the Sgt's voice was tinny over the scrambled radio.

"tinh d?c! If that line's pressured, and it gets nailed by arty, the collateral in Davenport's going to be huge." She said, "I'm sending our logs to HQ, let them decide."

HHC 171 Volunteers, 2100 hours, Thursday...

"Blow it up." Colonel Ngo said, "the field's one of those places behind our lines that we think the sixty-third's holed up, and we have to put a stopper on that flow of enemy reinforcements."

"What about Davenport city?" Commander Cu'ong asked over the encrypted link.

"What about them? they're Rimjob territory-if the blast transfers along the lines, they'll have some fires, maybe a couple of explosions, but those people turned their neighbours over to be cut up and parted out-I'll save mercy for the survivors." He said, "I want airstrikes on the wellhead and pumping station, High Explosive, coordinate with your Marines to blow the sub-surface supports in the river-if they can get to them without being noticed, we'll drop shell on the ford at 2200, gives your boys and girls an hour."

"Sir, all due respect, I'm going to have to pass that over to Colonel Winters for his okay-I've got strike requests from four allied units that can't put enough birds in the air." Cu'ong said, "and the nine-oh's running light ops near that pipeline."

HQ, 181 Amaris Volunteer Guards...

"Lead element's have secured a route for the Sixty-Third to cross the river, Sir." the Comms officer reported.

Milton Quarrell nodded, "Good, tell Lt. Colonel Lubon in the six-three to go ahead and come on across while we've still got that route-fall back in order. I expect the dirty little 'loonies are working their dirty little asses off looking for where we managed our crossing, I'd as soon get things consolidated before they find it."

"Yes sir."

2nd Battalion, 171st Volunteers Brigade...

Moshe found himself in a 'shallow grave' fighting hole, with half the hillside erupting at random above and below him. The blasts were more than loud, they were inside his bones.

The soldier in the hole with him was older, and spoke Hebrew with a thick accent.

"Okay, breathe...take up the slack in the trigger." Corporal Dao Kantor ordered. "can you see him?"

Moshe stared through the optics. "I can see a man standing in the hatch of the tank."

"That's your boy. Breathe, keep the reticle on him, and slowly creep the trigger back. The shot should surprise you when it comes, so just keep the crosshairs on him." Cantor instructed, holding the bandage over his ruined eyes.

Moshe did as he was told. The enemy tank's missiles fountained out in a near-blinding fury of light, as its main gun hammered away with synthetic lightning.

The rifle barked, and bucked against his shoulder.

"How'd you do?" Cantor asked.

Moshe stared through the scope, as the enemy tank-commander slumped. There was a red and gray stain on the support strut for the LRM rack of the Manticore.

"I think I got him, sir." Moshe replied.

"Don't call me sir, I work for a living. Okay, work the bolt, and get ready to move." Cantor told him, "There's another hole about thirty Meters to your left."

"Can you make it there, sir?" Moshe asked.

"If I could, son, I wouldn't need you to do the shooting, now would I?" Cantor asked rhetorically, "you'll have to do the job-at least, until we're relieved, remember, one bullet at a time, and never from the same place-they can triangulate your location with a second shot."

In the Air...

Jimmy "Vader" Montafiore flipped his Riever Attack Fighter into a dive. The sleek fighter's internal bomb bays swung open revealing a pair of thousand pound penetrators. With the coastie's fighters overwhelmed the call had come in to the 7th Volunteer Regiment's Air Wing. Below the Rim Worlds troops were beginning to react. Fire reaching up to claw his ship out the sky.

Not today, not on your lives... Jimmy thought. The Riever was built to take punishment, and it didn't disappoint. Reaching the right angle and distance Jimmy watched the bomb lead reticule meet his cross hairs. Pulling the trigger he felt the big fighter lurch as the loads dropped away.

Pulling up he missed the strike, but a massive flash from behind was as bright as the sun.

Gas lines under pressure and high explosives rarely mix well as Ensign Sook knew. The resulting energy release traveled down the path of least resistance with the force of a volcanic eruption. The BattleMechs manning the relay point had no chance. Their deaths were like fireflies held up to the sun.

The fire storm reached Davenport City in under ten minutes filtering into transfer stations. Safety systems designed for an accidental breach went into action. For the most part they worked, sacrificing the pipelines to save the city. For the most part...

One line feeding into a middle class residential area failed and turned twelve homes and the families they contained into blast furnaces.

Another blew into the Municipal Rapid Transit System incinerating a subway full of night shift workers.

And one blew into St. Michaels Hospital killing twelve hundred doctors, staff and patients.

Years later, just before Human Space went to hell and a hand basket Jimmy "Vader" Montafiore, bone weary after years of nightmares would swallow a 9mm round from his service pistol.

Now however his shout of exultation turned into a disbelieving cry of anger as he spotted the glint of metal from dozens of fighting vehicles; tracked, legged and hover all in the blue and grey of the 63rd Amaris Dragoons.

His call for a strike on the column received the answer he'd feared.

No can do Striker Three, we've got nothing left....

Bruce; on the ground...

"What do you mean they're getting away?!" Disbelief and outrage colored my voice. Like Hell.

"B there's not much we can do about it, our birds are out of dope and booze, bro. Plus the 63rd's out of even Long Tom range. Our orders are to secure Davenport and wait for Kerensky. Let 'em go B, we'll get them next time." Alex sounded dead on Elmo's feet and his tone brooked no argument.

Passing the order along to my little gang of hooligans I slumped in Hussy's sheltering embrace and closed my eyes.

Well shit...

Field Hospital, 1171st MASH, Task force Elbar...

The casualties started filtering in after the Rim-Worlders finished their withdrawal.

"...no, I will Not accept transplant from that storehouse." SFC Duk Cantor was arguing with the doctors. "I'll live with being blind before I let you put a murdered man's eyes in me."

Dr. Sylvia Chung was from Phuket on Terra, she'd grown up hearing and speaking Viet in the Slum areas-she'd gotten out of those slums with hard work and study.

"Sargeant-" she insisted, "Your tissue type's rare, and if we don't fix them soon you really WILL be blind-we have the-"

"NO." Cantor struck the table, "no. You mustn't. They need to be given funeral rites, not plugged into-"

"you don't have a choice, Sargeant, You're going into surgery, we're GOING to fix your eyes." she said, "That's it, end of discussion. If it makes you feel better, I can look in SLDF supply again and see if we've got a recently deceased donor who matches your tissue type instead, but..."

"Find someone who's related to the ones you want to use, if the family gives their permission, I'll accept it." Cantor said, "but ONLY if they give their permission, otherwise just seal up the wounds and send me home."

Moshe watched the two arguing in a language he was only beginning to learn the basics of, then the Doctor turned to him.

The boy was carrying a sniper's rifle, he'd led the wounded man to the ambulance vehicle and accompanied him back to the rear area. "Infuriating people." she told him in English, "He doesn't want to buy off on an eye transplant that could save his sight."

"He doesn't want them from Running Deer." Moshe guessed.

"exactly-but his tissue type's rare." the Doctor told him, "hell, his Blood type's rare."

"Give me the name of the person whose eyes you want to use-if they've got family in the refugee camps, I can find them." Moshe told her, "Maybe they'll give their permission, maybe they won't, but I think Sargeant Cantor will submit more easily, and not undo your work, if he HAS that permission than if he doesn't."

Chellis River front, 2nd Battalion, 171st Volunteers, Friday...

The second battalion was down to a company of men-including the Elbar volunteers who'd come up with Major Qua, and there were a grand total of four tanks and two 'mechs left out of the sixteen that had been assigned as organic support for the infantry battalion.

Lucky enough, the position wasn't second battalion's responsibility anymore-the armour and support forces from the 90th had rolled in behind the retreating rimjobs, and taken up a defensive cordon closing the hole in the line.

Jimmy stepped into the new command-post, and saluted his replacement left-handed, since his right arm hadn't been find-able.

"Major...what are you doing here, instead of in the field hospital?" the Terran officer asked.

"Making sure all my men are accounted for, sir. We're about done with that, then I'll go sit in the MASH and let them graft a plastic arm on." Qua said, "besides, the bleeding's not that bad."

"Myomer, major-not plastic." the Terran told him.

"Myomer, plastic, not a big difference to me. What is a big difference, is making sure my boys get a proper accounting for. we took a hell of a beating out here." Qua commented, "Only to have the bastards get past us going both ways."

"Not your fault, Major-the Rimjobs just out-clevered us this time, it happens in war, you need to get your ass to the hospital now, plenty of time later to....correct the problem."

LZ Alpha, SLDF resupply point...

The Star League supply system prior to the coup was a complex entity overseeing forward-deployed stockpiles, and moving materiel (slowly) about the Inner Sphere and territorial states. The Amaris Coup, of course, disrupted a lot of this network, often creating temporary shortages on a random basis.

On the other hand, 'volunteer brigades' often used their native supply systems (when available), unless their home states had little or nothing to spare for political reasons.

Most of the Great Houses had varying political reasons, ranging from the need to maintain deniability in case Kerensky's counter-coup failed, to simple paranoia, for slowing or holding back on resupply drops.

As a direct result of this, Kowloonese supplies had arrived, shipped direct from halfway across the Inner Sphere, before the supplies sent from Hesperus II arrived for the 90th and 331st, and before the even closer supplies being routed through third parties for the 7th Andurien.

"What've we got?" Colonel Ngo asked.

"Well, let's see...spares for the Coast Guard, and some replacements for the fighters lost, one thousand tonnes of artillery munitions, spares for the personnel carriers, ammunition for field weapons..." Commander Cu'ong went down the listing, "and personnel replacements fresh out of basic and AIT."

"Officers?" Ngo asked.

"um...ten total." she said.

"Great...just great." Ngo frowned, "How about spare parts for our 'mechs?"

"That is the good news- or would be if we had anything heavier than fifty five tonnes. Might be able to trade some of those actuators to the Tigers for spares to get some of our damaged-but-reparable Shadowhawks running."

Davenport spaceport...

"we can get out, when Kerensky's rebels set up their blockade, they were stretched pretty thin, and there's orbits they can't control where we can make rendezvous with our haulers." Dellinger reported.

"Good, how's the evacuation of civilians going?" General Milton Quarrell asked.

"We're going to run out of spaces, I've managed to get the lists of embarkation trimmed down to senior officials and their immediate family and selected staff, but we're going to have to cut back on those pretty soon, or we won't be able to squeeze our OWN troops onto the dropships." Dellinger said, "You know they'll probably punish you for this."

"I know. I also know that Kerensky's people are waiting for reinforcements-reinforcements we're not going to be getting on our end, if we drag this out, all that'll happen, is the bastards will let the 'loonies run loose, which means crucifixion, impalement, and oil-drum lynchings for the men unlucky enough to survive it-and that, I won't have."

"What's your plan, then, sir?" Dellinger asked.

"I guess I'll have to make an apology in person. After that, whoever takes over for me-well, they're going to at least have experienced men to draw on." Quarrell said.

"Right sir."

Epilogue, December 9, 2776, Mar-Devon, Elbar...

"...letting them transfer to the Ninetieth?" Jimmy Qua asked.

Colonel Ngo nodded. "Yeah, I am. Cu'ong's not too happy about that, but it's how it has to be..." he poured coffee, and shook out two tablets, "Besides, they'll pick up skills and experience we can use after the war, and it's always good to make friends."

"Let me fix that-" Qua stepped over and adjusted his colonel's dress uniform, "You're sure about meeting with Kerensky?"

"I'm sure that I'm going to have to, Jimmy. The bastard knows I'm sick, if I dodge the meet, he'll start thinking I'm too sick, and that's not good for our folks-there's already scuttlebutt since the second wave landings that they want to break up the 171 and distribute our people to other formations as replacements-besides, he's signing the Declaration today, I can't miss that."

Qua frowned, "What about our homeworld's independence?" he asked.

"One thing at a time, Colonel." Ngo said. "First, we fight THIS war, we'll worry about the next when we're finished."

Chellis River, Elbar

I watched a constellation of manmade stars dwindle into the darkness. My feelings were mixed. Anger at being forced to let the RimJobs go, Sorrow for both our own casualties and the countless victims of a mad tyrant. Relief for the survivors here on Elbar, who could begin the long slow road to recovery.

Relief that we were one step closer to our goal, one step closer to home.

Alex stepped up next to me and followed my gaze.

"How many?" he asked, meaning the fighters we'd sent after them.

"Looks like maybe three can't tell for sure."

"We'll get them you know, if not us then somebody else, Despite all the shit the Fat Man's thrown at us, he's done."

I nodded, but my mind was light years away. We almost lost something here that no military historian could quantify. The loss of which would have made us no different from Amaris himself. We'd stepped back this time, but if Elbar was this bad, what would Earth be like?

Across the encampment 'Rat threw up his cards in disgust as Minh Jennings won the third hand straight. Truk Tranh smiled and shook his head from where Didi and Vinh, who actually was a bonified English teacher were helping polish up his English. Tigers take care of their own. A chime from my pocketcomp announced a new text message. Glancing at it I smiled.

That Lieutenant from the 7th, remember her? Well she and I had a date with a bottle of bad wine.

Life goes on

Shattered Dawn bonus Epilogue...  
Chesterton, Capellan March  
Federated Suns  
12 February 2797

Sarah Davion, Duchess of Chesterton and seventh in line for the throne (Cousin James having died on Odell.) strode out onto the balcony smiling at Colonel Tranh of the newly formed 4th Crucis Lancers' 1st Chesterton Rangers Regiment. Truk Tranh smiled back but his eyes were worried. Her husband, Baron and General Bruce Gilmour leaned on the railing in Chesterton's cool fall air. Looking less like a General of the Armed Forces of the Federated Suns and more the villain in a B grade space pirate flick he turned and came over to hug her fiercely.

"You've heard?" he asked quietly. Sarah nodded against his chest.

"Fifty some odd million...by all that is holy." The magnitude of what Jinjiro Kurita had wreaked on Kentares was mind boggling to her. The Kowloonese Colonel's presence sparked something Sarah had been afraid of.

"Your're leaving again." A question not a statement.

"I have to, baby, with the Crappies stalemated we have some breathing room so Uncle John wants us to go kick out Jinjiro's teeth." The last came out in a growl and he looked at her. "We're gonna do more than that, we're gonna mount that freak on an Elbar toothpick..." looking at her he trailed off and looked away.

"Elbar...was that like New Home? You always change the subject; what happened there?" She fixed him with a cat like stare.

Closing his eyes he took a deep breath and told her. Told her about a world where the Devil chopped up Humans for spare parts. Told her about the impalements, the savagery on both sides. When he was done Sarah looked at him in horror that turned into a deep sadness.

Once again a demon had risen and once again her husband was going off to slay it.

"Syn is going too isn't she?" Bruce's adopted daughter had at the age of twenty six risen to command her father's old company in the Black Tigers. Synthia Gilmour had been a terror to the Liao troops trying to take the Chesterton Worlds. With PJ on New Avalon in law school only Rhiannon in Isokoru Satoh's Training Battalion would be left on Chesterton.

"How long?" She whispered into her husband's chest.

"Two weeks to finish mobilizing the Brigade then we join Alex and the Black Tigers at New Avalon." He shook his head angrily then. "\*\*\*\*\* Jinjiro, I should have killed him on Earth when I had the chance."

Pulling his head down suddenly Sarah kissed Bruce hard and for the next couple of hours the couple forgot about madmen, the flames of war about everything but themselves.

It was never enough but it would have to do.

The Moskowicz residence Landing, Chesterton.

Truk Tranh leaned back from the dinner table and burped loudly. Tranh Moskowicz, Minh and Alexander's oldest grinned while seven year old Ahn their youngest giggled. Minh shook her head with a resigned smile.

“What? In some cultures I just gave you a big complement.” Truk smiled.

“Glad you enjoyed it...but you’d better have room for dissert.”

Widening his eyes in mock surprise Truk said in mock surprise thickening his nonexistent accent; “There’s more?! How am I supposed to lead my unit if you fatten me up so much!”

“Well you could always sit on the Dracs.” Ahn fell into giggles at her joke.

Truk grinned, but Alexander looked at his former team mate.

“Truk, you and the Rangers are going off to fight the Combine aren’t you?”

Truk nodded. “This Jinjiro is as bad as Amaris was...The Davvies finally have enough spirit in them to throw the snakes back. The Baron wants his sorry ass bad.”

“Language, mister high and mighty Colonel.” Truk’s former radioman said archly glancing at the children.

“Is Tranh joining Colonel Satoh’s Training Battalion?” Truk asked as the boy in question was arguing with his sister.

“Over my dead body.” Minh said evenly reaching out to hold her husband’s hand. “This family is done with War Period.”

“Truk, you should get out too.” Alexander cut in. “Gods you’ve done enough and we could use you at Jennings-Moskowicz.”

Truk smiled. “Thanks man, I mean it, but I’m no merchant...I’ll stick with what I know.”

All conversation about the military ended then as Ahn climbed up on Truk’s lap to give her uncle a hug.