

Tide of Goldfish

A New Era BattleTech Novel

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Foreword

The story you have on your computer screen (or hold in your hands if you have printed this out, heedless of the damage you cause to the shrinking rainforest) is the product of rage and fear.

Rage at all the things that are wrong with the universe in which the BattleTech story exists.

Fear at what may become of it in these uncertain times.

However, any truly great warrior knows how to turn disadvantages into the key with which to achieve victory. Great warriors also know that if all else fails you get a real big stick and hit your enemy repeatedly.

This work began life as a running joke on the Dropship message board where, inexplicable, some people actually liked it. At this point I decided that some collation and editing might be in order, resulting in what you now have in your possession.

There are a number of “in” jokes from that message board for which I make no excuses. There are, I hope, enough other jokes for the uninitiated not to be left completely in the dark.

Some of the characters will be familiar to anyone who knows the BattleTech universe, while others will be a complete mystery, lifted in their entirety from the denizens of the Dropship message board.

To all those who encouraged me all I can say is – This will be the last time I do this as I am going to start taking my medication again.

Prologue

Lopez, Free Worlds League, May 18th 3082

Within a minute of contact with the attacker, MechWarrior Ewan Hopkins of the 4th Free World Legionnaires realised he was not going to make it.

When his unit had been dispatched to deal with the unknown raiders he had been confident that his Mad Cat II would see him through the battle. But that was before the hoard of unidentified 'Mechs swarmed the forward elements of his Company. The torrent of data on these strange attackers had overloaded his war-book computer, crashing the system. Now that auxiliary monitor only displayed a blue screen, and with the damage the 'Cat had taken, few others were operational.

By the time his Lance commander fell, the only thing Ewan had determined about the enemy was that each 'Mech had the same symbol emblazoned on the centre torso; some kind of fish, yellow on a blue field. Something at the back of Ewan's mind told him he had seen something like this before, but in the heat of battle his concentration was elsewhere.

The hulking form of an Assault 'Mech emerged from the curtain of smoke thrown up by the burning remains of the Razorback piloted to this field of death by Steve Partridge, Ewan's Lance-mate. Even as the 'Mech raised its arms to bring paired PPCs to bear on his Mad Cat II, Ewan pulled the trigger to send two balls of ferrous-coated depleted uranium thundering from his own Gauss Rifles.

The first shell ploughed into the ground at the target's feet after its parachute failed to deploy correctly, but the second hammered into the head of his enemy. The 'Mech staggered from the damage, then recovered. Hopkins cursed, knowing that in the old days such a hit would have most likely been fatal.

The return fire against the Mad Cat II was devastating.

Under the hellish caress of the PPCs the plastic armor protecting his Mech melted like butter. Ewan could feel his 'Mech dying as the blast of charged particles probed the vulnerable internal components. A series of ominous clicks was followed by a jolt as the main power feed to the Gauss Rifles overloaded.

The three remaining Legionnaire 'Mechs were falling back to the tree-line that marked the edge of the vast Gorthond Forest to the West. They came under a hail of laser and missile fire, but as he tried to follow, a second salvo of particle beams reduced the main drive chain of his 'Mech to slag.

With a final click the 90 ton Assault 'Mech crashed to the ground, sending a jolt of pain through Ewan's side as ribs gave way.

The Mad Cat II had come to rest on its side, offering a splendid view of the other Legionnaires 'Mechs as they were cut down by a second group of raiders that had lain hidden just within the forest. Ewan thumbed with his communications system, trying to break through the jamming, but with no success.

The footfalls of an approaching 'Mech reverberated through the crippled Mad Cat II. Realising that little time remained, Ewan downloaded his BattleROM into a personal recorder, then thumbed the record button.

"Medron, I don't have much time. If you have viewed this, then you know we got toasted bad. The new 'Mechs couldn't stop them, armor was useless and the new fire solutions plain just don't work!"

The vibrations from the footfalls of the approaching 'Mech rattled Ewan's teeth now.

"I hope you can do something. God only knows what they want, but there is no force in the Inner Sphere that can stop them."

Hopkins pushed the recorder into a reinforced metal compartment built into his command couch, it would be safe there from the terrible energies that could melt even the hardened plastic of the Assault 'Mech.

The cockpit darkened as the shadow of one of the raiders fell across the Marik BattleMech.

The last thing Ewan Hopkins ever saw was the yellow fish emblem through the shattered canopy as the raider pored fire into his fallen 'Mech...

Chapter 1

Atreus City, Atreus, Marik Commonwealth, Free Worlds League, 4th July 3082

Captain-General Isis Marik held the finely worked net curtains of her study wide aside as she gazed out over Atreus City, the heart of her realm.

The last fifteen years had been much kinder to her than it had been to many of her contemporaries. The train of events that had placed her in the position of ruler of the Free Worlds League and First Lord of the Star League (for this term) had been so twisted that had someone foretold her future she would never have believed them.

The years that followed the Federated Commonwealth Civil War had been a turbulent time for the entire Inner Sphere. The fallout from the revelations of Katherine Steiner-Davion's involvement in the assassination of her mother and brother and her treason of treating with Vlad Ward of the Wolf Clan had shaken many whom though they knew what was going on. None of the misguided Wolves who had followed Vlad to disaster survived Annihilation as the Jade Falcons and Ghost Bears obliterated the traitors.

The Inner Sphere had heaved a sigh of relief as the merciless fighting had severely weakened the Clans, allowing the Lyran Commonwealth and Draconis Combine to contain future attempts by the Clans to expand further. But less than a year later the Word of Blake made their bid for power, creating the Realm of Blake from the Chaos March and other former Terran Hegemony worlds. The rest of the Inner Sphere was shocked when Thomas Marik, then First Lord of the Star League, backed their actions.

More shocks were in store as Precentor-Martial Victor Davion unveiled Thomas as an impostor, throwing the Free Worlds League into complete confusion.

With the backing of Coordinator Hohiro Kurita, First Princess Yvonne Davion and Archon Peter Steiner, Victor commanded a Star League force that quickly evicted the Blakests from the worlds that they had taken. The final assault on Terra had been a bloody affair, but in the end ComStar once more controlled their old homeworld.

From her viewpoint she could see Medron Pryde being escorted across the courtyard by two armed troopers. On one level she was happy to see the talented Warrior who had saved her that night when the assassins came, but also knew that this would be no easy interview.

Like so many others, he had reason to be bitter about the way events had unfolded.

Isis had been stunned by the wave of support that followed the unmasking of the man who had impersonated her father for so many years. With several powerful factions vying for power the League was in danger of tearing itself apart. The political manoeuvring taking place soon became as vicious and nasty as the tactical manoeuvring on the battlefields as dozens of small units clashed on worlds from one side of the League to the other.

Somehow she had survived, as other factions were overwhelmed. The turning point, the point where the people of the League embraced her as the true heir, was hard to pinpoint. All Isis knew was that when two terrifying years had passed she was Captain-General, facing the task of rebuilding her home. She was ashamed to admit that she had been a driving force in the deed that would betray the very men and women to whom she and the rest of the Inner Sphere owed so much.

In an effort to prevent the great loss of life that the Inner Sphere had witnessed over the previous fifty years the House Lords drew up plans to rewrite the rules of warfare. Victor Steiner-Davion had opposed the move, but when the council voted it through resigned his position.

He and Omi departed the Inner Sphere, accompanied by a good part of the Star League Defence Force and the ComGuards. Many others were to follow them as whole regiments were demobilized and their equipment scrapped. New equipment, more suited to the new rules of engagement soon became available, but many were too embittered to adapt.

Disenfranchised. That was the term that was soon to be used to describe the Inner Sphere heroes that had been so nonchalantly cast on the scrap heap.

Her other biggest regret was that she never got the chance to revenge herself against Sun-Tuz Liao. The Chancellor of the resurgent Cappellan Confederation met his end shortly after Isis became Captain-General under the most bizarre of circumstances.

Reportedly the Chancellor came upon the remarkable site of his pet fighting fish, Kai, performing back-flip somersaults in his aquarium. Intrigued by this display of piscine acrobatics, the Sun-Tuz had move closer to the tank, his mouth agape in amazement.

The heroic fish literally leapt at the chance and launched itself into one final titanic leap that carried it straight into his master's mouth. After a brief struggle, Kai succeeded in lodging himself in position to cut off the Chancellors air supply.

Control of the Confederation passed to Kali Liao who was, by all reports, nuttier than a fruitcake.

Thoughts of the past were cut off by a respectful knock at the study door.

"Come!" Isis turned from the window and walked quickly to the centre of the room as the door opened.

It was a shock to see Medron Pryde out of uniform, but that only underlined the anger she sensed radiating from every pore in his body.

Disenfranchised...Disenfranchised...Disenfranchised... She could almost hear it running like a litany through his mind.

"Medron, thank you for coming." Isis moved forward to greet him.

"Not like you give people much choice when you send the 'goon squad' after them." Pryde gestured with a thumb over his shoulder at the armed troopers who had escorted him in.

"You just got back from Lopez?" Now that she was closer she could see the fatigue from high-G space flight in his stance.

Medron grimaced and his look was sour as he continued. "I have the honour to report that the 4th Free Worlds Legionnaires no longer exist as an effective fighting force. They were hit real bad and it'll take them months to get back on line. You lost some good people out there."

"No indication of what the raiders wanted? Nothing at all?" The sting of sadness Isis felt every time somebody died in the service of the League was tinged with anger at the apparent senselessness of the attacks.

Medron began to pace, arms crossed and head down. "No, nothing. They landed, toasted the 4th and left." Stopping before the Captain-General once more he brought his head up. "But you could have gotten all this from whoever is in command over there. What do you want me for?"

"Medron, the League asks your services once more to combat this threat. We are not the only ones there raiders have attacked. The Federated Suns, Draconis Combine, Lyran Commonwealth, Jade Falcons and Ghost Bears have all been hit."

"What about the Capellans?" Suspicion flared in Medron's eyes.

"We can't get a straight answer from them, but they are always like that."

"So what can I do? Why not just set the Knights of the Inner Sphere loose on them?"

Isis sighed, "I did, but they were betrayed by one of their officers and ambushed."

"Betrayed? Who?"

"It was Rob Trane. Apparently he hated the way he was portrayed in 'Star Lord' and turned against us. The few Knights who survived the ambush... Well he helped the raiders hunt down and destroy them..."

Medron was shocked by the news. He knew Trane was a stuck up pain in the behind, but he never thought the man would have taken 'Star Lord' so personally.

"So, what do you expect me to do?"

"I know it is asking a great deal of you, but so far no Inner Sphere force has been able to stand against these raiders. We need you... We need you to form a special unit of Disenfranchised warriors to take them on."

Chapter 2

Cavern of the Scales, New Wales, Somewhere in the Periphery, 11th July 3082

Rob Trane glanced with distaste at the pitiful excuse for a human he escorted into the great underground cavern. He had to shove his charge in the small of the back to start him moving towards the throne sited on the central dais. The only illumination came from the great tanks that lined the walls of this place. The quick movements of the fish within threw flashes of light and shadow across the floor.

As he reached the dais, Trane bowed to the bald man seated there while his snivelling companion grovelled at his feet.

“What news, my old friend?” There was nothing to suggest friendship in the voice of the body armor clad figure sitting imperiously on the hand carved throne.

“This one has word from our agent in the Free Worlds League.” Trane aimed a kick at the form huddled on the ground.

Dead eyes focused on the unfortunate messenger. “Speak!”

“My Lord! The Captain General is building a new Regiment to protect herself from your armies! She has recalled Medron Pryde!”

“Medron Pryde you say? Medron Pryde?”

The messengers face was a mask of fear. “Yes, Lord!” Many had died for bringing lesser news.

“Pryde would not be recalled just to bolster their defences. Could Isis Marik presume to launch an attack against our forces? There is more?” The seated figure could see the terror threatening to consume the man at his feet.

“They are recruiting Disenfranchised Warriors my Lord.”

“Are they now! Are they?” A minute passed, torturing the nerves of the messenger. “Is our agent in position?”

“Yes my Lord.”

“Good, Have him find out the destination of this unit of the Disenfranchised.” The figure reached down and pulled a box from a crate that sat beside his throne. Nonchalantly he tossed it to the man before him. “You have done well. Go now!”

The messenger grovelled once more before snatching up the box and departing the cavern, hungrily sniffing at the seams of the cardboard.

“We are lucky, are we not Trane. To be able to buy such loyalty in return for a few malformed, twisted, pieces of plastic?”

“Our ranks swell with their numbers, my Lord.” Trane reluctantly conceded. “Their fervour and numbers do make up their lack of tactical sophistication.”

The man on the throne grunted sourly. “Still, Medron Pryde and his band could pose a danger.”

“Our plan has always been to strike without warning, then withdraw. The House Lords will be forced to spread their forces ever thinner, never knowing where we will strike next. We must draw their best units off from our targets.”

“I agree, Lord. But what is so different about another regiment, no-matter its composition?”

Fists slammed against the arms of the throne. “I don’t like it Trane. I don’t like the idea of an Inner Sphere unit acting offensively. If the plan is to work we must keep them reacting, not acting.”

“What are your orders, my Lord?”

“Move up the Golden Harmony Regiment. Get them in position to deal with Pryde and his troops. We may have to step up our timetable, so take your Mage Knights Regiment to the forward supply depot on Astrokaszy and prepare to launch Phase Two.” A wave of a hand dismissed Trane.

“Yes, Lord.” Rod Trane bowed then turned to march from the cavern.

The man on the throne remained seated, lost in thought until the clink of metal on metal broke his silent reflection. He turned to look at the shadows on his left.

“Quite a surprising turn of events is it not. Katherine?”

The rattle of chains accompanied the rapid movement of the figure that charged from the shadows. Brought up short of its target by the heavy chain attached to collar, the figure flailed wildly with hands with beautifully manicured fingernails were like long talons.

The seated figure merely laughed at a face that was nothing more than a mask of hate.

“Katrina! Katrina! My name is Katrina Steiner-Davion!”

“My, how ungrateful we are today. Perhaps you should consider what would have happened had I not spirited you away at the last moment. Your brother was really looking forward to mounting your head on a pike.”

“Your insane plan will never work. Do you really think the Inner Sphere will follow you?”

“But my dear Kath..” the man smiled indulgently “Katrina, once my plan for the leaders of the Great Houses is complete, they will have no choice.”

“And just how, may I ask, does having me wear this French Maids costume fit into your demented scheme? And this stupid red wig!”

Once more the enthroned man smiled. “I fear you fail to understand our target audience, my dear. After extensive market research it was determined that the most desirable market segment we want to control would be most susceptible to that outfit.”

He could see that Katherine remained sceptical. “It was just such inattention to image that resulted in your downfall. You completely failed to attract the most talented (or rich) warriors, and so your army was overwhelmed. I do not intend to make the same mistake.”

“But you failed in your last pitiful attempt to take over the Inner Sphere.” Katherine yanked fruitlessly at her chains.

That removed the smile from his face. Yes, his last scheme had disintegrated after his growing army had been infiltrated. A small unit made up from renegades from across known space in cooperation with the Trane and the accursed Knights of the Inner Sphere had thwarted his plans. Had his preparations not been so complete, he too would have fallen along with his troops.

The smile returned as he thought of the reception that woman from the Clans must have received on returning to her people with the head of his double.

“My dear Kath...” The smile widened. “Katrina, I have taken many lessons from the past and they make me stronger. It remains to be seen if the Inner Sphere will survive after failing to learn from its past.”

With one bound he leaped from the throne and raised both fists to the cavern roof. “Mark my words! I, Stefan Amaris the Seventh, will become First Lord of the Star League!”

Chapter 3

Zenith Jump Point, Atreus, Marik Commonwealth, Free Worlds League, 11th July 3082

“We are almost at the Jump Point, Medron.” Ravezero had stirred Medron Pride from his bunk as requested and now was taking him to the bridge.

Although the Dropship could have made the journey to the special point above the north pole of the systems primary, Ravezero had informed him that the ship they were to rendezvous with would not be there. The Dropship commander made a strong case for settling for a gentler one gee transit. There would be more than enough opportunities to push themselves later.

“So what’s so special about this ship? The Captain-General was very mysterious about it.”

Ravezero smiled at his passenger. “The SLS Xenophobe is a new destroyer built around a an experimental Kearny/Fuchida drive core the Star League captured from the Clans. She just finished her space trials.”

“So what’s so special about the core?” Medron was not enthusiastic about trusting himself, or his mission to some half-baked prototype.

Seeing the concern in the face of his old friend, the Star League Dropship commander slapped Pryde on the shoulder. “Relax, we have been working on her for months. We got the bugs worked out now.”

They reached the Dropship core and Ravezero summoned the elevator that would carry them to the bridge. “No, this core allows us to make much longer jumps than the conventional type of drive. Admittedly, the first time we tried it, we were thrown out of charted space. So far away that the standard coordinates system just could not be used for navigation.”

“How did you get back?”

“We were lucky. We had Rick Raisley and the rest of Team Bonsai with us. They were able to modify the navigation program to get us back to the Inner Sphere.”

“You were lucky you didn’t find aliens.” Medron just could not pass up the chance at the joke.

Ravezero looked embarrassed.

“You did find aliens?”

“Well, sore of. As far as we could tell, the system was inhabited by a band of humans who had somehow been stranded out there for centuries. But there was also an indigenous population of intelligent avian life forms.”

“Birds? Intelligent birds?”

Ravezero nodded. “Yup, Chickens the size of Elementals.”

“Incredible! What happened? Why has this not been announced to the Inner Sphere?”

“Well. You see... It was the drive... We were still working on it... Well what happened was that when we emerged from our jump, we created a pulse of radiation that sterilized the system. A little bit.”

“How do you ‘sterilize’ a whole star systems ‘a little bit’, You killed them all?”

The elevator arrived and the doors swished open. “Well...”

The two men entered the lift. “... Yes.”

“Now I know why your galley keeps serving chicken.”

* * * * *

The express elevator delivered Medron and Ravezero on the Dropship bridge a moment later. “The real advantage, now we have the radiation thing sorted, is that this ship can take up anywhere in the Inner Sphere in one jump. It’s a really great plot device that avoids having to explain how we cover the vast distances involved in this story.” Medron nodded his understanding as they mounted the raised dais where the command position was located.

It had been a long time since Medron Pryde had stood upon the Dropship bridge, but nothing had changed as he look around at the consoles teeming with flashing lights and monitors displaying incomprehensible, but photogenic, information.

His gaze finally came to settle on the vacant science station. “Any word of Mac?”

Ravezero seated himself in his command chair and fastened the straps. Too often he had seen crewmen tossed across the bridges of ships in HoloVIDs, and he was dammed if he was going to let it happen to him. “No, it’s been years since anybody had any word. He’s probably dead by now.”

Medron nodded sadly. “So, what is out destination?”

“Once we hook up with the Xenophobe, we make the jump to Solaris VII. The rest of the unit will join us there.”

The helmsman turned to the command station. “We are coming into visual range now.”

Ravezero nodded. “Thank you Chrome. Put it on screen please.”

The grey hull of the Xenophobe contrasted sharply with the scattered star field behind it. The sun illuminated the thick armor plates and cast razor sharp shadows from the myriad weapons mounts that bristled the surface of the ship. Three other transports were already attached and one remaining docking hardpoint beacons to the Dropship.

Medron was speechless for a long moment. “It looks like two UrbanMechs, on a stick!”

Sadly, Ravezero nodded in agreement. “They had Plog on the design team.” He switched on the ship-wide address system. “All hands, prepare for docking manoeuvres. Chrome, activate the automatic docking system.”

Chrome skilfully flicked the switch marked “Automatic Docking System” and sat back in his flight couch, looking bored as strains of the Blue Danube drifted from the flight console.

Ravezero shrugged at Medron’s questioning glance. “The music is traditional...”

Pryde grasped the safety rail as the deck shifted and vibrated under his feet while he watched the Xenophobe draw closer. With a lurch and a soft crunch, the Dropship made contact with the Destroyer. More grinding noises followed as docking clamps tightened their grip.

“Docking complete!” Chrome managed to beat the computer, just.

“Signal the Xenophobe we are all secure and they can fire up the KFC drive. Let’s go to Solaris.”

As the jump field began to form, Medron began to wish he had passed on that last chicken sandwich.

Chapter 4

Solaris Spaceport, Solaris VII, Freedom Theatre, Lyran Commonwealth, 18th July 3082

The 'Mech bay buried in the bowls of the Dropship was filled with the Disenfranchised warriors. The cavernous area echoed with the voices of old comrades and enemies as they talked of times past and the call to arms that had brought them here.

The people were dwarfed by 'Mechs secured in the cubicles that lines the bulkheads, but at the moment the Warriors of the Dropship paid no heed to their weapons.

Medron Pryde and Ravezero stood on an overhead gantry, leaning on the safety rail as they surveyed the crowd.

"It's incredible. So many faces I never thought to see again." Medron could only feel humbled at how many had answered the call. "Look! There's Rick Raisley and Team Bonsai."

"Over there!" Ravezero pointed to three warriors, deep in conversation. "Js, Atticus Longwalker and Brainburner."

"Isn't that RatBoy and Tel Hazan over there?" Medron straightened from the rail. "Guess we'd better get this show on the road before they finish catching up on old times too much and start shooting each other." He descended to the main deck, Ravezero close behind.

A small podium with a holo-projector had been erected in the centre of the bay. The two men worked their way through the crowd, exchanging nods and greetings as they passed. Once on the podium Ravezero handed Medron a karaoke microphone and silenced the crowd with a piercing whistle. The buzz of conversation died almost as quickly as a Liao BattleMech company at a 4th Succession War re-enactment.

"First, I'd like to thank you all for volunteering to serve the Star League and the Inner Sphere once more. Second, for the love of Blake, would somebody turn off that music!"

Ravezero made a cutting gesture to Chrome, on which he switched off the karaoke tape deck off.

"Thanks." Medron manipulated the controls of the holo-projector. "This is the data we have gathered on the raiders so far. This..." A schematic of the Assault Mech that had destroyed Ewan Hopkin's Mad Cat II on Lopes was projected at one-tenth-life size above the crowd. "This is their primary Assault 'Mech, which we have code-named an 'Balrog'. It's armed with twin PPCs and a laser of a type we have never seen before."

Another button changes the display for a squat, birdlike 'Mech.

"This Medium design has been designated a 'Flounder', because our intelligence team was running out of ideas." The hologram shifted as various aspects of the design were highlighted. "It is armed with some kind of rapid fire autocannon, but what makes it really dangerous is the special black rubber armor. If you are too close when you use missiles or ballistic weapons, they'll just bounce right back at you and catch you on the rebound."

The display changed once more, presenting an ugly humanoid figure.

"The final surprise these raiders had in store was this. It appear to be some kind of ProtoMech which we have designated "Scampi" because they can take a battering and they are small fry."

Medron let the murmurs of the crowd die before he continued.

"To combat this foe, we have been supplied with the best designs currently in production. We can select from Uziel, Argus, Razorback, Thanaos and other modern equipment. Any questions? Yes Js?"

"What are we looking at here? Is it some kind of splitter group from the Clans, or just some mad despot who has found another Star League Research Station?"

Tel Hazan broke in before Medron could answer. "They are not Clan. The Grand Council launched an investigation after the attack on Jade Falcon and Ghost Bear territory. All ten Clans agree that it is not the action of anyone originating from the Clans." The Clansman's gaze challenged all present to question his statement.

“Thanks Tel.” Medron then addressed the assembled warriors again. “Battle recordings and after action reports confirm that the raiders did not exercise Clan rules of engagement, instead relying on group fire, physical attacks and other un-Clan-like actions. Any other questions?” There were none. “Alright, personnel assignments will be posted on the main computer, with your I.D. tags giving you access.” Medron held up the electronic tags attached to a chain he wore. The crowd began to break up as Medron and Ravezero left the dais.

Before they reached the main hatch, Atticus Longwalker intercepted them. Brainburner walked beside him holding a old battered tin box.

“Medron, I’m worried about the new ‘Mechs.” Atticus pointed to an Argus that towered over them. “Are they up to fighting these raiders?”

“Don’t worry, They’ll be fine once you get up to speed with them.” Medron confidently pounded on the leg of the Argus with his fist.

“I just don’t know” Atticus said, watching Medron trying to fix the hole he had just punched through the plastic armor that shielded the heavy ‘Mech.

Brainburner came forward holding out the box. It was old and the rusty metal showed through where the painted tartan pattern had flaked away at the edges. Medron took the box.

“What is it?” He turned to box over and over in his hands, noting that it was lighter than he expected.

“Mac gave it to me the day before he left. He said I’d understand what it was for when the time came.” Brainburner shrugged.

“So what’s in it?”

“Nothing, now.”

“So what was in it?”

“Oh. It was full of shortbread. I got hungry one day and figured the time had come. So I eat it.” Brainburner was slightly crestfallen.

“So, was there anything in it? Holo-disks? Messages on the shortbread perhaps?”

“Nothing like that, I think. But if you take the lid off and hold it up to the light...”

Medron did so, holding the lid up to the bright light-strips that illuminated the bay. He gasped, seeing tiny pinholes of light twinkling down at him. “A map?”

Brainburner nodded agreement. “That’s what I thought.”

“Good work!”

“I can’t take the credit for it.” Brainburner glanced down at his feet. “My son found it. I was too busy eating the shortbread.”

“Let’s check this against the star charts” He handed the box lid to Ravezero. “If this map actually works, then whatever’s there must be important.”

Ravezero held up the lid and squinted at the pattern of lights. “You think we can spare the time investigating?”

“I think we have to. I don’t know what we’ll find, but I bet it’s going to be important.”

Chapter 5

System XP137-81 (Codename Bob), The Periphery, 25th July 3082

It was, Medron decided, not one of the nicer planets he had visited during his system-hopping career.

Brainburner's map did indeed match up with the Xenophobe's navigational database. The KFC drive performed a flawless leap, carrying them out thirty lightyears beyond the Circinus Federation. The single habitable planet would have drawn them even were it not for the faint beacon the Xenophobe picked up.

The Dropship made a standard one-gee approach while the Xenophobe began to unfurl the kilometres-wide "sail". Although outfitted with the expensive Lithium batteries that enabled the ship to make two successive jumps her captain, Commodore Hartford, and Ravezero wanted to keep the extra charge in reserve.

The planet itself had proven to be nothing special. Chrome piloted the Dropship in manually, grounding in the foothills of the equatorial mountain range from which the beacon continued to repeat an antiquated Star League signal. Medron disembarked his Command Company after Atticus Longwalker deployed the rest of the First Battalion to secure the landing zone.

At first sight the foothills gave an appearance of bleakness. Even at the equator, the gusts of the bitterly cold winds ensured that the only plant life consisted of ground hugging moss and grasses. As Medron piloted his Argus over the uneven ground he soon discovered that in this case appearances were not deceiving. He soon concluded that when it was not raining, it was about to start. The sodden ground was well drained in the foothills and could support 'Mechs, but the thought of what the plains and valleys must be like had Medron vowing never to go there in anything but a hovercraft.

He didn't even want to think about conditions up at the poles.

"Medron, I think we've got it." Brainburner was running point with his mixed Lance.

"Hold your position, the rest of us are coming up" The Argus squished it's way up the next rise to stop beside the Uziel Brainburner had selected. A vertical rock wall ahead blocked their path, but at the foot was a tunnel. Obviously not natural, it looked big enough to allow the passage of Mechs.

"Not another forgotten Star League installation." Brainburner began to wonder if there was ever the chance of finding something original in the Periphery. "Do you think there could be equipment we can use after all these years?"

Medron rubbed his chin thoughtfully while running a scan of the tunnel. "Possibly. I haven't heard of the Grey Death Legion coming out this way."

"Do you think it's safe? That place could have all kinds of traps and stuff." Brainburner ran his own sensors over their intended route. "I think I got something."

"Where?"

Squinting at his Magnetic Anomaly Detector, Brainburner worked to superimpose the results on an image of the ground between them and the tunnel. "Three hundred meters out from the rock face, to the right of the tunnel. Something metal, just on the surface.

"Let's go have a look see. Everybody else cover us, and stay sharp!"

Medron removed his Neurohelmet, noting once more that the new plastic ones were much lighter, but nowhere near as impressive as the ones he was used to. Once free of his command couch he was able to swing open the main hatch and climb down to join Brainburner, who was using a portable scanner to pinpoint the object of their interest.

"Over there!" Brainburner pointed, cautiously advancing, Medron moving carefully to keep his associate between him and the point indicated.

Brainburner halted and pocketed the scanner. Bending down, he freed his combat knife from its boot sheath, drawing the blade forth with a steely rasp. Gingerly, he began to probe the ground with the knife.

The howling wind played on Medron's nerves. "Well?"

Brainburner held up a hand for silence as he continued to work.

“Well?” Medron Pryde asked again after a minute of activity.

Ashen faced, Brainburner turned and beckoned him over. “I think you better look at this.”

As he approached, Medron could see that a patch of the grass and moss had been cut away by the combat knife. Underneath was what could only be a grave, covered with rocks. At one end of the pile was a ragged sheet of BattleMech armor, doubtless what had set off the MAD. As he drew closer, Medron could see that something had been cut into the metal.

KYLE DONAHUE, ASSISTANT COOK (3RD CLASS), GREY DEATH LEGION. BORN 3030 – KIA 3069

“So they did come here!” Medron was aghast, for anything that could kill a cook of the Grey Death would be a force to be reckoned with.

Surveying the mouth of the cave, Medron could now see that it was really a tunnel burrowing into the rock. Tell-tail groves of an old Star League tunnelling machine could still be faintly seen on the walls. Medron pulled a communicator from his belt and opened the Command Company frequency. “Fokker, Slicer, get your gear together and get down here. We’re going in. Hazen, you are in command until I get back.” The Clansman confirmed the order and by the time Medron had checked his own equipment, the two MechWarriors had dismounted and joined him and Brainburner before the entrance.

“This is how we do it. Me and Brainburner take the left side, you two the right. If something jumps us then use pattern Alpha.”

“Alpha?” Slicer was checking the loads on his Sternsacht pistols. “I’m not familiar with that one.”

Medron grinned, “Run like hell! If you stop to ask which way, you’ll be talking to yourself.”

The four Warriors of the Dropship looked around at the open hills around them for one last time. “Right! Let’s go.”

The two hundred and fifty meters from the entrance to the mighty inner doors took a nerve-jangling five minutes for the cautious team to traverse. Medron let go an explosive sigh of relief when all four of them reached that point without and casualties.

“Now what?” Fokker looked at the heavily armoured inner portal. “How do we get this open?”

“We’re in luck. Somebody left the side door open.” Brainburner nodded towards a small personnel door to one side of the ‘Mech entrance. The smaller door was slightly ajar and a faint light could be observed. Brainburner was about to pull the door open wider when he froze at a sound from within.

There was a clank of metal on stone, followed by the sound of flowing liquid, then silence. Brainburner looked at Medron but before he could say anything the sound repeated itself.

With hand motions Medron sketched out their plan. Brainburner and Slicer would pull open the hatch then Medron and Fokker would dive through with weapons ready. Once through, the other two could support them from the cover of the hatchway.

The hatch proved to be less troublesome than expected. Although old, it was well maintained and had apparently been oiled recently. Medron Pryde and Fokker were thru in moments, weapons drawn and covering the chamber beyond.

Medron scanned the area even as he shouted. “Freeze! Nobody move! I said.... Freeze?”

Chapter 6

Mage Knight Encampment, Astrokaszy, The Periphery, 25th July 3082

Nights in the Astrokaszy desert were always bitterly cold under the cloudless sky. Some hours before the second moon had risen, and now it cast a pale greenish light. The landscape was transformed under the moonlight, giving the image of some alien seabed, rather than the parched landscape of the day.

A black-clad figure moved stealthily through this unnatural terrain, soft-soled boots hardly making a whisper on the sand. Although the nocturnal desert animals marked the intruders passing, the troopers clad in heavy body armor were more interested in huddling around makeshift braziers to notice anything.

Flitting from shadow to shadow cast by the prefabricated buildings, the stealthy figure reached the main command centre without challenge. Although the main doors were guarded, a small side window afforded easy access after the skilful application of a vibro-dagger to the frame.

Once in the hastily erected structure, Akira found himself in an unlit, musty smelling storage area lined with shelves stacked high with cylindrical containers.

Relying on the moonlight filtering through the window, Akira carefully approached the blank door that was the only exit from the room. After listening carefully for several minutes and hearing nothing, he tried to door, finding it locked.

After casting a cautious glance around the room once more, Akira picked up one of the cylinders and risked using his torch, taking care to use his body to shield the dim light from the window. The card cylinder was closed at both ends with plastic caps and was devoid of markings. It took no more than a flick of the vibro-dagger to remove one of the caps to reveal that the cylinder was filled with musty smelling flakes of fish food. Looking up and down the rows and rows of fully stocked shelves, Akira calculated there had to be fifty tons of the stuff in this room alone.

He hid the opened container at the back of the shelf where, with luck, his handy work would not be discovered for some time. Moving back to the door, once more he forced himself to listen for several minutes before slipping a set of lock-picks from his belt. Several deft motions were rewarded by a faint clicking sound from the lock mechanism.

Cautiously Akira slipped through to explore the rest of the building.

Major Sigard Von Danaken was reporting to Rod Trane in the Tank Room. “General Trane, the rations have been distributed to the troops as you ordered.”

Trane nodded while sprinkling fish food into a tank bearing a label that read ‘Hohiro’. The fish within circled in apparent serenity, but Trane could see it was cautiously eyeing the food, waiting for the right moment to strike. “Were there any problems this time Major?”

“The boosters were distributed fairly General. I oversaw it myself. One of the men over in Baker Company got a Unique, but we soon broke things up with the Neural-Lash.”

Trane sighed, knowing that such behaviour was only to be expected. “Just so-long as they are ready to fight.”

Moving to the next tank marked ‘Yvonne’ Trane though for a moment that it was unoccupied until he spotted her hiding behind the decorative castle. Carefully measuring the quantity of fish food from the container he carried, he continued with his task. “What of these ‘Warrior’s of the Dropship’ that Pryde has recruited? Any news from our agent yet?”

“Only that they have manpower enough to fill out a Regiment and they were headed into the Periphery.”

The occupant of the tank marked ‘Peter’ circled aggressively as Trane approached, raising its dorsal fin in challenge. “Looking for us no doubt.”

The Major’s brow creased in concentration. “I’m not so sure General. The last report suggested they might be looking for something to help them oppose us.”

“I have to agree with Amaris. It would take a miracle for them to stop us now. They have already lost, but have yet to realise it.”

“The Star Lord is most wise.” Major Danaken agreed with his commander.

“The only thing that could help them would be the Ultimate Combat System, and they will never find it. The only ones who know are all dead.”

The General grew pale at the mention of the fabled Ultimate Combat System.

“Keep track of them Major. The moment we have news of where they are headed get the Golden Harmony Regiment moving to intercept. They are not the only ones with a KFC drive.”

Walking passed the tank marked “Kail”, Trane noted that the surface was seething and bubbling. “Nothing for you I think.”

“Sir?”

“The fish Major, the fish.” Trane looked down at the tank bearing the label ‘Isis’. “Don’t you worry my pretty, soon you will be going home. Soon we’ll all be going home.”

The ever-silent intruder had overheard Trane’s every word.

Recognising the renegade Knight and the significance of his presence here, Akira retraced his steps and departed without leaving a trace. Fighting the excitement welling up inside him, he concentrated in negotiating the perimeter defences.

Dawn saw him clear of the encampment and safely back in the mountains, where he performed the sand dance to greet the rising sun, thinking of the money his information would bring.

“Freeze! Nobody move! I said... freeze?” Entering the chamber beyond the door was like stepping into a time machine.

Medron had seen many holo-vid programs detailing the history of the original Star League, but even with the technological renaissance the Inner Sphere had undergone in the last few decades, little progress had been made in restoring the glory of the peak of human civilisation. After the centuries Medron Pryed had expected to find a run-down complex of dingy rooms and peeling paint.

The room into which Medron and Fokker had charged was the main entrance to a Star League facility in pristine condition. The banners hanging from the walls looked like they were woven yesterday, the paint looked so fresh he could almost smell it, and the floor was freshly washed.

He knew the floor was freshly washed because they had just interrupted the process.

An old man, his hair pure white and face a network of wrinkles stood beside a bucket with his mop in hand. He looked over his shoulder at the intruders, his faded blue eyes twinkling as if at some great jest. “Can I help you, son?” The mopping process continued despite the deadly weapons pointing at him.

Brainburner and Slicer stepped through the hatch on seeing that Medron and Fokker had not been gunned down, vaporised by hidden lasers or crushed by falling rocks.

“Errr.. Who are you, What are you doing here?”

“Right now son, I’m the man mopping the floor.”

“Yes but...Are you in charge here?”

“No... I am” The four Warriors spun to face the side tunnel from which the voice came. A figure in a hooded robe of brown homespun cloth stood in the tunnel. A Claymore almost as tall as its owner was strapped across the figures back.

It had been years, but Medron recognised the robe immediately. “Mac?”

“Aye...tis me. Welcome to Bob Base. What took you so long?”

Chapter 7

Bob Base Bar and Grill, System XP137-81 (Codename Bob), The Periphery, 25th July 3082

“From the way ye tell it, things are sounding grim back there.” Mac had taken the Dropship Warriors the “Bar and Grill” attached to Bob Base where Medron explained the their mission while partaking of a chicken-free meal.

“No kidding, and the dimmest thing is, even the Warrior’s of the Dropship may not be enough to defeat these raiders. We have no idea where they are getting their weapons, or what their ultimate objective is. They just drop into a system, shoot up the defenders, and jump back out. They don’t take any loot or prisoners. No demands have been received. Nothing.” Medron chewed thoughtfully on his steak for a minute. “We had hopes that we would find something here that would help.”

The robed figure emitted a low chuckle. “Aye lad, ye were richt ta be comin here.”

Medron winced at the thick accent. “Do you think you could try to stick to English?”

“Sorry... Well yes, I think we can find something here to help you.” Mac paused for a moment. “Come on, I have something to show you.”

Mac stood and motioned them all to follow him. Brainburner, Slicer and Fokker moved to the door, but Medron paused to grab one final mouthful from his plate.

“I don’t understand how you manage to keep this place running.” Slicer took in the whole complex with a sweep of his arm. “I mean getting the equipment, the manpower required. At the very least you would need a pile of C-Bills.”

“It’s not too hard. You’d be surprised how much you can make from the tourist industry when you have a genuine ‘Hidden in the Periphery Star League Base’” Mac ushered them through a portal into a cavernous bay beyond. “The main exhibit room.”

The contents of the chamber were breathtaking. “Is that a real Mackie?” Medron turned to question Mac. “And the Warhammer, it’s painted up like the Black Widow’s!”

“Well, how would you suggest I paint Natasha Kerensky’s ‘Mech?” Mac shrugged and pointed to some of the other exhibits. “Victor Davion’s Victor, I had some luck getting that one, I can tell you. Then there is Theodore Kurita’s BattleMaster and Dan Allard’s original Wolfhound.”

Brainburner was looking at the central display. “You’re not telling me you get the real Yen-Lo-Wang over there are you?”

“Kai drove a hard bargain, but he needed the money.” He escorted between the silent ‘Mechs, pointing out items of interest. “And here, we have Alexandr Kerensky’s Orion. A big hit with Clan visitors, especially Goliath Scorpion Seekers, thought the Trials of Possession can be troublesome”

“So you think we can use this stuff against the raiders?” Fokker sounded dubious of such a plan. “There just ain’t enough to go round all the Warriors here.”

“Oh-no, you don’t get my prize exhibits. Follow me.” Mac set of through another portal between a BattleMaster of the Davion Brigade of Guards and an Emperor in Blackwind Lancer colors.

The area beyond contained rank upon rank of BattleMechs. As far as Medron could make out, every design introduced after the Clan Invasion was represented amongst the silent ranks. “Mac! You bought all this with the profits from a museum?”

“Well, the museum helps to pay for the maintenance, and I was able to pick a lot of them up for a song when the Inner Sphere was dumping them for their current equipment.” They followed the robed curator between the towering weapons.

“But you must have had a lot of money to set all this up.” Medron guessed.

“I made quite a lot selling modified Heavy Gauss Rifle ammunition to the Lyran Commonwealth.”

“Modified?”

“Yes. You would be surprised how easy it was. I would buy Heavy Gauss Rifle ammunition from the Lyrans, then modify it by cutting off the parachute. I could then sell the rounds back to Lyran MechWarriors on the Black Market.”

Slicer was incredulous. “You were selling them their own ammunition?”

The hooded head nodded. “It was surprising how much they were willing to pay to avoid the range limitations of the regulation stuff.”

“But there can’t be that much profit in it to buy all this!” Slicer could still not believe what he was hearing.

“Well, there wasn’t, not that much.” Mac gave an embarrassed coughed. “I had all these parachutes left over...”

“And?” Medron was quickly reconsidering his retirement plans.

“Well I had all that good quality silk left over. It took some doing, but I was able to produce a very successful range of lingerie. I can tell you, the design challenges were very different from the ones you have with BattleMechs.”

“There is really that much money in underwear?”

By the sixth cavern, Medron concluded that there were indeed a lot of opportunities in underwear. In the last hour Medron was sure he had seen more ‘Mechs than in his entire career.

Rank upon rank of Warhammers, Archers, Griffins, Wasps and Stingers stood before then now, but what really held his attention were the sleek lines of a mint-condition Phoenix Hawk LAM. “I’m looking forward to taking this baby out for a spin”

“Not so fast Medron, You get to pay, just like everyone else.”

“This is more like it!” Brainburner was eyeing the hulking form of a late model Marauder. “We have a real chance now.”

Medron was shaking his head. “Not as much as we would with the UCS, but Victor took it with him when he left.”

“Not quite Medron.”

Medron looked at Mac expectantly. “You have it?”

“No, but I know a man who does.”

The Warrior’s of the Dropship were scampering all over Bob Base, selecting ‘Mechs and marshalling supplies and spare parts with childlike glee.

The old man leaned on his mop, watching the activity, shaking his head and smiling. To be young again and join in the grand adventure.

“It’s like Christmas, and the kids are opening their presents.” Mac stood beside him.

“You’ll be going with them?”

“Yes.” Mac thumbed the thick manuscript he was holding, sadly rereading chapter thirteen. “I’m afraid I have to. It’s up to you now Hanse, you’ll have to look after the place.”

“Don’t worry. Thomas and I can handle it.

Chapter 8

Atreus City, Atreus, Marik Commonwealth, Free Worlds League, 1st August 3082

“General Trane, we have a report from our agent!” Major Sigard Von Danaken entered the opulent office space that Trane had leased here in Atreus City clutching the vital message.

The KFC equipped Jumpship the Star Lord had placed at his disposal allowed Trane to oversee the final preparations of Phase Two. Now he was pacing back and forth before a large fish tank. “You had no trouble with ComStar?”

“No sir. As you predicted they are maintaining their strict neutrality.”

“That will change, once they realise what we are doing.” He ceased pacing and turned to stare into the tank. “What has the spy to say then?”

“Pryde has located a cache of OldTech ‘Mechs in the Periphery and is outfitting his troops. They expect to be operational within the week.” The Major glanced once more at the message. “They are headed for Stein’s Folly for some reason.”

“The Capellan March? We haven’t been raiding that deep into Federated Suns territory.” Trane continues to gaze into the tank, lost in thought. “There’s nothing there – No.” Trane corrected himself. “There is nothing we know of that’s there.”

Snarling, he turned and snatched his ceremonial sword from the table. Half drawing the steel he faced Major von Danaken. “These ‘Mechs make no difference. This ends now!”

“Sir?” The Major was concerned, never having seen Trane in this mood before. “Your orders?”

“We know where they are headed, and when.” He slammed the blade back into its scabbard. “Send in the Golden Harmony Regiment. Let’s end Pryde’s little game now.”

Brainburner Jr. cursed as the cerulean beam of a PPC whipped across the torso of his RAC equipped Hatchetman, then looked around guiltily, knowing his father had probably heard him.

The attack from an unseen Uziel had jolted his ‘Mech around and he was left fighting the controls to try and bring his weapons into line with his attacker. With one final desperate pull on the stick he centred the crosshairs on the hip assembly of the ungainly looking ‘Mech. The moment his HUD confirmed a weapons lock he squeezed the trigger for his primary TIC.

The Rotary Autocannon built into the right breast of the Hatchetman emitted a demonic howl as it vomited a stream of depleted uranium shells at the target. The muzzle flashes combined to form a meters-long finger of death pointing at his enemy.

Brainburner Jr. smiled as the shells chewed at the hip, splintering armor, cutting Myomers and finally snapping the Uziel’s leg clear off. Deprived of support, the ‘Mech flopped onto its back, then rolled down the hill to join the string of metal corpses that marked his progress.

Ahead, the main gate to the ComStar compound was clear of defenders, but Brainburner Jr. knew to his cost that automated weapons turrets were concealed in the thick gateposts.

One more push would get him inside for the final confrontation with the renegade ComStar Precentor, winning freedom for the people of this planet and the gratitude of the Dukes beautiful daughter....

Clunk...His primary monitors died.

Click...Click.... Click... One by one, all his ‘Mechs systems disengaged.

He was left sitting in the dark.

“Nuts!” He slammed his fists down on the padded armrests of his command couch.

With a metallic groan the main hatch swung open. “That’s enough son. It’s your bedtime.” Brainburner looked down into the simulator as his son began to reluctantly undo his restraints.

The spy moved cautiously down the corridor from the Xenophobe’s HPG section. After successfully sending a message to the nearest ComStar station for forwarding to Trane, it would not do to get caught now.

At the sound of voices in the corridor ahead, the spy drew back into the shadows.

“But Dad, I could have taken them this time! Why’d you have to pull the plug on me just thennn!” Brainburner Jr. was still upset at begin cheated of the chance to finish MechWarrior XX on ‘elite’ setting.

“It’ll still be there tomorrow son. I promised your mother I’d take care of you. You know it was the only way she’d let you come with us.”

“But I get to go out with the ‘Mechanist of Doom’ when we hit the ground?”

“Only if you do as your told, go to bed on time and eat your greens.”

“Greens again...”

The pair passed the place where the spy was hiding and carried on their way to the sleeping quarters.

After waiting for several moments to make sure the passageway was clear, RatBoy walked out into the main access-way. Whistling tunelessly to himself, he headed for the canteen to pick up a chicken sandwich.

Chapter 9

Lost Lakes District, Stein's Folly, Capellan March, Federated Suns, 8th August 3082

Colonel Gunner St. Nicholas regarded the fetid swamp from the command couch of his Orca Assault Mech. His lip curled with distaste at the thought of slogging through all the muck out there, and he counted himself fortunate that he was able to order others to perform such tasks.

The rest of his Regiment, the Golden Harmony, was stung out through the region known as the Lost Lakes. The area went through seasonal variations that made mapping the ever-changing bodies of water impossible. Right now St. Nicholas' Regiment had arrived at the middle of the dry season, which allowed them to move through the region without submerging.

Most of the time.

Like his command 'Mech, the other unit were powered down and heavy camouflage. Skilful piloting on the part of his Dropship crews, combined with some hefty bribes meant there was no way his target could know of the reception awaiting them.

The communication hardline crackled into life. "Sir, Lieutenant Kelp here. The scouts report the target down and deploying BattleMechs. It looks like they're setting up a perimeter defence "

"Very good Lieutenant, keep the scouts in position. Let me know if they do anything interesting." St. Nicholas watched as information collected by the scouts scrolled across his auxiliary monitor. Blakes Blood! Where had they found all those antiques? He watched as a flame-painted Marauder descended the main ramp, closely followed by a matching Hatchetman and a flat grey colored Warhammer.

"But Sir! Aren't we going to attack? I mean before they become entrenched?" The Colonel smiled indulgently at the eagerness of his junior officer.

"Patience, Lieutenant. Let them get settled in a board. We have more than enough fire power to deal with a bunch of old has-beans and a travelling museum." A gaggle of Locust sprinted along the perimeter of the firm ground the Dropship had settled on, kicking up divots of sodden grass. "Let them wear themselves out playing soldier. We'll hit them at dawn."

The last part of the data-feed identified a hulking BattleMaster as the 'Mech directing the enemies deployment.

"Stein's Folly!" Slacker spat into the muck. "Stein's Folly! Just my stinkin luck!" There was a torturous sucking noise as he pulled his left leg free from the hungry embrace of the swamp. "Why couldn't we go to Vega? Or Arakis? No stinkin swamp on Arakis, is there? Give us a hand here?"

Shaking his head, Abbas Ahsan steadied his friend while he extricated his right leg from the sucking sludge. "Keep the noise down. We don't want to attract any attention."

Slacker tried to tug his general issue body armor into a more comfortable position again. Once more he failed, only succeeding in moving the spots where the straps cut into his sweat covered skin. "Attention? Who in their right mind would hang out in this place?"

"Could be just about anything out there." Abbas scanned the area, borrowed Pulse Rifle at the ready. "Getting anything on the motion detector?"

"No..." Slacker slammed the side of the boxy device with his palm. "Could be broke."

"Let's hurry, the others are getting ahead again."

"So Victor Davion gave the UCS to Mishima? Why, in the name of Blake did he come here?" Medron cast a despairing glance at the gloom-enshrouded trees that surrounded them.

“He just selected at random I guess.” Mac had decline body armor, retaining his care-worn robe. “Remember how it was all those years ago. It was hardly safe to stand up and declare that you had the UCS. You’d have all sorts of oddballs down on you.”

Medron skirted a pool of deceptively shallow looking water after probing it with the light pole he carried. “But everybody though he was dead in that Dropship crash on New Samarkand.” He noted sourly that Mac was finding the swamp much easier going than the rest of the team, despite the Claymore he favoured over a Pulse Rifle from the Xenophobe’s weapons locker.

“He and Vic had a lot of help remember, what with Victor being close to the Kurita family. It was easy to have the ISF set the whole thing up, with nobody the wiser.” Mac passed for a moment, peering into the darkening forest. “Night is closing in. Best we hurry.”

“Which way?” Medron knew he was completely lost. With no distinguishing landmarks he could see, it was a mystery how Mac could possibly guide them with any certainty.

“That way. It’s not far now.”

Just then, a terrified scream echoed behind them. Medron dropped his pole and brought his Pulse Rifle up even as Mac was drawing his Claymore.

Slacker was finding the footing more and more torturous in the failing light. He and Abbas stumbled along in Mac’s wake, passed trees possessing increasingly twisted and distorted shapes. “So what you worried about then?”

“Come-on! You’ve seen the Holo-vids. It’s always the minor characters at the back who get picked off by the Aliens first.” Abbas nervously eyed their surroundings, his Pulse Rifle at the ready.

“So? Urhg...” Slacker once more laboriously pulled his mud-encrusted combat boots from the mud, wondering why Medron wasn’t having so much trouble as he and Abbas.

“In case you haven’t been paying attention... we’re minor characters.” Abbas Ahsan noticed it was getting darker.

“Yeh...Well...” Slacker took one more awkward step.

“And we’re at the back, and night is falling.”

He stopped and looked at Abbas, comprehension dawning. “Aaww! This sucks!”

Slacker’s next step snagged a submerged root, sending him ploughing face first into the muck. He surfaces spluttering, spitting mud and curses in equal quantities. Reaching out to a nearby tree, his hand did not encounter swamp-rotten wood as expected, but something else. Something hard.

Clawing the slime from his eyes, Slacker looked at the tree he had fallen beside, noticing a pronounced budge of the vine shrouded trunk. Where his hand had disturbed the vines he could see something long, brown and roughly cylindrical.

Comprehension began to work its way into his fall-addled brain and he quickly glanced up. As the grinning death’s head of a skull gazed down at him from eyeless sockets, Slacker could not restraint his terrified scream.

Chapter 10

Lost Lakes District, Stein's Folly, Capellan March, Federated Suns, 9th August 3082

Medron Pryde and Mac splashed through the swamp to where the fallen Slacker and Abbas Ahsan stared in fascinated horror at their gruesome discovery. On the sight of the swamp-browned bones, they stopped to stare. Finally Medron moved closer to pull away some of the forest growth to reveal the tattered remains of a MechWarriors combat suit.

A pale blue light from behind him illuminated their find, allowing Medron to make out a faded patch, decorated with a black rose. Underneath was a name. "Rose, Jeremiah." Medron could just make out the letters.

He could now see that the skeleton was bound to the tree with creepers, but the arms and legs also appeared to be bound with the same material. It looked like the poor wretch they stumbled on had been tied to the tree, then left to die.

"What happened here?" He looked around to see the source of the light.

The blade of Mac's Claymore was shining like an aurora, with waves of light chasing each other up and down the heavy blade. "How's it doing that?"

"Special effects." Mac shrugged. "Look..." he pointed at another nearby tree. It too had a curious overgrown lump on one side. "Medron, there, and there..." Mac pointed to other trees. Medron was aghast as he looked. Wherever he looked he could see a tree with similar ghastly adornments.

"Well, I guess we now know where the Blackthorns disappeared too." He took one more look at the remains of the Mercenary unit. "Let's get out of here."

Mac unerringly guided them to an area of raised ground occupied by a small domed building constructed from handmade clay brick. The first glimmers of dawn could be seen through the break in the trees that ringed the dry land like sentinels.

Slacker was happy to reach something he could stand on without fear of sinking.

"I don't see any lights." Medron scrutinised their destination as they walked up the slope to the front door. "Not my idea of the perfect retirement home either."

A narrow paved path circled the building and several plain pots containing a variety of flowering plants were placed at intervals along the wall. "Well, lets wake Mishima up shall we?" Mac pressed the door-bell button.

In response, a flickering hologram materialized before the small team. The obviously recorded message began to speak. "I'm sorry, but Mishima is not home right now. If you would like to give your name and a location where you may be contacted, he will get back to you." The projecting flickered out and a high-pitched tone sounded.

"Terrific! Now what?" Medron whirled on Mac. "We come all this way for nothing?"

Mac raised his hands in a calming motion. "Wait a moment." His hooded head scanned the ground around the house for several moments. "Ahha!" he reached down and moved one of the pots, revealing a key.

"So how did you know that would be there?"

Mac raised the key, shaking it triumphantly. "I've been here before."

The interior was surprisingly well appointed after the somewhat rustic appearance of the outside. Two bedrooms and a kitchen ran off the main area, which appeared to be devoted in equal parts to a sophisticated home holo-theatre and a workshop devoted to metal and wood-working. Several wooden items were still on the workbench, half completed projects of some kind. Several sacks hung from wall hooks nearby.

Slacker peered into one of the sacks while Mac searched the other side of the main room. "Strange.... Medron, these sacks are full of doorknobs!"

“Doorknobs? How many?”

Slacker looked into the next sack “Hundreds of them... All different. Looks like they were all hand carved.”

Abbas turned from his own search. “I don’t get it. Why carve doorknobs?”

“If you were stuck on the sodden planet for fifteen years, what would you do?”

“Got ya! Ye wee beastie!” They all turned to Mac, who accent had momentarily reverted to his native dialect. He was holding a small computer disk with “UCS” scrawled on the label.

Medron sighed “I’ve told you before Mac, you must think in English.”

“Sorry. Humph... This is what we came for. Lucky for us he keeps his computer disks in alphabetical order.” He tossed the disk to Medron, who carefully pocketed it.

“I guess we can get out of here then.” Medron started towards the door.

Mac placed another disk on the workbench. “Just an explanation for Mishima.”

A voice barked from the doorway. “Nobody move! Lay down your weapons!”

Dave Hill walked his Thunderbolt on a patrol of the perimeter that Atticus Longwalker had selected the previous day. In the dark he was relying on passive light amplification, having found IR to be useless. The sky showed the first hints of dawn to the west.

“Dave, you picking anything up?” Simon Howard was sharing the patrol with his lance-mate, throttling back his Phoenix Hawk to keep pace with the heavier ‘Mech.

Dave scanned his auxiliary sensors. “No, you catch something?”

“Maybe. Just for a moment I thought I had something on the motion sensors. Could have just been the wind.” As Simon rechecked his own sensors several read points appeared, then some more, then a lot more. “This is Aardvark Two Seven!” He switched to the Regimental channel as he turned to face the enemy, seeing Dave’s Thunderbolt turn with him. “We have many hostiles on the South, repeat South perimeter! Require assistance! Require lots of assistance”

Even as he fired his large lasers into the swarm of Scampi coming out of the swamp he could hear other alerts from other perimeter patrols.

“Tel! Get First Battalion moving to reinforce the South perimeter. I’ll get Team Bonsai saddled to reinforce the North, then join you.” Atticus Longwalker was calling up tactical data on the monitors of his BattleMaster even as the Clansman sent his Timber Wolf’s lolloping into the night, the rest of First Battalion in tow.

After sending Rick and his troops north, Atticus switched to another coded channel. “Wombat this is Platypus.” Longwalker’s eyes narrowed when Medron Pryde failed to answer. “Wombat, this is Platypus. Come in.” Grasping the controls of his ‘Mech, Atticus headed after Tel Hazan, trying to raise Medron several more times, but without success.

Ahead he could see the First Battalion outlined by the flashes of Autocannon, Missiles and energy weapons. The tactical feed showed they faced a veritable sea of enemy units. It looked like the initial attack had succeeded in pushing the perimeter back about half a click, but the arrival of more Warriors had momentarily steadied the line, pinning the raiders against the swamp.

The raiders launched a renewed assault that threatened to split the Warrior’s line just as he reached the battle line. As Atticus moved to intercept the spearhead of the effort he just had time to see Tel Hazan dispatch a Flounder before warning sirens screamed in his cockpit. A Heavy ‘Mech, which his combat computer tagged as a Rock Lobster, stepped into the gap left by the burning Flounder. Ignoring the triumphant Timber Wolf, the raider fired its Heavy Gauss Rifle at the BattleMaster.

Twisting desperately to one side, Atticus avoided the attack, but the blossoming parachute attached to the speeding chunk of ferrous metal enveloped the head and torso of the Assault 'Mech.

Effectively blind, Atticus struggled to free himself from the enshrouding silk, but before he could succeed, his 'Mech received a teeth-rattling blow low on the torso that sent the BattleMaster crashing to the ground.

Chapter 11

Lost Lakes District, Stein's Folly, Capellan March, Federated Suns, 9th August 3082

"Nobody move! Lay down your weapons!" The command issued from the first of three body-armored figures who stood with readied Assault Rifles in the doorway.

Medron saw Mac make a curious motion with his right hand. "We don't have to put down our weapons." Mac said to the three strangers. "We can go about our business."

"Lay down your weapons!" the first figure stabbed his weapon insistently towards them.

Mac silently cursed to himself as he slowly unbuckled his Claymore as the others threw down their Pulse Rifles and sidearms. He had never had much luck with that old Jedi mind trick. Casually, he tossed a bag of unopened "Summoning: The Collection" boosters down with the other weapons.

"All of you, back up! That's right... All the way against the wall. If you give us any trouble we'll shoot the lot of you!" The first of their surprise guests appeared to be the one with the intelligence to string whole sentences together. As Mac had planned, another of the three started to look through their discarded equipment, while his compatriots continued to keep their prisoners at gunpoint.

Atticus struggled up from the blackness into which he had plunged with the fall of his Assault Mech.

A rapid check of the tactical displays informed him that the period of his unconsciousness had been mercifully brief. Gripping the controls once more he fought to free himself from the clinging parachute. His efforts appeared to be achieving very little, when the smothering whiteness that had blinded him was ripped away.

A flame colored Hatchetman stood over his downed 'Mech, the offending silk shredded in its left hand. Behind his club-wielding savoir the bubbling mass that had been a Rock Lobster streamed a pillar of black smoke into the morning air.

"Are you OK mister, err Sir?" Brainburner Jr. sounded painfully young to Atticus as he struggled to bring his Battlemaster back to its feet. "Thanks, I'm all right."

Reassured, the Hatchetman spun to face the raiders. Brandishing the gruesome axe, it charged towards the thickest fighting. Over his external speakers Atticus could hear the 'Mechs pilot screaming a challenge to the enemy. "WHO WANTS SOME!" Close on the heels of the homicidal Hatchetman ran the Wolverine belonging to Owans, and Uraikha's Panther.

A Marauder and a Warhammer halted on either side of Atticus. Brainburner observed watched as the other two members of his Lance followed the Hatchetman. "That's my boy." Brainburner observed proudly, looking at the path of slaughter left in the flame-colored 'Mechs wake.

Atticus quickly took stock of the situation, noting that the last enemy charge had stalled, sending their attackers staggering back to the edge of the swamp. One more push now should shatter this force. "First Battalion! General advance! Hit them now!" As Brainburner and Slacker moved off to catch up with their comrades, Atticus pushed his BattleMaster into a run to join up with his command Lance.

Js and his Axman, along with Zeugme's Archer and Sapherite's Griffin had joined him by the time he caught up with the advancing wall of Warrior 'Mechs. As they poured fire into the retreating enemy, Atticus caught glimpses of his troops locked in combat.

On the right flank a Firestarter-O, piloted by the aptly named Pyro, almost single-handedly drove back a swarm of Scampi, rendering any that dared challenge his flamers into smoking pools of plastic.

Js, his Autocannon disabled, closed with the Balrog responsible, striking again and again with the hideous weapon from which his 'Mech took its name. He finally gave up in disgust, having failed to decapitate his target. The Axman went in search of other prey, the still writhing torso of the Balrog surrounded by dismembered limbs.

What should have been as stunning a victory as the other engagements fought by the Golden Harmony Regiment quickly dissolved into a nightmare for Lieutenant Kelp.

The initial drive from the swamp had been successful in gaining ground, but the pickets deployed by the Warriors of the Dropship had proved harder to eliminate than expected, with most falling back in good order. Too soon additional 'Mechs came swarming to their aide.

The attack wave stalled like a JumpShip with a blown Helium seal.

Colonel St. Nicholas had rallied his troops with promises of more booster packs, but the next assault had been thrown back in confusion. Now the Warriors counterattack threatened to push the Golden Harmony troops all the way back into the swamp.

Placed in command of the reserves, Lieutenant Kelp had watched uncomprehendingly as his comrades were shredded, hacked and melted by what should have been an overmatched foe. Inexplicably, the accuracy of his comrades' fire was appalling. Even Captain Moffet, the best gunner in the Regiment, botched his first shot against a BattleMaster. That his second attempt connected squarely, putting the Assault Mech on its back, that was no consolation to the Captain. A Hatchetman cut down his Crimson Crustacean with a single burst of autocannon fire.

"Lieutenant Kelp! Move up the reserves to steady the line." Colonel St. Nicholas sounded desperate as he gave further deployment orders.

As his own Orca Assault Mech closed with the enemy Kelp brought his twin ER PPC's on line. Raising the arms of his 'Mech, he sighted on the BattleMaster which had been the subject of Moffet's brief attack. After several moments he noticed that his targeting system had not given him a target lock. Thinking he must be out of range, Kelp switched to a nearer Archer that was raining missiles upon hapless Basking Shark. Once more the targeting computer failed to lock on.

Desperate now, Kelp pulled the trigger anyway, but both weapons fired high and the Archer remained unscathed.

It was almost as if the computer could not see the target.

It was not only the heat generated by the PPC fire that had Kelp sweating now. He began to sweep his crosshairs across other enemy units.

Wasp, no lock!

Griffin, no lock...

Marauder, still no lock...

Axman... The crosshairs pulsed green as he targeted an advancing Axman!

Instantly, Kelp fired the Bombast Laser at the Heavy 'Mech. The beam cut into the torso, reducing the heavy autocannon to slag. His flush of triumph was short lived as the Axman pounced forward, the terrifying axe methodically rising and falling again and again.

Chapter 12

Lost Lakes District, Stein's Folly, Capellan March, Federated Suns, 9th August 3082

It was now full light outside and the sounds of distant battle echoed through the swamp as Medron Pryde nervously eyed the Assault Rifle levelled at his chest.

Their captors had proven uncommunicative, with any attempt to open a dialogue cut off by a meaningful gesture from the automatic weapons covering the four of them. Medron took some comfort from the apparent calm with which Mac was treating this most recent turn of events. Being a major character he also had less to worry about than Slacker and Abbas Ahsan.

One of the three who now held them captive was looking over the weapons and equipment they had taken from the Warriors of the Dropship. The Pulse Rifles had been earmarked for later study, but no interest had been shown in the archaic Claymore that had been the only weapon Mac had carried into this fetid swamp.

Medron watched as the searcher reached the bag Mac had casually thrown on the pile of discarded equipment. Cautiously the combat armor clad man opened it to peer inside. His shout of surprise had the instant attention of his companions. "Summoning cards! Unopened first edition boosters!" One of their guards immediately turned and ran to see this rare find. The other, clearly torn between getting his share of the booty and performing his duty remained training his weapon on his captors wearily.

Medron silently cursed their luck. Obviously the third mans addiction was not too far advanced or he would have been unable to resist the sirens call of the unopened packets. He had to congratulate Mac on cunning plan which, but for bad luck, would have distracted the guards and given the Warriors a chance to overpower their captors. Still, there was still a chance it could work as Medron observed an uncontrollable tick on the face of the guard.

While watching for the last mans guard to drop, Medron observed the other two with distaste as kneeled on the floor, pawing at the pile of packets that had fallen from the bad. Snatching individual packs, they sniffed and licked the wrapping that protected the object of their addiction. So wrapped up in their ecstasy were they that they failed to notice the heavy Claymore as it smoothly slid away from the pile of weapons across the polished wooden floor. He fought to avoid staring at the phenomenon, not wanting to attracted attention to the apparently self-propelled weapon.

Unable to contain themselves further, the distracted troopers began to rip open the packets of cards, feverishly thumbing through the contents. Occasionally their discoveries would elicit curses, but more often one or other would cry out in triumph at a choice find.

A glint of light caught Medron's eye as he continued to monitor the progress of the sheathed blade towards them. He suddenly realised that came from an incredibly thin wire, running from the hilt of the sword and into the right sleeve of Mac's brown robe. Smiling inwardly at discovering the secret behind one of the mysterious figure's "Special Effects", Medron braced himself for action.

"Black Lotus" one of the kneeling pair cried out in glee, thrusting a rectangular piece of card heavenward. It was too much for their remaining guard who turned, unable to resist the desire to look, only to catch a flying Claymore in the teeth.

Slacker and Abbas had also seen the slow progress of the sheathed blade and were ready. Grabbing conveniently positioned sacks of doorknobs from the hooks that lined the walls, they descended on the still distracted pair. Unprepared for such a furious assault, the two were beaten into unconsciousness with dispatch.

Spitting blood, the last trooper began to swing his Assault Rifle on Slacker, but before he could unleash a hail of lead at the figure swinging a sack of doorknobs, Medron beat him to the floor with a sack of his own.

Stefan Amaris the Seventh, self proclaimed heir to the throne of the Star League sat in the centre of the Cavern of the Scales and raged at the news just received. "How! How can this be! What incompetent is responsible! I will have his head on a pike! His body will feed the fish for this!"

The messenger cowered at his master's feet, weathering the storm of rage as best he could.

“How did they do it! The Golden Harmony Regiment destroyed, and these cursed Warriors of the Dropship with barely a scratch?”

“My lord, our transports were able to monitor the battle and...”

“Battle! That was no battle! Even the Clans could not destroy my troops so quickly!” Amaris seethed on his throne, then forced himself into calm. “Well? What do the transports report?”

“Apparently the reason our troops performed so poorly was because they could not hit the enemy.” The messenger consulted a data pad. “Specifically, they were almost totally unsuccessful against the older designs they encountered.”

“What was it? Are we facing an army of Phantom BattleMechs?” Amaris became fearful. “Are we facing an army of Morgan Kells?”

“No, my lord. At least then we know they would now head off to a monastery for a few years.” Again the messenger consulted his data pad. “The targeting systems on our ‘Mechs could not lock on to many of the enemy. When we looked into the problem we discovered that they had been programmed to ignore certain designs.”

“What! Why!” Amaris was incredulous.

The messenger presented his data pad. “It was a result of a copyright dispute that started in the late thirtieth century, my lord. When it was finally settled, the manufacturers of our targeting systems had to purge their systems of all data pertaining to specific designs.” The messenger shrugged. “It has just never been an issue before because our forces have always attacked units equipped with more modern designs.”

Amaris scanned the data pad, and then tossed it back to the man at his feet. “I want our targeting systems reprogrammed at once! Do you hear me? At once!”

“General Trane has been informed, my lord. He has already started such a plan in motion. He estimates it will be completed within four days. He requests...”

The messenger was interrupted as one of his comrades scurried in, clutching another data pad.

“My Lord!” The second messenger paused to grovel. “Dire news! The Free Worlds League has become aware of our presence on Astrokaszy! The Captain-General has directed the Warriors of the Dropship to attack.”

“When!” Amaris snatched the presented data pad from the man. “Our spy reports that they are recovering from battle with the Golden Harmony Regiment, but will be ready to jump in ten days.” His mind racing, he read the rest of the report. “Send word to General Trane. I want him on Astrokaszy to deal with these upstarts. Also tell him to launch Phase Two immediately.”

Both messengers hastened to do his bidding, leaving him to contemplate this turn of events. “I’m very disappointed in St. Nicolas. I had hopes he would make me a gift of the destruction of Medron Pryde and the fools who follow him.”

“We don’t always get what we want.” Katherine Steiner-Davion emerged from the shadows, trailing her chains. “I too wanted to be First Lord of the Star League. Now look at me.”

“Which is precisely why I keep you around my dear.” Amaris smiled at her. “Just to remind me of the price of failure.”

Katherine tugged at her chains. “Will you fail?”

“No. No I will not.” Gazing off into the darkness, Amaris rubbed his hands together gleefully. “Even if Trane fails to stop these Warriors, it is too late for them. Once Phase Two is complete they will have lost everything.” The cavern echoed to the sounds of his laughter. “Everything!”

Chapter 13

The Dropship, Astrokaszy Orbital Space, The Periphery, 22nd August 3082

Tel Hazen led his Lance across the vibrating deck of the Mech Bay as the Dropship commenced the final approach to Astrokaszy. As he scaled the ladder to the cockpit he looked left to where Nicholas Kerensky was already entering the cockpit of his hunched over Nova Prime. Looking to his other side with distaste he noted that the two Inner Sphere warriors were lagging behind; Maverick was not even half way to up the Griffin IIC and Abbas Ashen had paused at the foot of the Warhammer IIC to talk with a Tech.

Once aboard the Timber Wolf he efficiently ran through the checklist, bringing his OmniMech to life. "Falcon to Hatchlings, check off." He activated his Lance communications frequency.

"Hatchling Two, Nova is ready Star Commander." As expected Nicholas Kerensky was first.

"Hatchling Four, Griffin is ready Lieutenant, err Star Commander" Tel winced, but elected not to correct Maverick on getting the 'Mech designation wrong. At least he had corrected his gaff with ranks this time.

There was a pregnant silence as Tel waited for his final warrior. "Hatchling Three, Warhammer IIC on line Star Commander." Abbas sounded carefree which, as this mission did not involve wading through a swamp on foot, he probably was.

Reporting that his Lance was ready, and secretly wishing they could use Clan unit formations, Tel Hazen ran over the mission objective in his mind one more time.

After successfully repulsing the surprise assault on Stein's Folly, the Warriors had worked quickly to salvage what they could from the battlefield. Answers had been frustratingly elusive however. None of the prisoners knew anything of value and all the senior officers had died in the final slugfest at the edge of the swamp. Casualties had been incredibly light, with no fatalities and only a few 'Mechs lost. The recovery of the UCS had remained a secret, shared only with members of the Command Company and a few others. Rick Raisley and some of Team Bonsai were working with Mac to turn the information into something usable with their 'Mechs but they knew it would take time.

When the message from Captain-General Isis Marik had arrived, pinpointing on of the major staging areas used by the raiders, Medron had decided they could not afford to wait for the conversion work. Tel Hazen was forced to agree with Medron Pryde's strategy. They needed to hit hard and fast to recover the intelligence they needed to defeat the raiders once and for all. The possibility that an Amaris was behind everything had sent Tel into a flying rage. Only after leaving the Clansman to trash the conference room did Medron persuade him to wait until they could confirm the where Amaris was before calling in all of the Clans. None of the Inner Sphere warrior found the thought of the Clans ripping apart known space looking for one man an appealing one.

With no opposition on their way in-system, it looked like they had caught the raiders, or the New New Republican Guard as they called themselves, off guard. Either that or they were flying into another trap.

Like on Stein's Folly.

"All units, stand by, Stand by for landing." Ravezero's voice came in clear over the internal communications network.

The vibrations increased as the Chrome brought the Dropship in for a manual landing at the site they had selected after long deliberation. Within striking distance of their target, the site was highly defensible with a deep gorge covering one flank. Once the only bridge that could carry 'Mechs was destroyed, they would have no worries about an attack from that direction.

There was a final jarring shock as the Dropship grounded. "Yehaaa!" Mavarik had failed to shut down the Lance comms channel. Tel Hazen shook his head in despair. "Freebirths!"

Rob Trane watched as the Dropship disgorged what he estimated to be three full Battalions. He cursed the lack of intelligence he had available, for while he knew of the landing site in advance, he had no details of the actual battle plan.

With the destruction of the Golden Harmony Regiment Trane was forced to deploy the Redmond Rednecks as the main defenders for the supply base. His own Mage Knight Regiment was deployed in hidden positions beyond the gorge. Once the Warriors were engaged, the Mage Knights would strike from the rear, destroying their Dropship and annihilating the Warriors.

This time they would at least be able to hit their targets. Trane had pushed his technicians mercilessly to complete the upgrades to the targeting systems.

Trane just needed to get across the bridge, and he had taken steps to ensure that he would.

“Just like we planned! They’re coming out!” Medron did not need the report to see a solid phalanx of enemy units kicking up a dust cloud that would be visible for miles. So far the enemy had failed to deploy fighters to challenge his Lance of Land Air Mechs as they circled what would become the battlefield. “Stick to the plan everybody. We want to pin them in place while Jester and his boys sneak in and get what we came for.” He switched channels “Back Door group, what’s your status?”

“The charges are being placed now. Give us ten more minutes and the bridge will be ready to blow.” RatBoy reported from his UrbanMech.

The space between the two forces began to fill with the criss-cross pattern of missile contrails, tracer rounds and the electrical discharge of PPCs. As the air thickened with smoke, the blaze of lasers could also be made out. On the right flank Medron could see the distinctive shape of Rapier’s Marauder III, supported by Slacker in a monstrous Templer OmniMech and the comical form of Miguel’s Yu Huang. Together they threw out a hail of fire that halted the enemy Mechs. A pack of Scampi darted towards the trio, but was shredded by volleys of laser fire from a Blackhawk KU as Jacobite moved up to support his Lancemates.

Over on the left flank Medron could see another group of enemy Light ‘Mechs trying to swing wide of Archmore’s Fire Lance. The big Archer piloted by the Lance commander was supported by Syphon’s Whitworth, but neither had the mobility to deal with the faster units. “Flank attack! Command Lance, tallyho!” Medron sent his augmented Phoenix Hawk LAM into a dive, Fokker’s red Shadow Hawk LAM close on his tail.

Trane watched as the opposing Regiment’s slammed into one another out on the plain. Although his plan was working, the Rednecks were taking a fearful pounding. Only the fact that the Warriors of the Dropship were not pressing their advantage, possibly suspecting a ruse of some sort, had saved them from complete collapse.

As he watched, a lance of Trout recon ‘Mechs attempted an end-run on the Warriors flank. One fell pray to a flurry of missiles from a pair of Warrior ‘Mechs, but the others outdistanced the weapons. Just as it looked like their manoeuvre had succeeded, the three survivors were pummeled by a lance of Aerospace fighters. No, not Aerospace fighters. LAMs!

The first two, a Phoenix Hawk LAM and something Trans’s computer could not identify, downed two of the remaining Trout with an incredible amount of firepower. Two Stinger LAMs finished the survivor, before kicking in their afterburners to chase after their compatriots.

Checking his battle computer confirmed his suspicions. All four LAMs were upgraded with extended range pulse lasers. “Frack! They’ve got MunchTech!”

Trane wanted to wait longer, but the Rednecks could break any moment now. “Mage Knights, move out!”

“Enemy to the rear! Enemy to the rear.” RatBoy watched as the Mage Knights poured from their concealed positions. “I’m out’a here!” He spun the UrbanMech and sent it in a leisurely sprint towards the Dropship.

“Hold your ground, Mac snapped to the other members of RatBoy’s Lance. Blow the bridge Sergeant!” He watched as one of Jester’s demolition experts disengaged the safety on the radio detonator.

“Ready! Steady! Fire!” the Sergeant depressed the master switch. The Sergeant depressed the master switch again. Once more the Sergeant thumbed the master switch. “It’s not responding! There must be a fault in the somewhere in the system!”

Mac glanced at the advancing force, running calculations in his head. “How Long?”

The Sergeant was also looking at the enemy. “Five minutes, maybe ten. We don’t have time!”

“Get it fixed.” Mac throttled up his Claymore. “Fix it then blow the bridge.” The big Assault ‘Mech started across the span.

“But sir! What’re you doing? You’ll be on the wrong side of the gorge!”

“I’m buying you some time. Fix it, and then blow the bridge. Immediately.”

Trane slowed his Orca to a walk as he watched the lone ‘Mech marching towards his Mage Knights. He half noticed that his men likewise cut their speed. Quickly, he checked his sensors, looking for some kind of trap.

Magnifying the Mech on his auxiliary monitor he could see that the white ‘Mech was covered in Celtic runes and smeared with streaks of some blue substance. He would have mistaken it for a Highlander but for the heavy sword, which identified it as a Claymore. Understanding who he faced, Trane switched his communicator to an open channel. “So Mac, We meet again at last!” Still looking for some kind of trap Trane continued talking. “Before, I was but the learner. Now I am the master.”

The Claymore halted. “Only a master of evil, Trane.” The Claymore suddenly leaped skywards on blazing Jump Jets even as Trane screamed the order to fire. The withering barrage of the whole Regiment fanned out beneath the soaring BattleMech, leaving it untouched. Stunned but the failure of the murderous attack, Trane watched as the Assault ‘Mech landed with surprising grace, then snapped off a shot with its Gauss Rifle.

The doorknob shaped chunk of ferrous metal thundered from the weapon, smashing into the torso of a Crimson Crustacean, sending it toppling onto a squad of Smoking Octopus ProtoMechs that made to poor decision to use the Heavy Mech as cover. The speeding Gauss round had ricocheted instead of imbedding itself in the sturdy plastic armor, spinning off to decapitate a Walrus before finally smashing a Trout into the ground.

Momentarily stunned by the ferocity of the counterattack, the Mage Knights answering shots were slow and ragged against the charging Claymore. “No parachute! He’s got modified rounds! Watch yourselves!”

More of the Mage Knights were beginning to score hits against the Claymore now as it continued to advance, weapons ablaze. Armor spun away in sheets and ribbons, but still on came the Assault Mech, the deadly Gauss Rifle sowing destruction with every thundering shot. “Stop him! Don’t let him get amongst you!” Too late, the Mage Knights were their own worst enemies as the Assault ‘Mech plunged into their ranks. Their losses now was as often as not from friendly fire as from the murderous swing of the Claymore’s blade.

Trane looked on, fascinated, as the Assault ‘Mech broke through his men headed straight at his Orca. It was in a pitiful condition, dragging its right leg, weapons destroyed, armor rent and sword broken. But somehow it was still on its feet.

“Your armor is weak, old man.” Trane lined up his own weapons.

“You can’t win Trane.” Mac winced at the corny dialogue, but he was playing for time. “If you strike me down, I’ll just come back and annoy you later.”

Trane fired his PPCs, stabbing deep into the still advancing ‘Mech and starting internal fires. As the PPCs cycled he snapped off a shot with the Bombast laser. Smoke was billowing from every joint now, but still on came the Claymore. He lined up for another shot. This one would finish it...

A thunderous detonation rocked Trane as the demolition charges sent the gorge bridge down in flames.

Instantly Trane understood he had lost his chance to destroy the Warriors of the Dropship. Snarling in frustration he fired everything he had at he Claymore. Finally, trailing fire and smoke, the Assault ‘Mech crashed to the ground at the feet of Trane’s Orca, the left arm stretched forward and the middle finger extended skyward in one final act of defiance.

Chapter 14

The Dropship, Nadir Jump Point, Astrokaszy, The Periphery, 22nd August 3082

From one point of view, they had been lucky.

Jester and his special ops team had succeeded in penetrating the New Republic command post without raising the alarm. While the Warriors of the Dropship had been busy rendering the Redmond Rednecks down to soup stock, the seven-man team had downloaded the central computers database, and then stealthily departed. A small landing craft made pickup and returned them to the departing Dropship.

Team Bonsai was busy sifting through the data even now.

The losses amongst the ‘Mech forces, while higher than their previous encounter with the New Republic forces on Stein’s Folly, had been mercifully low. David Richards survived the destruction of his Raijin, but the doctors reported that his dice arm would take time to heal. The rest of the 188th Barak Brigade (as Second Battalion had taken to calling themselves), had been mauled in the final move to disengage from the Rednecks.

There had been no way to reach the burning wreck of Mac’s Claymore.

Medron transmitted a complete report to the Xenophobe for transmission to the Captain-General, but so far no reply had been received. Lacking additional orders, Medron planned to jump back to Atreus once the Dropship completed docking operations.

Medron idly leafed through a signed copy of the Battle Armor Design Rules, sadly noting that Mac had never managed to get the Purifier design to work properly. As he neared the end of the document a small data disk slipped from between the pages, scattering a riot of rainbow colors through the cabin as it bounced across the deck.

Medron crossed the cabin to retrieve the disk, noting that it had no markings to identify the contents. With a shrug Medron inserted the disk into his personal workstation and watched as the screen flared with static for a second.

Then an image filled the screen.

“Medron, if you are viewing this message, then everything has proceeded as was foreseen and I didn’t make it off Astrokaszy.” The cloaked image of passed a moment, collecting its thoughts. “There are things you should know. Things I never had the chance to tell you about before.” Mac flicked through a thick manuscript before continuing. “Years ago, before the Disenfranchising, I had the opportunity to talk with the Lore Master of the Nova Cats. During one of their ceremonies, he had a powerful vision, a vision that one day the Inner Sphere would be threatened by an ancient evil.”

Medron quickly checked to see if he had accidentally switched the Dropship’s entertainment channel to the “Immortal Warrior” show.

“The Nova Cat’s prophesied that one Warrior would stand forth and destroy this evil, restoring balance to the Inner Sphere once more.” Mac continued his message. “From the day I was told of the Prophecy, I worked to prepare for the dark times ahead, and I searched for ‘The One’. It took years before I found what I was looking for. Now it is up to you and the Warrior’s of the Dropship to fight against this evil tide that threatens to engulf the Inner Sphere.” Medron shook his head; not understanding a word of what Mac was talking about. “You have a lot of work to do Medron, so I will keep you no longer.” Medron was left staring at the blank screen.

“All hands, stand-by for docking.” Ravezero’s announcement was immediately followed by the strains of the Blue Danube.

Medron had picked up a sandwich on his way to the bridge of the Dropship while the Xenophobe began preparations to activate the KFC drive. He was standing beside Ravezero, munching his snack and watching the status reports scroll up on the main display when Rick Raisley hurried from the elevator. “Medron, we’ve cracked their codes! We know what they’re planning!” He waved several data pads at Medron Pryde.

“Do you know where their main base is?” Medron tossed his half-eaten sandwich aside and snatched one of the data pads.

“No, it looks like they were too cautious to record navigational data. But their plan! It’s insanely fiendish!” Rick dodged the flying snack while still juggling several pads.

“So what are they doing?” Chrome scabbled at his collar. The airborne nibble had struck him in the back of the neck, sending crumbs trickling into his flight suite.

“They have a group of agents. They call themselves the ‘First of April Movement’. They plan to substitute Goldfish for key people within the government and militaries of the Successor States. Before anybody notices the difference, they intend to use the confusion to take complete control.

Medron Pryde stared at Rick, dumbfounded. “They must be totally out of their minds!”

“There’s more.” Rick evaded the sandwich as Chrome launched it on a return trajectory. “Their list of targets included the heads of state.

“The Captain-General! We have to save her!” Medron deflected the speeding chunks of bread with Rick’s data pad. He turned to Ravezero. “Call the Xenophobe. There’s no time to be lost. We have to make the KFC jump now.”

Ravezero nodded and opened a channel to Commodore Hartford while brushing the remains of Medron’s snack from his lap.

The Dropship materialized around Medron in the twinkling of an eye as the KFC drive worked its magic, flipping the Xenophobe and her quartet of Dropships across hundreds of parsecs in the blink of an eye.

“Commodore Hartford reports that he is getting nothing from Atreus system control.” Ravezero relayed as the post-jump checks were performed.

“I’m getting something on the civilian bands. At this distance, it’s about three hours old.” Chrome flicked a switch, transferring his favourite Holo-vid channel to the main screen.

“... we interrupt episode 513 of the ‘Immortal Warrior’ to bring you this special news item.” The first presenter was replaced by another, who’s smile was about as genuine as the rest of her. “The Star League Council today announced that the unit known as the ‘Warriors of the Dropship’ have been declared bandits after the unit launched a series of raids against peaceful colonies along the Periphery boarder.” The newsreader paused to flash another smile at the camera. “The Council went on to outline details of the large bounty for any member of the unit, or the support personnel aiding them. Full details in the news at ten. We now return you to your normal program.”

Medron exchanged looks with Ravezero. “I think we’re a little late...”

“I think we better get out of here.” He had been running routine sensor scans. “Looks like we have an Agamemnon Heavy Cruiser and support ships closing on our position.”

“We still have one charge in the Lithium batteries, but where do we go? Ravezero was analysing the sensor data while skimming over star charts.

Medron’s mind raced frantically. “We have no choice. There’s only one place that’s safe for us now. Jump to Bob base.”

As Ravezero talked to the Xenophobe Medron turned to Rick. “We need to do some serious thinking.”

Chapter 15

New Republic Headquarters, New Wales, Somewhere in the Periphery, 8th September 3082

The dark hallway echoed to the sound of Rod Trane's boot shod feet as he approached the entrance to the cellblocks. The guards saluted crisply but made no move to halt the General as he entered. Trane made a mental note to discuss security procedures with the commander of the guard. Their location may be a closely guarded secret, but that was no excuse for sloppiness.

There were few occupants of the normal cells. The New Republic had taken very few prisoners in their diversionary raids. Those that had been captured to gather intelligence had required no cell once their purpose had been fulfilled.

But Trane had come to check on some special guests. The high security cells consisted of two rows of transparent cubicles, four of which were currently occupied.

He paused briefly at the empty cell intended for Kali Liao. The First of April team sent to infiltrate the Celestial Palace had failed in their attempt to introduce the Chancellor's proxy. No news of their fate had been received, but the Death Commandos had likely been very efficient. Trane shrugged, fingering the scrap of cloth tucked into his belt. The loss of personnel was insignificant, but the failure of the plan was an inconvenience at worst however.

The next cell held a man whose oriental features were almost unreadable. Only the eyes gave some clue of the fury the captive was feeling at his imprisonment. "Good morning Coordinator." Trane executed a mocking half bow to Hohiro Kurita. "I trust the accommodations are acceptable. They must bring back fond memories of Turtle Bay."

Hohiro made no move to return the bow. "This mad scheme will never work. Your pathetic substitutes will be discovered and the vengeance of the Draconis Combine will descend upon you and your insane master."

"I think not." Trane laughed. "The glorious forces of the Combine are even now marshalling to do the bidding of their 'Coordinator'. Soon they will take part in the grand offensive to capture Terra itself."

"And what then? Once the identity of your leader is known to the Clans they will be at your throat, like a pack of wild animals." Hohiro made a chopping gesture with his hand. "You have not the strength to withstand the Clans."

Trane's smile had no humour in it. "But we will have the combined might of the Inner Sphere at our disposal, thanks to your companions." He gestured to the other occupied cells.

Moving to the next cell, Trane grinned at the fair-haired man within. "And how is the Archon this morning? Recovered from his taxing journey?" Peter Steiner had been troublesome for the team that had barely managed to spirit him away from Tharkad. In his struggles, two had been killed, and another would never walk again.

Peter threw himself at the clear wall separating him and his tormentor. Trane just smiled at the display of impotent fury before moving on.

Yvonne Davion sat with her shoulders slumped in defeat on the narrow cot of her cell. When she looked up however Trane felt a tinge of uneasiness. Something in the eyes told him her spirit was unbroken, regardless of any outward display.

The occupant of the final cell appeared untouched by her surroundings. Trane found it impossible to gauge her thoughts. "A good morning to you, Isis." Trane executed a sloppy salute to his old commander-in-chief. "Everything is satisfactory I hope." The Free Worlds League government had proven susceptible to infiltration, making the replacement of the Captain-General a relatively simple operation.

"What happened to you, Trane?" Isis approached the transparent wall of her prison. "You had a career, position, respect." She looked searchingly into his face. "The people looked up to you after 'Star Lord'. You were a hero!"

"Hero!" Trane vehemently spat the word. "Hero! What use is that? People don't care about heroes anymore. The Inner Sphere doesn't need heroes anymore!" He pulled a tattered scrap of cloth from his belt. "You want heroes! Here is what it means to be a hero now!" He waved the charred fragment of brown homespun cloth at the Captain-General. "What use are your heroes now!" Trane spun on his heel and stormed from the cellblock.

"You hit a nerve there Isis." Yvonne looked up once more from her cot. "I fear he will soon be as mad as Amaris."

“What would be worse?” Isis asked sadly, thinking of the burnt scrap of cloth. “A universe without heroes, or one that thinks it can do without them?”

“Whatever way you look at it, we’re screwed.” Freefall was lounging in one of the comfortable chairs in the conference room Medron Pryde was using at Bob base. Medron looked with mild annoyance at the Stinger LAM pilot, but refrained from throwing a chunk of cold Pizza in his direction.

“Well, we have the data we recovered and it gives us a good idea of what we’re facing now. This New Republic has a force of ten Regiments of mixed troops. That’s down to eight now, after all the damage we caused them.” Medron glances over the piles of hard copy covering the desk.

“But...” Freefall paused to catch a toppling pile of data disks. “... now they control most of the Inner Sphere military as well. With that, they can move to take Terra, then move on to obliterate the Clans. Then they will probably come looking for us.”

“The fact that nobody has come after us yet would suggest that they don’t know we are here. Yet.” Syphon, the other Stinger LAM pilot in Medron’s Command Lance eyed his mug of cold coffee unenthusiastically.

Medron scratched his unshaven cheeks. “Only a handful of the Command Staff know where this place is. Given the way we always run into a warm welcome, I’m beginning to think we should keep it that way.”

“You think we have a traitor?” Fokker was shaking a thermos, but found it empty. “We need more coffee.”

“What we need is the location of the New Republic base and where they have the Successor Lords they’ve replaced. I can’t see them just killing them. They know too much, and would be valuable hostages if things go wrong.” Medron looked around the table. “I’m open to ideas.”

“Well I may just have something for you!” Rick entered the conference room, several of his Team Bonsai Battalion carrying various data pads. “You may remember we picked up a whole bucketful of these things on Stein’s Folly” He was waving a pair of tongs holding a misshapen lump of plastic.

“Yes, we though they were not important.” Medron reached for the crudely painted object.

“Don’t touch!” Rick jerked the tongs out of Medron’s reach. “We were doing some analysis, just to pass the time really, and we discovered something.” The Team Bonsai personnel behind Rick were all nodding and waving their data pads. “It’s fiendishly brilliant. The plastic is impregnated with an addictive compound. Prolonged exposure will result in a craving for more of it. Of course most people will probably not make the connection, so the craving manifests itself in a desire to collect more of these things.”

“But that’s...” Medron was horrified.

“Aggressive marketing, I know.” Rick carefully placed the chunk of plastic into a lockable container.

“So, how does this help us?” Freefall looked at the container; making a note to dispose of the things he had picked up on Stein’s Folly after the battle.

Rick plucked a data pad from the grasp of one of his assistants. “The chemicals are quite special. Few places in the Inner Sphere can produce them. If we can find out where they are coming from, we might be able to trace the shipments. If these things are being used to control their troops, then the most obvious place they would stockpile them would be their main base.”

Medron took the offered pad and studied it. Although he could understand nothing of the scientific gobbledegook, he nodded wisely. “So, we track them down. Then we finish this. Once and for all.”

Chapter 16

Brit's Bar, Montenegro, Solaris City, Solaris VII, 15th November 3082

The working class bar was lit exclusively by the flashes and flares of holographic 'Mech combat and the excitement was so thick it required a laser cutter to reach the bar. David Allard-Liao Lear was going for the record tonight and everybody was watching.

Almost everybody that is.

David Richards and Eastwood Alexander worked their way through to screaming and cheering crowd, viewing one of the supporting features for the "Big Fight". They were not here to view the fight, nor specifically for a drink, although the bar was their destination.

Under his worn and stained tunic Richards arm still ached from the fighting on Astrokazy, and he still mourned the loss of his Raijin. The cache at Bob base had failed to yield a replacement, so he had been forced to make do with an updated Panther. Together with Eastwood, a Valkyrie pilot from Brainburner's reorganised mixed lance, they had been assigned to Solaris VII. Infiltrating into the Inner Sphere after the declaration branding them as renegades had been a time consuming affair, but a number of teams were now working to trace the New Republics supply lines.

News from across the Inner Sphere had generally been bad however. ComStar, perceiving the threat from the combined strike by the military from four of the Successor States had acted first. The ComGuards had taken control off a number of systems surrounding Terra, creating a buffer zone. The Successor States attack was now having a hard time punching their way through against stiff opposition.

Movements along the Clan Occupation Zone sapped the Combing and Commonwealth forces of desperately needed reinforcements as units were repositioned to guard against Clan adventurism.

Medron was attempting to contact ComStar to advise them of the true situation, but all attempts had been fruitless. It looked like the Warriors of the Dropship were alone.

The bartender looked up as the shabbily dressed pair finally reached the bar. STC had been mildly suspicious of the pair when they first showed up over a week ago. After they spent their time poking around, asking questions, he was really suspicious. However, they paid good House Bills and the information they were after was not too sensitive. "What'll it be gents?"

"Two PPCs, Marik style, and not quite so heavy on the grain alcohol this time. We'd like to retain our sight." Eastwood grinned at the barkeep.

STC kept a smile plastered across his face as he charged Eastwood's glass with an extra shot of grain alcohol, just to make sure. "That shipment you were asking about, I could have some info for you." He placed the PPCs on the bar.

Richards peeled the to three bills from a wad of Marik script, C-Bills not being fashionable right now, and placed them on the bar. STC didn't even look at them. "I'm running a bar, not a charity." When the three bills were joined by three more of their compatriots STC beckoned the two closer. "The chemicals shipment from the Fraymore plant is being shipped to Grand Base. They get delivered to PathRalla Plastics. Enjoy your drinks."

Eastwood nodded to his companion. After Team Bonsai had analysed the chemicals, they had narrowed down its origin to a handful of planets in the Inner Sphere that possessed the same concentrations of rare isotopes. Teams had been dispatched to the most likely targets, and it looked like Solaris VII was the one. "Grand Base is in the Confederation. This could get tricky."

David picked up his glass. With the Feng Shui movement currently sweeping that region of space it was more dangerous then ever. Specially trained Maskirovka Feng Shui masters were scouring Liao space, executing whole communities when finding something deemed "un-harmonious". "Still, we're one step closer to completing our mission." He clinked his glass against his Eastwood's and they both toasted their success.

STC watched his two patrons pass out, and then beckoned to the bouncers. "Dump these two losers outside, and don't forget to clean out their wallets this time."

Rick Raisley walked from the simulator bay, making notes on a data pad as he traversed the corridors of Bob base. He had to admit, the place was a marvel, with equipment and data hoarded here against the day the Inner Sphere would need it.

A day like today.

The two old men who were running the place now that Mac was gone had been very helpful. The old man with the blue eyes had provided technical resources, while his scar-faced associate provided data from extensive libraries that were probably even more impressive than the store of war materials.

Rick reached the offices provided for the Warriors, looking around for Medron on entering. "Good news." Rick called to Medron while waving his data pad. "The last simulator runs worked out perfectly. We can start installing the UCS in our equipment immediately."

Medron looked up from the mass of maps he had been studying, nodding. "Good, get things started. I hope we have a target to use it against by the time you're done."

Rick looked down at the maps. "Any news?"

"Yes, all bad." Medron took in the maps with one sweep of his arm. "Reports suggest ComStar is hanging on by their fingernails, so no help from there. The Capellan Confederation are out of it, but I can't see us convincing them we're not the renegades we have been branded as." Stabbing a finger at the Clan space Medron continued. "The Clans are pinning down Kurita and Steiner troops, but have not come down on our side. It looks more like they just plan to take advantage of the situation. They refuse to believe our information about Amaris."

"Anything from our people?" One map was populated with small markers, each one representing a Warrior.

"Our boys on Solaris VII may be onto something, but their last report is overdue. Communications are flaky though, so it may be nothing." Medron looked up from the markers. "How long for the refit?"

"Provided we run into no snags, all the equipment will be upgraded within five days. Then all we need is our target."

Chapter 17

Grand Base, Sian Commonality, Capellan Confederation, 14th December 3082

The flare of the Seekers main drive light the night as the fully laden cargo vessel struggled off from the loading dock. Jester drew back into the shadows just beyond the chain-link perimeter fence, turning to Richards and Allexander. "So, your positive the cargo we're after is aboard that old Union?"

David Richards nodded, though it was too dark for the gesture to be seen. Then he winced. That last drink on Solaris VII had packed quite a punch. "Yes, we traced the chemical shipments here, and PathRalla are incorporating it into some of their products." He scanned the spaceport quickly. "We were able to get a look at the shipping manifests for most of their output, and they all go out to legitimate outlets."

As he paused, Eastwood Allexander took up the briefing. "The shipments we couldn't get any information on were also the most heavily guarded. We were able to tail them here, where they go out on a weekly basis. So far we've not been able to find out where those Dropships are going."

"And that's where my boys come in." Jester paused to adjust the collar of his Nighthawk Armor, another marvellous find at Bob base. "Well, all the covert options have failed, and we're running out of time. We'll just go over and get what we need, then run like hell." He glanced at a wrist chronometer he carried as a backup to the suits HUD. "Almost time, the charges we planted go in five. You better get yourselves over to the landing craft."

The pair moved off into the night as Jester donned the Nighthawk's helmet. Once in place the helmet activated the suits sensors, giving him an augmented view of the landing field.

If all went to plan, the landing craft would carry them to a rendezvous with the Xenophobe, which had jumped in using a fake ID transponder proclaiming it to be a tramp freighter. So far the deception was working, with the lazy system defence forces not even bothering with a visual inspection. Their luck could not hold forever, but it might last long enough. If Jester could get the information they were after, the Destroyer could carry them directly to their target, giving the New Republic little time to react to the events about to unfold on Grand Base.

It was almost time. Jester disengaged the visual sensors, not wanting the coming explosions to blind him through artificial enhancement.

A thunderclap echoed from the far side of the spaceport as the main transformer exploded with a flash. Seconds later the backup transformer was consumed by a similar explosion. The lights illuminating the field flickered off and the faint hum from the electrified fence was cut off.

From various places of concealment, Jester's strike team sprang towards the fence in giant power armor propelled bounds. All eight had cleared the fence and were well on their way towards their objective before emergency lights began to cast easily avoided pools of light. The sound of ringing alarms were momentarily muffled as additional explosives and pyrotechnic decoys detonated throughout the port.

Jester laughed as his two squads approached the tired old Union Dropship. The crew had been caught napping and the main boarding ramps were still down. A trio of crewmen were standing at the bottom of the nearest ramp, gawking at the light show of secondary explosions from a distant warehouse. They fell soundlessly as his men opened fire with the pulse lasers built into their bulky Mauser Assault Systems.

Three more bounds, and Jester was into the cargo-packed hold. "Fan out! Team two, head for the computer core, Team one with me." Using the augmented strength of the Nighthawk, Jester punched in the side of one of the shipping crates. Chunks of plastic fell from the shredded boxes he pulled through the hole, confirming they had the right ship. "This is it. See if you can find a shipping manifest." He began to work his way down the rows of tightly packed shipping crates, checking each in turn.

"Sir! Over here!" The team demolitions expert, Wedge called from where his Nighthawk was knelt beside the cargo bay bulkhead. Jester moved cautiously to see what he had discovered. "What do you make of this?" Wedge was pointing at a packet on the deck, a yellow powder spilling from a rip. The label on the packet confirmed Jester's suspicions. "Instant Custard powder. Could be from the last cargo the ship carried." A flashing timer on his HUD brought Jester back from his musings over the find. "Times-a-passing people! We have five more minutes, then we're outa-here!"

"Team two, Cloud here. We've pulled the computer memory core. We'll be with you in three."

“Got it! Everybody listen up! Once Team Two gets here, we take whatever we have and make a break for it. Anybody who gets separated, make for the rally point.” A glance out the open hatch told Jester that port security was beginning to bring the chaos outside under control. He had to admit they had been quicker to respond than he’d expected, but not quick enough. “Wedge, bag that packet, then lets move.”

As Jester and his men bounded away from the ship he could see the forms of BattleMechs silhouetted against the fires. Their luck, and electronic countermeasures, held however. None of the fighting machines gave any sign of noticing the swiftly moving figures.

“The navigational data from the computer core supports the evidence from that packet you found.” Medron Pryde and the command staff were going over the information Jester had retrieved. “The packed was marked as the produce of New Wales.”

“Don’t recall anyplace by that name.” Jester stretched; glad to be out of his bulky armor.

“No, it’s a miserable little planet out in the Periphery. Although it was named by the discovery team, nobody could be bothered colonizing it.” Medron called up a holographic display showing the position of New Wales beyond the Taurian Concordat. “However, records provided by ComStar after the Clan Invasion show that it was the site of a Star League Research Lab. It would be a perfect base of operations for this ‘New Republic’.”

Jester was intrigued. “What kind of research? Mechs? Weapons?”

Medron shook his head. “No, it was set up by the SLDF Catering Corps. The Republic must have reactivated the manufacturing plants. Now they can use them to produce food shipments to trade for the materials they need for their army.”

“So, are we going to attack?” Tel Hazen looked up from studying documents on the SLDF base. “It is quite a fortress.”

“Yes, we’re going in. Even if this is just a link in their supply chain, we don’t have the luxury of time. ComStar can’t hold out much longer, and we have to find the Succession Lords.”

Atticus Longwalker tapped a data pad thoughtfully. “I think we can even up the odds a little. Those special Arrow IV missiles could be very useful.”

“Yes, but whatever we do, it has to be a diversion.” Medron looked at Jester. “Our priority is to rescue any prisoners and get them to safety, or gather intelligence. Think your people are up to the job?”

Jester gave a thumbs-up. “No problem, just give us a diversion, and we’ll do the rest.”

Chapter 18

Dromedary Flats, New Wales, The Periphery, 21st December 3082

The thunderheads rushing in from the west crashed with mighty thunder, the sudden flashes of lightning already fading as the sound reached the advancing New Republic units. Captain Montegue Smith cursed the weather that would soon deprive him of air support, for although a Battalion of Mage Knights supported the Basking Sharks and Dolphin Regiments, he would have been happier attacking with an even higher numerical advantage.

Already one New Republic fighter wing had been destroyed by the Warriors of the Dropship.

When the attacking force had been first detected, the Flying Fish Aero-wing had been scrambled to knock them from the sky. Wing Commander Hobbs had been momentarily confused when the Dropships had performed their turnover before the half-way point. Forgoing ahead with the prospect of catching the enemy further away from New Wales, Hobbs had ordered all fighters to launch. Accelerating hard, his wing ran into a cloud of metal doorknobs deployed from the cargo bays of the attackers just after the turnover. Although of small mass, the relative speeds of the Aerospace fighters and the doorknobs were considerable. Many fighters did not survive and others were forced to turn back with heavy damage. The few that reached the enemy were no match for the weaponry of four Dropships.

The Warriors of the Dropship proceeded to make an uncontested landing out on Dromedary Flats. Once on the ground they had inexplicably failed to advance towards the New Republic fortress. General Trane cautioned the forces he deployed to be wary of other tricks, but had remained at the old Star League instillation to direct the defence at the order of the Star Lord. Trane had been less than happy at the order, but had elected to deploy some of his Mage Knights in the attack force to be in at the kill by proxy. Smith was just curious as to whom the kill would be. Twice these Warriors had survived ambush, eliminating two of the eight New Republic 'Mech Regiments in the process. Now, against all odds, they had located the Republic's hidden base. Regardless of what his comrades were saying, this would be no easy battle.

"All units deploy for combat." Colonel Wong of the Basking Sharks had been given operational command. "There they are!" The Warriors of the Dropship were arrayed across the Flats in a single line of battle. There was no cover, no place to hide additional units. There would be no surprises.

Smith was immediately suspicious.

The New Republic forces deployed well out of weapons range, yet the Warriors made no move to attack. Just as the Basking Sharks finished forming up for an advance the comms channels were filled with calls. "Incoming! Defensive Fire!" Artillery! Smith could see the contrails of Arrow IV missiles, lots of them, rising from behind the ranks of the Warriors. Even as he fired the heavy autocannon mounted in the right arm of his Walrus, he could see the other 'Mechs doing the same. A glance at his sensors told him that there was no laser guidance to these deadly weapons.

Odd. Odd and very wasteful.

Some of the big missiles were hit by the defensive fire, exploding with strangely subdued force. The majority arced high over the Republic 'Mechs where they detonated, spraying the forces below with a viscous white fluid. The communications channels were filled with confused reports, but within moments it was clear that the strange attack had cause little damage. "Second launch!" The warning rang out as a new group of Arrow IV missiles screamed overhead. Once more they missiles detonated with no destructive effects, although Smith was unfortunate enough to receive a liberal coating of whatever the missiles were loaded with. Looking around, he could see that most of his Company were similarly plastered.

"Hold your fire! Don't waste ammunition!" Colonel Wong struggled to return order to his force even as a third wave of missiles streaked on their way.

But this wave was different. The Missiles exploded into expanding brown puffballs of smoke, showering the Republic forces with tiny brown fragments. The ground where they stood was now covered in a dusting of light material, but the same stuff also adhered to the fluid coating many of the 'Mechs and ProtoMechs. "By God! They're taunting us!" Colonel Wong was relieved that the assault had failed to be the devastating barrage it could have been, but the indignity of seeing his bright and shiny Regiment reduced to their current state was too much for him to accept. "All units charge! Let's get them."

Even as the Basking Sharks lurched into motion, Smith felt a niggling doubt at the back of his mind. Perhaps it was the way the coating his Walrus had received hissed and crackled around the Heat Sink vents. Something was amiss.

When the ground gave way under the first ranks of Republic Mechs there was nothing Smith could do. Unable to stop in time, rank after rank plunged into the hastily excavated trench, floundering around in the golden liquid it contained.

His Walrus clawing at the far side of the trench, Smith realised what kind of trap they had been plunged into. “Oh! My! God!”

Atticus Longwalker watched the heaving mass of machinery trying to haul itself from the trap he had planned. The Scampi were particularly hard hit, being completely submerged in the trap. The heavy excavation equipment they had borrowed from Bob base had made short work of the long pit required by the plan. The Warriors of the Dropship had all but stripped the various eating establishments there of cooking oil however. “Pyro! Light them up!”

The form of the Firestarter darted out from the ranks of the Warriors, the pilot lights of flamers already aglow. Laughing insanely, the MechWarrior fired the terrible weapons at the end of an oil trail. The oil ignited with a blue flash, and a trail of fire snaked across the Flats towards the batter and breadcrumb-coated foe.

The trench exploded into a curtain of fire through which the Warriors could see the futile efforts of their trapped enemy. The detonations of ammunition cooking off in the heat rippled up and down the line of death, and a dark haze of evil smelling smoke was carried across the battlefield.

Pyro turned and marched back to his comrades. “Anybody think to bring marshmallows?”

The first battle of Dromedary Flats was over.

The Warriors of the Dropship had moved in to eliminate the few stragglers who had either avoided the trench, or had miraculously pulled themselves from the inferno.

“That worked out as well as could be expected. If I was in charge of the forces defending this place, I’d be livid by now.” Medron was surveying the scene of destruction from the cockpit of his grounded Phoenix Hawk LAM.

Tel Hazen looked in distaste at the dishonourable trap they had been forced to employ. Still, outnumbered as they were, they had to reduce the odds. “If we attack now, it should draw out their remaining forces.”

“We’re still looking at three-to-one odds here.” Atticus was looking at surveillance footage collected by the Dropship on the way in. “Even with the UCS, its going to be a tough fight.”

Wincing at the use of contractions, Tel also looked at the data. Three more full Republic Regiments remained. In addition to that, the Mage Knights could still put a Battalion in the field. “It will be an honourable fight, and one that will win us great glory.”

“Well, it will give Jester and his men the kind of opening they need.” Medron checked the meteorological data. “There’s a storm coming in, which will give them good cover for insertion, but I think it’s worth the risk to have the Command Lance fly shotgun.” Looking once more at the smoke rising from the blackened gash in the ground Medron shuddered at the memory of ‘Mechs melting even as they struggled to haul themselves from the lethal trap. “This UCS better work as advertised, or they will not be the only things smoking around here.”

Chapter 19

Cavern of the Scales, New Wales, The Periphery, 21st December 3082

Standing in the flickering light of the aquariums, Rob Trane fingered the ragged scrap of cloth in his belt and braced himself for the inevitable explosion.

“Gone! All of them!” Stefan Amaris the Seventh started from his throne, his face livid. “Over two Regiments do not just vanish in under ten minutes!”

“My Lord, I fear that Colonel Wong underestimated the Warriors of the Dropship, despite my warnings. Fatally underestimated them.”

The Star Lord sank back into his throne. “But how?” He hammered the arms of the gilded chair with both fists. “How could they cause so much damage? They must have suffered heavy casualties themselves?”

Trane shook his head. “Not from what little information we have recovered.” Trane thought back to the screams that had cut off abruptly while he was monitoring the action. “Colonel Wong was goaded into an all-out assault. He failed to scout ahead and the bulk of our troops ran afoul of traps the Warriors dug after landing. Those that survived were no match for a fully operational Regiment.”

“Ha! That fool! If Wong were still alive, I’d boil him in oil!”

Trane winced. “The Warriors have saved you the trouble, my Lord. Their traps were filled with some kind of combustible material. They had Firestarters to set it all off.”

“The indignity of it! My loyal troops cooked! Cooked! They are barbarians Trane! Their like will have no place in the Inner Sphere once we complete Phase Three!” Struggling to recover his composure, the Star Lord considered his options. “Trane, have my personal Dropship prepared for launch. If by some ill stroke of luck these maniacs should prevail, I will rob them of the final victory of my capture.”

“My Lord, can we not use the prisoners as hostages? We have three more Regiments, but with the Successor Lords...”

“No Trane, you do not understand.” Amaris wiped the sweat from his brow. “Our prisoners are expendable. Their deaths would just be a tool for our attackers to uncover our operations. If we were facing regular house forces, it would work, but these Warriors come from across known space. They own their allegiance to everyone, and no one. We could stop some of them, but not all of them.”

“Shall I put them on your ship then? Just in case.” Trane absently tucked the charred cloth further under his belt.

“Yes Trane, yes.” Amaris leaned forward in his throne, beckoning his general closer. “But lets make sure evacuation is not necessary. How will you deal with these Warriors?”

“It is strange, my Lord. After their success this morning, I would have thought they would have continued to dig in, or launch raids to wear down our remaining forces.” Trane knew there was something he was missing. “Our scouts report they are moving en-mass towards this facility. It’s almost as if they think they can win in an assault against our forces.”

Amaris nodded wisely. “They have something in mind, yes? Any news from our agent?”

“Regrettably, no. Either he has been caught, or the Warriors have tightened security after we ambushed them twice. They must at least be considering the possibility of a traitor in their ranks.” Trane forced his subconsciously wandering hand away from his belt. “I would say let them attack our superior numbers here, where we have extensive fortifications, but...”

“But that is what they must think you would do. They have some plan to deal with us all crowded together here?” Amaris knotted his brows in concentration. “Could they have heavy weapons? Could their Warship come in-system?”

“It is not moving sire, but their Dropship has lifted off and now sits in a high orbit.” That sparked a memory from the Federated Commonwealth civil war for Rob. “They could have a Naval PPC or Laser mounted in their Dropship. If our forces were concentrated into the fortifications, they would make an excellent target, especially if they do not know our prisoners are here, or don’t care.”

“That is immaterial. They obviously want us here, but I am too brilliant to fall into their trap. Amaris cackled manically. “I want them dead Trane! I want them all dead! I don’t care what it takes. Send everything out after them. There will be no traps, no escapes, no Scotsmen, no incredible last minute miracle!” Amaris looked around his throne room with a sour glance. “Send everything, but you and your Mage Knights stay here.”

“As my Lord commands.” Trane keenly felt the need to go out and avenge the fallen Mage Knights, but he could not go against the will of the man with whom he had thrown in his lot. “The Seahorses, Psycho Squid and Tuna Regiments will go immediately.” Standing beside the throne, Rob Trane began to plan what orders to issue while he fingered the cloth tucked into his belt.

“They’re on the move Medron, just like we planned.” Freefall had perched his Stinger LAM on a wide ledge that gave him a commanding view of the ancient Star League research outpost. An attack from the ground would have been very difficult, even for the Warriors. The walls were twenty meters thick, and the sides of the mount on which the old Star League engineers had worked raised the thirty-meter high walls even higher above the valley floor. Access was by a single snaking ramp, covered at all points by gun turrets. Beyond the walls was a small city of accommodation blocks, storage facilities, ‘Mech bays and factories.

Of course, if you could fly all those elaborate defences amounted to nothing. Once into the maze of buildings it would take a Regiment to root out intruders.

Visibility was getting poor because of the driving rain that had preceded the main storm front. But Freefall could see the lines of Republic forces marching from the massively reinforced gate and down the ramp. “Looks like almost everything. They can’t have more than a couple of Battalions left now.”

Medron and the rest of the Command Lance were grounded, out of sight, in a ravine along side the infantry Landing Craft. “How long before the storm hits?”

Eying the dark clouds and his instruments, Freefall watched the receding enemy troops. “I guess we have about forty five minutes boss.”

“It’s going to be close timing. The Warrior’s will make contact round about then.” A flash of distant lightning made Medron jump. “Then we finish this.”

“What I don’t understand is how do we find out if the prisoners are here?” Syphon was still unsure about the whole operation.

Medron had to laugh at that. “It’s simple Syphon. We find somebody and point a big gun at them.” He worked his weapons joystick to wave his Phoenix Hawk LAMs weapons. “I’ll guarantee they’ll be most cooperative.”

Chapter 20

Valley of the Goldfish, New Wales, The Periphery, 21st December 3082

It was unlike any battle Atticus Longwalker had ever fought in before.

The crackling discharge from the pistol-like PPC his BattleMaster gripped in its powerful right hand was mirrored by the raging storm overhead. Natural and man-made lightning combined to illuminate the battlefield with sudden light, and the flash of autocannon and missile explosions filled the darkness between discharges. The BattleMaster moved across the battlefield with a fluid grace never before possessed, thanks to the addition of UCS programming deciphered by Team Bonsai. The whole 'Mech reacted to the demands of its pilot with a speed and precision that Atticus had never experienced before.

The Warriors of the Dropship had made contact with the scout elements of the Seahorses Regiment first. Team Bonsai, with Rick Riasleys Grand Dragon in the vanguard easily flanked them. Even as the ER PPC of the old Kurita manufactured machine carved the heart out of a Flounder, David Richards at the controls of his new Panther attacked a Haddock. The other Bonsai Command 'Mechs provided support fire, with the Ultra Autocannon mounted on the arms of Wedge's Rifleman sticking a trail of destruction across the torso of the Republic 'Mech while the heavy Autocannon mounted on the Hoplite piloted by Epaminondas chewed at the armor protecting the Haddocks legs. Even as these first to 'Mechs went down in flames, Richards could see other 'Mechs of his team pick off lighter units.

"Let's draw them off to the west, then the 188th can sweep them." Rick pushed his Heavy 'Mech into a run. For the next ten minutes the two Warrior Battalions coordinated their attacks, pulling the neat formation of the Seahorse Regiment apart. More than once the Republic Regiment anticipated the next move the Warriors would make, but when they moved bring their heavy elements against their attackers, the Warriors were just too fast. With the UCS the Inner Sphere force could strike with lightning speed, cutting down two or three Republic 'Mechs before falling back down the valley.

Always drawing the Republic units further and further away from their fortified base.

Finally recognising the futility in their piecemeal attacks, the Republic unit halted their advance, awaiting the arrival of two sister Regiments. The valley behind was littered with their casualties, though here and there the unmoving form of a Warrior BattleMech lay beside the more numerous Republic units, showing that such victories did not come without cost.

"First Battalion, attack!" Atticus could see that the Seahorses had made the mistake of allowing themselves to be drawn forward, out of support range of their comrades. The opportunity to land another crippling blow with his fresh Battalion was too good an opportunity to pass up.

Pushing forward, Atticus passed Maciej Marciniaks limping Wolverine as it fell back to regroup with the rest of the 188th. The hulking form of EndoSteel's Marauder covered his lancemate. Longwalker hoped the other 'Mechs had escaped with less damage as he sent blistering salvos of laser and PPC fire into the momentarily confused enemy. As the other 'Mechs of his Battalion joined in, the ranks of Seahorses wavered noticeably. The alarms ringing in his neurohelmet warned Atticus that at least somebody was trying to lock onto his BattleMaster. He just located the Rock Lobster which was drawing a bead on his Assault Mech when the enemy fired its torso mounted Heavy Gauss Rifle.

The weapon ejected the deadly mass of a ferrous slug with a flash that blended into the display of sheet lightning raging overhead, the parachute billowing behind the speeding round. Atticus had automatically thrown his 'Mech into an evasive manoeuvre before the round fired, but was still amazed to see the high winds catch the trailing parachute attached to the deadly round, whipping it around and sending it ploughing into the ground well short of his position.

Grinning at the advantage provided by the weather, Atticus renewed his laser fire against the Rock Lobster. On his left Tel Hazen was advancing at the head of his Lance, his Mad Cat raking an unfortunate group of Scampi with Clan Tech.

Archmore's Fire Lance carpeted the enemy with wave after wave of LRMs, the unmistakable form of his Archer standing shoulder to shoulder with the Crusader piloted by the very aptly named Crusader. The Seahorses line began to buckle under relentless punishment.

There was a flash of movement on his right as a flame-painted Hatchetman rushed forwards with a Wolverine and Panther. Jo Shmoe and his heavier Cestus trailed the rest of the Lance for fire support. As their combined fire scythed through the Republic battleline, their war cry echoed above the noise of the storm.

That was it. The battle torn Seahorse Regiment broke at the sight of axe swinging 'Mech charging them. Atticus laughed in triumph.

“Atticus! More company!” JS pointed his own axe through the rain at the neat ranks of the two new Republic regiments.

The battle was just beginning.

It was unlike any flight Medron Pryde had attempted before.

Flying in at low altitude as the storm raged around the Star League facility, the savage winds threatened to send all of the Land-Air-Mechs of his command slamming into the valley floor, or into a rock face.

The deteriorating weather would help conceal their approach at least.

“Boss! Got a target!” Fokker called out from his Shadow Hawk LAM. “On the parapet!”

“Take him Lance!” Medron was firing deadly bolts of laser fire from his refitted Phoenix Hawk LAM even before the other three LAMs opened up. The combined fire cooked the unfortunate Haddock before its pilot could even issue a warning to his comrades. Another crash of thunder fortuitously masked the sound of the 'Mechs death throws.

The LAMs skinned in low over the now vacant parapet, with the Landing Craft right behind them.

“That looks good!” Medron was scanning for a good place to land. “Fifteen degrees port, that large factory has some landing pads on the roof. They should do nicely.” He scanned the small city contained in within the fortifications. “Jester, you put the Landing craft down on the main pad, we'll set down on the smaller one at the other end. Secure the roof and we'll see you at the upper entrance.” The guard 'Mech they had fried would be missed eventually. They didn't have much time.

The mission was just beginning.

Chapter 21

Clan Snow Raven Command Complex, Brim, Kerensky Cluster, 12th April 3084

The night was filled with thunder and light as Tel Hazen moved stealthily around the courtyard perimeter. It was almost as if the gods themselves had strapped themselves into OmniMechs to savagely attack one another in the sky above the Clan Snow Raven city. Tel analysed that though as he edged closer to the entrance, a sack of doorknobs in his hand. Thoughts of gods were most un-clan like, yet more proof of Inner Sphere contamination.

That last thought almost made him laugh aloud. Here he was, employing an Inner Sphere approach to a very real Clan problem. The skills he had developed while amongst the Warriors of the Dropship could be the only thing that would save the Clans.

Or doom them forever.

It had in a raging storm, not unlike this one, that Tel had fought alongside Warriors from across Known Space against the evil forces of the New New Republic on the forgotten Periphery world of New Wales. The outcome of that battle had changes everything.

Inching along the plain lime washed wall, Tel moved closer to the single guard who sheltered under the awning of the building he wished to enter. The fool was paying no attention to his surroundings, engrossed in reading the first book of the Warriors of the Dropship trilogy. Tel quickly gauged that the unsuspecting guard had yet to reach Chapter 21, sighing with relief.

He would still have the element of surprise.

With a final leap, Tel Hazen swung his sack of doorknobs at his inattentive target. The ferocious weapon struck home, spinning the guard against the wall with a sickening thud. The Snow Raven slumped to the ground.

Tel knelt by his victim, checking for a pulse. There was one, but the bruises blossoming on the guards face showed he would be unconscious long after Tel Hazen had completed his task here.

A quick glance at his chronometer told Tel there was little time left before Clan Coyote would face their nemesis, Clan Roadrunner, in the Trial of Absorption. While he had no love for the Coyotes, he could not stand by idle while they faced Absorption after being falsely accused by the Snow Ravens.

Tel reached for the door control...Gavin Stanovich cursed as the buzzer interrupted his reading. Carefully marking his place in the book he had been reading, he put the novel down and checked his security desk.

Who could be out on the factory roof on a wild New Wales night like this? Whoever the mad fool was, they had neglected to inform the security staff. Or, just as likely, that idiot Jenkins had failed to log it before Gavin relieved him.

The door buzzer sounded again, more impatiently. "Alright! Alright, I'm coming!" Gavin cast a regretful glance at his novel, mourning the fact that he had been unable to locate the first book in the Warriors of the Dropship trilogy in the library. The buzzer sounded a third time as he began to climb the stairs to the roof entrance.

Fumbling with his keys, Gavin deactivated the locking mechanism and pushed the heavy door open against the howling storm outside. "Come on then you idiot, lets get out of this..." The rest of what Gavin might have said was cut off when a swinging bag of doorknobs caught him across the face.

Jester stepped over the unconscious guard, swinging his Mauser to cover the stairwell while Eradicator bent to relieve the man of his keys. "Clear! Lets move!" Jester started down the stairs, but halted at a large sign on the wall. "Hay! Get this! 'WARNING! This facility contains highly flammable materials and is involved in the production of products using fine powders. Naked flames or sparks may result in explosions. Positively no smoking or gunfights in this facility. Thank you.'"

Medron joined Jester in examining the notice. "What do you think?"

Jester shrugged as he read the notice again. "Don't know. All kinds of fun stuff involved with food production. Flour can cause all kinds of problems...Hmmm." Jester thought for a moment. "That custard powder we found was quite fine. Under the right conditions you could use it in a Dust Air Initiator. I guess we don't want a fire-fight inside then."

No, I don't think so." Medron shuddered at the thought of the factory imploding under the force of a DAI as all the oxygen was consumed. "We better move. We're double-parked upstairs."

Jester nodded and moved on, the rest of his squad close behind.

The delivery truck rumbled through the rain-beaten streets towards the Star League command centre. Medron tugged at the collar of his ill-fitting uniform for the hundredth time as he drove the Pizza delivery truck towards their target.

"Are we there yet?" Jester asked from within the stack of Pizza boxes that concealed his Nighthawk suited troopers.

"Almost. Keep quite back there." A squad of troops ahead manned the checkpoint, and two Mage Knight BattleMechs stood silent vigil with them.

The building that had served as a landing pad had turned out to be the primary site of dessert manufacturing on New Wales. As Jester had surmised, some of the processes employed could result in catastrophic explosions under the wrong circumstances. Although mainly automated, there was staff on hand to provide the Warriors with the information they wanted.

Apparently Amaris had made no secret of the identities of those he had imprisoned.

After considering their options, Medron had rejected the initial plan to infiltrate the cellblocks by faking a prisoner transfer. That ploy was even staler than the Pizzas in the back of the delivery truck they had finally selected for the rescue attempt.

As they approached the checkpoint one of the sodden guards waved for the van to halt. The two BattleMechs stirred themselves from their slumber to line up their weapons on the approaching vehicle with whining servos. Medron brought the van to a halt, glancing down at the communicator that would unleash the rest of his Command Lance against the defenders at a word.

"What business do you have?" The helmeted face of the guard almost pushed itself into the cab as Medron wound down the window.

"I got a delivery of an order for General Trane." Pryde showed the guard the data pad with his deliveries list, a list that one of Jester's men had forged twenty minutes ago. It was a gamble using Trane as the recipient, for if he were in the field with his troops their ploy would be uncovered. Likewise, if the guard were to call to confirm the order they would be forced to resort to more direct methods. The last report from the Warriors did show the Mage Knights amongst their attackers, and the presence of at least some of their 'Mechs at the checkpoint suggested that Trane was still here.

The guard made little show of looking over the pad, probably wanting to get back into cover. "Ok, but deliveries go in the side entrance." He stepped back from the delivery van and waved to his comrades to open the gates.

Medron resisted the urge to gun the engine and make a break for the gateway before they changed their minds. Forcing himself not to hurry, he guided the delivery vehicle into yawning opening ahead.

Chapter 22

New New Republic Headquarters, Valley of the Goldfish, New Wales, The Periphery, 21st December 3082

The walls of the compound Medron drove into had been constructed centuries before by some of the best military architects of the first Star League. The walls were thick enough to allow even the mightiest Assault 'Mech to patrol the firing step that circled the interior with no fear of collapsing the heavily reinforced defensive wall. Massive buttresses imbedded deep into the bedrock further bolstered the sheer strength of that weapon studded manmade cliff. After this impressive barrier, the rest of the compound was an anticlimax. A series of long, squat buildings dotted the compound, interspaces with skeletal masts that supported an array of antenna and sensor dishes.

To an experienced eye however, it was clear that the bulk of the facility was buried far beneath the rocky foundations. Ramps ran down to titanic underground bunkers equipped to support an army to defend this forgotten fortress. In one corner of the compound Medron could see the boxy shape of a Leopard class Dropship that was almost swallowed by the protective embankments surrounding the launch pad.

Even without the Amaris banner flying above it, Medron would have easily identified the main command bunker, which Jesters troops had identified as the location of the prison block from the information gathered from the factory workers back at their point of entry. That it was also the apparent centre of activity just confirmed their information.

"I guess that's the side entrance." Medron guided the delivery truck down the narrower ramp that plunged onto the rocky ground. "Get ready Jester." Their stolen transport squealed to a halt in a poorly lit loading dock. The back doors of the Pizza delivery vehicle burst open as Jester and his Nighthawk equipped troops burst out in a flurry of cardboard Pizza boxes. Working as an efficient team, they swept the area with their weapons, looking for threats.

Climbing from the cab, Medron stopped to retrieve one of the Pizza boxes. "Just playing the role." He explained as Jester looked over questioningly. "Guess I get to go first."

With one more futile tug at the tight uniform collar, Medron walked boldly towards the doors that would grant them access to the interior. The Nighthawks flitted silently from shadow to shadow behind him. "Pizza delivery!" He called into the speaker grill beside the door. "Hey! Hurry up. It's getting cold!" The doors slid open silently and Medron found himself facing the levelled weapons two guards inside. "Look! Just a Pizza!" Flipping the top open, Medron exposed the Pizza inside to their scrutiny. "Well, just a Pizza with extra chicken and ham. Oh! And an extra olive." Satisfied, the guards lowered their weapons and waved him through.

Medron timed his trip carefully, hitting the ground with an apparently startled yell. The guards turned from the still-open door by reflex, only to be felled as Jesters troopers swarmed through the opening, swinging bags of doorknobs savagely. "The old ones are the best." Jester grinned wolfishly as he watched the unconscious bodies of the subdued guards being dragged away by his team. "Where now?"

"Well, I have a hunch we'll find the prison block on level 28." Medron carefully rescued the Pizza.

"And just how do you know that?"

"Well, it looks like our unknowing hosts have left us a map." Medron held up a pamphlet he had retrieved from the floor. "Secret Periphery Star League Installations Guide: Abridged Edition." He read the title before showing Jester the side cutaway illustration.

"Is it just me, or are these guys really dumb?" Jester looked back at the doorway through which the guards had been hauled.

The lower levels of the ancient fortifications were mercifully quiet. The full scale 'Mech battle being fought across the valley was drawing everybody's attention Medron suspected. Twice Jesters team had been forced (though not very strongly) to resort to violence, eliminating stray personnel with vicious swings of their doorknob-laden sacks.

"That's the main entrance" Jester peered quickly around the corner and down the long hall. Two troopers in combat armor guarded sets of doors at the end. While not as effective as power armor, their garb might keep them alive long enough against a Mauser to raise the alarm. The doorknobs would be of no use at all. "No way can we storm that without them raising the alarm."

“Looks like Plan B then.” Medron looked unhappily at the Pizza box.

“Don’t worry, we’re right behind you.” Jester tried to sound reassuring.

“Here goes nothing.” Medron strolled round the corner, trying not to let the nervousness he was feeling show in his face. He could sense the piercing gaze of the guards from behind their helmet visors as he continued to approach the guarded portal. The uneasy sensation in the pit of his stomach as the guards levelled their weapons made him swear to himself that this was the last time he would ever face enemy weapons outside a ‘Mech.

“Halt! State your business!” The guard on the right challenged Medron while he was still over ten meters from the door.

“Special order Pizza for Hohiro Kurita.” Once more Medron displayed the delivery box.

“You what?” The guard asked incredulously.

“Look, I’ve got this Pizza and it’s for one of your ‘guests’. I’m running late on my deliveries, so can I leave it here and you see that he gets it before it gets cold?” Medron waved the box invitingly at the guards who exchanged glances.

“Yeh! Sure. We’ll make sure he gets it right away.” Pryde could tell that the two guards were grinning inside their helmets as he handed over the Pizza box. “Got to go now! Remember, it’s best while it’s still hot.” With that he turned and walked back down the corridor. Rounding the corner, he reached Jester and his waiting men. “How long do you recon?” Jester asked, passing Medron a captured laser rifle.

Medron shrugged. “I don’t know. Figure they will wait until I’m out of sight, thing things over for a minute, then open the...” The rest of what he was going to say was cut off by the detonation of two grenades that Jester had wired to the lid of a Pizza box.

“Lets go!” Jester darted around the corner with the other Nighthawks close behind. Medron hung back, letting the armoured figures go first with myomer powered bounds. Reaching the door, the troopers burst through into the cells beyond, while one of their number checked the sprawled forms of the guards.

“Find the prisoners! Quick! Somebody must have heard that blast.” Medron raced into the cellblock and raced between rows of empty cells.

“Over here! Jester waved Medron over. “We’ve found them. Ok get those cells open.” Under Jesters orders his men began to work on the locks to the occupied cells.

Throwing caution to the wind, Medron pumped several laser bolts into the lock of the nearest occupied cell. Jester joined him and yanked the door open using the superior strength of his Battle Armor.

Medron darted into the cell, only to be confronted by a bemused looking Yvonne Davion. “I’m Medron Pryde! I’m here to rescue you!”

Yvonne looked at his poorly fitting uniform. “Aren’t you a little tall for a Pizza delivery man?”

Chapter 23

Valley of the Goldfish, New Wales, The Periphery, 21st December 3082

For Js the battle had taken on a dreamlike quality. The Republic forces appeared to move at a glacial pace as the Warriors of the Dropship almost danced their 'Mechs across the battlefield. While his opponents reacted as if struggling to move underwater, Js guided his Axman with razor edged precision, caving in cockpits left and right with his 'Mechs trademark weapon.

What turned the experience from a dream into a nightmare was that new Republic units always moved up to replace their fallen, whereas the Warriors had no such reinforcements.

When a momentary lull entered the battle as both forces disengaged to regrouped and take stock as if by mutual agreement, Js was able to look around at the Warriors for the first time in many long minutes. Their position was still stung out across the valley, although they had fallen back several kilometres from their point of contact with the Republic Regiments. Js was proud they had done so well in this fight. Despite having started the battle outnumbered three to one, the route over which they had withdrawn was littered with the bubbling remains of many enemy units. Now he figured the gap was closer to two to one.

This had not been achieved without cost however.

Js judged that the Warriors could only field two Battalions of battered 'Mechs, where as their adversary still had fresh reserves to tap.

“Here they come again! Hold the line! Hold it!” Js followed Atticus and the rest of what had become the Command Lance for this battle into a position in the centre of their line. Tel Hazen anchored the right flank with his Clan equipped unit while the left was almost nailed in place by the hulking presence of Rapier's Assault Lance.

The Republic troops advanced into a hail of energy beams, interspaced with the occasional missile or autocannon barrage. The Warriors ammunition was becoming as depleted as their armor in this drawn out fight. Although caressing beams of destruction cut down several of the advancing units, a solid phalanx of Balrogs continued to advance against their hard held battle line.

Js could see that this renewed thrust would strike the line where Brainburner was holding his lance. Side by side Braninburner's Marauder and Slicers grey Warhammer held their ground, pumping bolt after bolt of PPC fire into the heavier units marching towards them. The return fire scored glowing scars across the armoured hides of the two stubborn 'Mechs, but the two refused to go down. Rover's Shadow Hawk and Eastwood Alexanders' Valkyrie leaped into the fray alongside their lance-mates, showering one Blarog with their remaining ammunition.

The Balrog melted to the ground, but dangerous units continued the advance.

“Reserves! Counterattack now!” Js watched as Brainburner Jr. sprinted forwards to aid his father.

One final PPC barrage caught the flame colored Marauder, ripping the left arm away from the elongated body of the deadly looking 'Mech. Staggered by the damage, the Marauder spun almost full circle, but Brainburner somehow managed to keep his war machine on its feet. Slicer limped his battered Warhammer closer to his beleaguered comrade, shattered heatsinks leaking coolant and rents in the armor spewing smoke.

Just as the Republic Assault 'Mechs closed the range to deliver the killing shots a flame colored Hatchetman was suddenly amongst their ranks, flailing at them with a hatchet in one hand and a large sack of doorknobs in the other.

“WHO!”

Thud.

“WANTS!”

Crunch.

“SOME!”

Wham.

Thrown into confusion by the brutal assault, the Republic Mech drew back from this new and destructive entry. The terrific force of those weapons felled two before the others could get out of range. But before the larger machines could focus their fire on their reckless attacker, Owans and Uraikha followed their Lance Commander into the battle, swinging sacks of their own.

Falling back from the savagery of the close combat that was claiming far too many of their number, the Republic 'Mechs were showered by a hail of high-speed doorknobs, accelerated to killing speed by the Gauss Rifle of Jo Shmoe's Cestus.

Lord Soth joined the swirling melee, his Wolfhound benefiting from its all-energy weapon design in this drawn out battle. Working with Scorpion's Centurion, he cut down a Bro Has missile support 'Mech while it had been lining up a salvo on the rampaging Hatchetman.

Js could see that up and down the line the attack was being turned back. The Republic 'Mechs grudgingly fell back out of range of the Warriors weapons to regroup once more.

"Atticus, should we counter attack now?" Js watched the orderly withdrawal of their enemy.

"No, we don't have the reserves to hold the line, and we're almost done for ammunition. Best to let them come to us. We can do more damage that way." Atticus checked his monitor screens, seeing there were fewer active Warrior 'Mechs displayed than before the last attack. He looked up at the sky, where the storm was beginning to give way to a light drizzle and the clouds were beginning to thin. "I hope Medron is getting on better than we are."

"Atticus! They're on the move!" Js steeled himself for the next assault.

Chapter 24

New New Republic Headquarters, Valley of the Goldfish, New Wales, The Periphery, 21st December 3082

The enhanced strength of the Nighthawk suits were put to good use by Jesters men as they quickly freed the Successor Lords from their cells. Medron greeted each of the rescued heads of state as they emerged from captivity.

Isis rushed from her cell to embrace Pryde, but halted when she saw the truly awful uniform he was wearing. Medron cursed silently. For a moment there it looked like he would get the girl this time.

“What are you doing in that, that thing?” Isis examined the ill-fitting cloths.

“I’m in disguise.” Medron shrugged lamely. He tugged once more at the constricting collar of his uniform. “We have to move fast. Somebody has to come to investigate that explosion soon.” Regretfully, he forced himself to stop fussing with his disguise. Although it had served its purpose there was no time for him to discard the garish clothing here.

“Got another prisoner.” Richard Snow gestured at the cell located at the far end of the row.

Medron turned to Isis. “Who is it? I thought Kali Liao had not been abducted.”

“She wasn’t. It’s some author they found sniffing around after we were brought here. He claims he was just doing some research for his next BattleTech novel.” Isis looked at her peers, who nodded in agreement. “He said his name is Coleman. Loren Coleman.”

“Get that door open. Quick!” Medron waved Snow to continue then turned to Jester. “Some good PR can’t hurt. Just as well Warner is not here though. I think he still has a grudge about that St. Ives business.”

Jester agreed. “Just don’t let him drive the truck. Nasty things happen to authors when they get to drive the truck.”

With a final power-assisted heave Snow opened the last cell, half tearing the door from the wall. The author emerged, blinking owlishly and clutching bundles of paper tightly. “What’s all that?” Medron looked at the miss-matched collection of pages Coleman held protectively.

“My next book. Being locked up in that cell meant I wasn’t getting interrupted all the time. I managed to get quit a lot done.” Loren looked around the cells once more. “I think I’d like to go now though.”

“Right.” Medron turned to Jester and nodded. “Let’s get out of here.” As two of Jester’s troopers took point he fell into step beside the author. “Just for the record, my name is spelt M E D R O...”

They had been very lucky to reach the delivery van without incident. Jester shook his head in disbelief when they found the guards they had disabled on the way in had yet to be missed.

Amateurs! It wasn’t like the old days when he had to work against real professionals.

He noticed that Coleman’s eyes had glazed over as Medron had regaled the author with details of his career, family history and the Warrior’s mission against the Republic. Jester directed his men to clear the piles of Pizza boxes from the rear of the truck to make room for the rescued prisoners while Medron continued to talk.

When the alarms started their raucous call everyone in the underground parking area froze. Looking around, Jester could see no visible threats however. “Somebody must have checked on the cell blocks!” He had to scream at the top of his lungs to make himself heard over all the noise. “We’ve got to go now!”

Medron dashed for the cab, ushering Loren to join the Successor Lords in the back. None of the others would be able to drive while wearing their Nighthawk suits. Hauling the driver’s door shut he fumbled with the ignition, firing the engine to life. He could barely hear the deep-throated roar of the ICE power plant over the continuing wail of alarms. As he guided the van back up the entry ramp he screamed over his shoulder to Jester “Warn the LAMs were coming out!”

Jester snapped shut his helmet, drowning out the worst of the noise. “Fokker!” He opened the Comand Lance communications frequency. “Fokker, take out the gate guard and the gate. Do it now!”

Fokker had parked his Shadow Hawk LAM on the roof of an apartment building that gave him a fine view of the Republic headquarters. The storm had enabled the two Stinger LAMs to likewise position themselves to cover the escape of their rescue party. Now his ‘Mech was hunkered down amongst the vents and tanks in powered down mode. The Mage Knights ‘Mechs would be have been lucky to see him, even if they knew he was in the area.

The distant sounds of battle combined with the Warrior’s general frequency to paint a grim picture of the titanic battle being fought out somewhere down the valley.

As much as he wanted to cut in his jets and scream off to aid his comrades, he knew that the real battle that had to be won was here. Without the real House leaders, there was no way to curb the tide of Goldfish that had ceased control of most of the Inner Sphere.

“Fokker!” Jesters transmission brought him from his reverie. “Fokker, take out the gate guard and the gate. Do it now!”

Powering up his own LAM, Fokker sent coded laser pulses to FreeFall and Syphon to engage. The two Stinger LAMs immediately blasted the smaller of the two defending ‘Mechs with a deadly string of laser bolts from their retrofitted extended range pulse lasers. The first volley hurt the unsuspecting Flounder, but it was too startled to do anything before a second volley cut it down.

“Good shooting! Now stick with the plan!” Both Warriors answered affirmative as they jumped their BattleMech mode LAMs into the street and ran off down a side road. The remaining Mage Knight ‘Mech, a formidable looking Moray, thundered down street in pursuit, cracking the road surface with each heavy footstep. As the heavy ‘Mech passed his position, Fokker jumped his lighter vehicle down behind it, sending lances of laser fire into the thin rear armor from his LAMs shoulder mounted large lasers.

The larger ‘Mech appeared to arch it’s back in agony as the hellish caress of those beams probed into vital components. A stream of melting plastic ran from the gashes the attack had ripped into the Moray’s armor told Fokker he had damaged the gyro, and possibly some of the engine shielding. Fokker pumped more fire into the ponderously turning machine, silently screaming at it to fall. But somehow it remained standing, lining up arm-mounted autocannon on the LAM.

Bracing for the impact of cannon fire, Fokker watched as the Morey suddenly jerked it arms skywards, filling the sky with glowing tracer rounds as its pilot lost control. The armor plates covering the heavy ‘Mechs centre torso began to blacken, sending tendrils of black smoke up into the stormy skies. Finally the nova brightness of a runaway reactor burst through the melting structure of the Morey, consuming the torso and head in an expanding ball of plasma.

“Target two is down. FreeFall, take care of the ground troops. Syphon, cover our backs.” The returning Stinger LAMs set to their tasks as Fokker used his lasers to cut through the gate control circuits. The scattering troops were no concern to Fokker as he employed the giant hands of his Shadow Hawk LAM to pry open one of the gates.

“Just in time, thanks” The Pizza delivery van screamed through the opening gate at reckless speed, the back doors swinging open as Jester troops poured fire at two pursuing ground cars. On seeing enemy ‘Mechs, the drivers of the two vehicles were quick to reverse inside the headquarters fortifications once more.

“If you would be so kind as to run some interference for us, I think its time we left.” Medron floored the accelerator and tore off down the main street and back towards their landing site.

Chapter 25

Cavern of the Scales, New Wales, New Wales, The Periphery, 21st December 3082

The light from the tanks lining the walls of the cavern glinted brightly from the medal and braid of Rob Trane's dress uniform as he stood beside the carved throne of Stefan Amaris the Seventh.

Together they watched the holo-projection of the battle raging down the Valley of the Goldfish. While the bald man on the throne clapped with glee with every Warrior 'Mech brought down, Trane could see little to celebrate. Of the three Regiments that had issued fourth from the stronghold, he judged that barely two Battalions now remained on the field. While they had whittled their opponents down to a ragged Battalion, they had taken hideous losses in the process.

Trane momentarily fingered the hilt of his ceremonial sword as he continued to watch. The last attack had met with little success, with several 'Mechs grouped around a brightly decorated Hatchetman once more throwing back the main thrust. Trane was tempted to order the troops to eliminate that one 'Mech at any cost, but he resisted the urge to micromanage the situation. The confusion orders from afar could cause might be enough to break what was left of three Regiments.

Trane had a suspicion he was missing something elementary about the Warriors strategy. Whatever it was, it must have something to do with the report that Medron Pryde had not been identified amongst the forces in the valley.

One of the retreating Republic 'Mechs, a Monkfish, disintegrated as twin beams of coherent light caressed the ravaged armor that was all that remained of a formidable carapace. The missile magazines that fed the heavy launchers grotesquely bloating the machines arms cooked off, scattering shards of plastic over the battlefield. Trane cursed the Clansman at the controls of the Mad Cat that had just eliminated one of his senior Battalion commanders before his attention was caught by an aid entering the cavern hurriedly. "Yes man? What is it?"

Glancing nervously at the throne where his lord continued to watch the carnage, the aid fearfully lowered his eyes. "General! A delivery truck just blasted it's way out of the compound. The markings match those of a Pizza delivery vehicle that was reported stolen half an hour ago!"

Trane was about to question the man on the details when a second aid rushed in. "My Lord! General! The prisoners have escaped!" The aid threw himself to his knees before Amaris.

"Gone! Gone!" Amaris spluttered as he pushed himself out of the heavily carved piece of furniture. "Where are they? Where!"

"That truck!" Trane snarled as he turned back to the first aid. "How did it get past the 'Mechs guarding the gate?"

"Reports say that a number of LAMs ambushed the gate guard sir." The crestfallen aid realised he should have reported the attack first. He cast a nervous glance at the still raving Amaris who was pacing around the throne, screaming about how hard it was to get good help theses days.

"LAMs?" Trane thought wildly for a moment. "Medron Pryde! So that's where he got to! Where was the truck stolen from?"

"General?" The aid was momentarily confused by the question. "Umm... It was reported missing from the dried foods manufacturing plant area."

"Trane!" Amaris paused in his circuit of the furniture. "Trane! I want them back! Hunt them down, do you hear me! Hunt them down now. I want them alive, but more importantly, I want Pryde's head. Don't come back without either, do you understand?"

Trane bowed before the man to whom he had tied his fate. "Yes, my lord." Turning, he rushed for the door while already calling for troops and a VTOL to be ready immediately.

"I think we have a problem Medron." Jester positioned himself behind the drivers seat and watched as his commander guided the laden vehicle through the streets.

"I can't think of any." Medron was grinning despite the discomfort of the borrowed clothing he wished to discard at the first opportunity. Things had gone well, with the LAMs drawing off what little pursuit that the surprised Republic forces could

muster. He expected the bulk of the 'Mech forces were headed for the main gates to the base, where they would have a long wait. He intended to fly out the way they had come in.

"Well, I may not be a brilliant mathematician, but I can count." Jester steadied himself against the shaking of the truck by gripping the internal bracing for the drivers roll cage with the powerful manipulators of his Nighthawk suite. "We're going to be one seat short on the transport, even if we overcrowd it."

Medron cursed silently. They had tailored the strike force to give them enough room to get all the Successor Lords out, but with Loren Coleman they had an extra body. Then a more attractive option came to him. "No problem, I'll get the Captain-General out in my P-Hawk."

Jester just shook his head within the confines of his suit helmet. "I hate it when you're grandstanding."

With a screech of tired breaks, Medron brought the Pizza delivery truck that had served them so well to a halt outside the brooding edifice of the automated dessert manufacturing plant. Even with the lightening clouds, there was a strange menace about the place.

"Everybody out! We are outa here!" Medron swung the drives door open a jumped down from the cab as his passengers piled out of the rear doors. He turned to the Captain-General. "Issis, if you would care to come with me, I'll guarantee you a first-class flight out of this dump." When she joined him he turned to Jester. "Get everybody else out. I'll see you back at the Dropship."

Rescuers and Rescued alike hurried towards the factory.

While Jester took the others to the transport, Medron and Isis worked their way through the maze of corridors and walkways that threaded their way through the guts of the factory. After their initial entry into factory from the roof, Jesters men had found a map to the facility that showed a more direct route to the small landing pad where Medron had landed his Pheonix Hawk.

Medron definitely wanted out of the city as fast as possible. The radio chatter from the Warriors he had picked up suggested that time was running out.

Still, he had an uneasy feeling as he hurried along a gantry that took them over a series of steaming vats. More than once he thought he caught motion on the edge of his vision. A flash of something moving quickly but silently. Something keeping pace with their progress. Something white.

But when he looked around to try and identify what it was, he would see nothing but steam. Each time Medron would tell himself he was imagining things, then just when he had almost convinced himself that he was, he would once more catch that flash of white in his peripheral vision.

"Almost there now. Just one more intersection and we're at the emergency roof exit." Medron turned to help Isis along.

"Not so fast, Pryde!"

Rod Trane, resplendent in full dress uniform, stepped from the swirling steam to block the way. Two troopers in body armor flanked the General. One of the guards started to level a nasty looking assault rifle at Medron, but Trane pushed the barrel of the weapon down. "Not in here you fool!" He gestured towards one of the may warning signs on the wall. "One spark and this whole place could go up! Isn't that right, Pryde?"

Medron nodded reluctantly, pushing the automatic pistol he had been drawing back into its holster.

"Don't worry about your friends upstairs. My men were able to persuade them to surrender. While your commandos may be invulnerable to small arms fire in those antiques you dug up, they were persuaded that the Successor Lords are not quite so bullet-proof." Drawing his ceremonial sword, Trane began to advance.

Once more Medron caught a flurry of movement, this time through the grillwork of the walkway under Trane's feet.

With the sound of wrenched metal the section of walkway Trane had just been standing on sheared away, sending the two troopers screaming into the vats beneath.

Tran turned in time to see his men sinking into the dessert mix, then whirled back to confront Medron and Isis, both of whom had been too stunned to take advantage of momentary opportunity of his unprotected back.

Snarling, the traitor swung his blade at Medron's neck, but Isis saved him by falling backwards, using her weight to yank him by the belt from the path of that deadly stroke.

The walkway shuddered as Medron fell beside her.

With a cry of victory, Trane once more swung at his enemy.

The deadly decent of the sword was halted inches from Medron's face by the heavy metal blade of a Claymore which radiated a pale blue light.

Medron looked up at the white shrouded figure that held the mighty weapon. "Mac?"

"Aye...tis me. What took you so long?"

Chapter 26

Star League Catering Division Manufacturing Plant Alpha, New Wales, New Wales, The Periphery, 21st December 3082

Trane could do nothing but defend himself against a series of blows from the glowing blade as the white-clad apparition drove him several steps back from his quarry. The surprise had him off-balance momentarily, but his own skill served him well, giving him time to adjust to the situation. A series of thrusts halted his adversary, then a sequence of cuts forced Mac back.

Trane silently saluted his foe, for most opponents would have failed to block the last deadly cut.

Even as he fought, Mac shouted instructions to Medron without turning from Trane. "Don't just lie there! Get the Captain-General out of here!" The pair scrambled to their feet, watching the deadly contest of blades. "Run! Run you fools! I'll keep Trane off your backs."

Medron paused a moment, but Isis pulled at his arm insistently. The pair turned and ran back down the gantry, looking for a way around the collapsed section.

"I though I'd sent you straight to Hell back on Astrokaszy. I should have known better." Trane parried the great Claymore, then aimed a quick slice at the hooded head of the man he had though killed.

"Aye, Ye did..." Mac dodged the attack with ease, and then launched a counter-stroke with frightening speed. The robed swordsman wielded the large weapon as if it were almost weightless. "...but they said they dinna want my kind there, so they sent me back."

Trane ducked the next stroke, the blade shearing through one of the gantry supports instead of his neck. The whole walkway shuddered as the weight on the remaining supports suddenly increased. He threw everything into his next attack, driving Mac back several more steps and getting clear of the damaged section of the gantry. "So, have you joined ComStar now?"

"This?" Mac parried the next swing, then dodged back form the next before retuning to the on-guard position. "It's just a little something I picked up."

As Trane battled, he could not shake the feeling that there was something familiar about his opponent. Trying to pint down that though almost cost him his life to an arcing overhand cut with would have disembowelled him. "Your robe!" Trane realized why he recognised it. "That's where the linen table-cloths disappeared to!"

"Aye, I've been here some time, just waiting for the Warriors to show up. Ye toasted me old robe along with my 'Mech" Once more Mac retreated in the face of Trane's sword blows.

At first, Trane though he was just imagining things, but then he realized that Mac's responses to his attacks were slowing down. That bid weapon was not as light as it appeared.

Grinning like a pirate he attacked once more.

The Republic 'Mechs attacked once more.

Atticus Longwalker moved his battle-weary assault 'Mech up to steady the line. As the Battlemaster moved he could hear a grating noise from somewhere deep within the mangled torso.

The noise did not inspire confidence.

Ahead of him, the mighty form of a Templer fell as autocannon fire shredded the thinner rear armor. Atticus winced as the OmniMech piloted by Slacker ploughed into the ground. He checked his sensors, looking for the unit that had fired the killing shot. "Dammit Ratboy! What're you playing at! You're on our side!"

"Sorry Atticus. Slight weapons malfunction there!" The UrbanMech had finally reached the battlefield after a leisurely sprint from their landing zone.

"I though you said you could drive that thing!" Atticus turned back to the battle to rake a group of Scampi with a rippling salvo from his torso-mounted lasers. "Try and kill more of the them then you do of us!"

"They're pulling back again Atticus." Js halted his Axman and paused to plug the laser-cut hole that had been cut into his cockpit canopy with a rolled up copy of the BADR rules. "We don't have much left to stop them."

Atticus consulted his secondary monitors and was forced to agree. The tactical computer showed that the Warrior's of the Dropship were down to perhaps two Companies of effectives, whereas the Republic forces still standing amounted to a Battalion or more.

"Here they come..." At the call from Brainburner, Atticus looked up from his monitors. "No wait! They've stopped!"

From the thinning grey clouds above the valley descend a titanic globular form, riding on a pillar of fire and raining destruction down on the Republic troops.

The Dropship had arrived.

Chapter 27

The Dropship, Above the Valley of the Goldfish, New Wales, The Periphery, 21st December 3082

The vibrations from the straining engines rattled Chrome's teeth as he skilfully held the massive ship in position. The sound of heavy autocannon and missiles could just heard over the labouring powerplant, but he stayed focused on keeping ship from smashing into the ground and giving the gunners a steady firing platform.

The atrocious weather had prevented Chrome from bringing the ship in to support his comrades until now. He and the rest of the crew had been unable to do anything but hang in orbit and listen to the reports of the engagement that had raged beneath the boiling clouds. But with the storm dying, Rave Zero had given the order to go in and Chrome had battled his way through dangerous high-altitude winds, crowding the trailing edge of the storm as closely as he dared.

They had arrived just in time.

"Roll fifteen degrees off vertical on the port side." Rave Zero was safely strapped into the command position, monitoring the enemy forces beneath them. "Steady. Steady. Keep it there!" He turned to J Bento who was manning one of the engineering positions. "Open cargo bay six."

It took all the skill Chrome could muster to stay on course as the Dropship experienced a sudden shift in mass as the heavy doors opened in the side of the ship.

Endo Steel watched from the cockpit of his Davion-build Marauder as the Dropship tilted from the vertical to glide over the confused Republic troops. Every weapon the great ship could bring to bear on the enemy was pounding them mercilessly. The smell of something burnt mixed with the overheated air and Endo Steel devoutly hoped it was not coming from him.

But now, only the Dropship could hold his attention.

Soaring along the ragged enemy line, the heavy cargo bay doors on the side tilted towards the ground swung open, releasing a deluge of small objects that glittered in the reflected light of weapons fire. The stream continued as the ship completed a pass over the enemy forces smoothly, despite the sudden shift of so much mass.

The effect was devastating as the rain of doorknobs pummelled the combat-weary 'Mechs and ProtoMechs. Many of the machines fell under the avalanche of metal, quickly to be buried and crushed under the irresistible weight of the unconventional attack. Those that remained standing found their legs imprisoned. Unable to move, they were easy targets for the remaining Warriors. The dreadful clicking noises of their destruction merges into one titanic tearing sound that echoed from the surrounding mountains for one lone moment.

The silence descended on the battle-torn valley.

Having completed a decisive fly-pass, the Dropship circled round for a landing further down the valley, disgorging technicians and medical teams to care for the fallen.

Climbing down from his battle-scared war machine, Endo Steel staggered across to help Slacker pull himself from the mangled remains of the OmniMech which had been the unfortunate victim of friendly fire.

The battle was over.

The battle continued through the factory as Trane used his greater height and skill to push his tablecloth-clad foe back meter by meter.

Sword to sword the pair now battled on a wide circular gantry that ran around the rim of one of the great mixing vats. Beneath them the thick steaming custard was churned by slow-moving blades of titanic proportions as the swords clashed again and again.

"I told you I'd come back to annoy you." Mac sidestepped a thrust, then attempted to pin his opponents' blade against the railing that edged the platform.

“You’re no match for me!” Trane exulted as he sensed his opponent continuing to tire. “I’m the best swordsman in the Free Worlds League.”

“Maybe.” Mac had to agree that he was getting too old for a drawn out fight like this one. “But, we aren’t in the League.”

Trane had to move swiftly to block the next sword stroke Mac launched in an attempt to slice the traitor across the legs. “Even if you could win, what would that get you? The Warriors are out there in the valley, dying! My men have most of the Successor Lords at gunpoint.” He force Mac back another step with another lightning fast cut. “We still have control of most of the Inner Sphere. Why don’t you surrender now? Why did you come back? Nobody cares about the Warriors. They all but threw them out of the Inner Sphere when they Disenfranchised them. Why did you come back?”

The two swordsmen circled for a moment. “They never told you about your father, did they Rob?” Mac feinted a thrust, but turned the attack into a crosscut that Trane avoided, but at the cost of his own attack.

Trane didn’t understand. “My father? He was a navigator on a Jumpship. He died when I was young.”

“No, Rob. They lied.” Mac jabbed a thumb at his own chest. “I am your father.”

Sudden emotions crashed into Trane’s mind, making him halt his attack for a moment. “No! That can’t be! That’s impossible!” He looked at the white figure before him in shock. “Isn’t it?”

Trane dropped his guard of just a moment, but Mac acted with lightning speed to exploit the opening, snapping his right foot up in a kick to the groin. “Yes.” As Trane began to double up in pain and surprise at such a dishonourable trick, Mac hammered his forehead into the taller mans face. “I was lying.”

The Glasgow Kiss sent the traitor reeling back, clutching at his broken and bleeding nose. The railing caught the disorientated man low across the back, and he tumbled off the gantry with a despairing wail.

Clutching his forehead, Mac stumbled to the edge of the gantry.

Beneath he could see Trane struggling against the suction of the viscous yellow custard. For a moment it looked like he might reach the edge of the vat, but one of the great mixing blades caught him, dragging him beneath the surface.

For several moments a stream of bubbles marked the site of Rob Trane’s decent, then they petered off.

Chapter 28

Cavern of the Scales, New Wales, New Wales, The Periphery, 21st December 3082

Stefan Amaris the Seventh, would-be First Lord of the Star League, watched as his troops were annihilated in the Valley of the Goldfish by the combined weight of fire from the Dropship, the surviving Warrior 'Mechs and several thousand metric tons of doorknobs. As his latest plan for galactic domination blew away like the clearing storm clouds he could do little but rant and shout curses while he watched events unfold in glorious three-dee.

Pacing around his throne, he issued a stream of virtually incoherent commands to the aids who cowered before the dais, sending them one-by-one scurrying from the cavern to obey. By the time he mastered himself enough to think coherently, only two remained.

"You, go and prepare my Dropship for immediate lift-off." The terrified aid quickly left, grateful to be given an assignment that was humanly possible to accomplish. His lord as not known for being forgiving just because what he asked for was sometimes impossible.

"And you, contact General Trane. Tell him to execute all his prisoners. I've had enough of these Successor Lords. The have outlived their usefulness." Amaris began to pace.

"My Lord. The troops who accompanied the General report they have had no contact with him for half an hour." The aid awaited a possible explosion in response to his news.

"Well then, order the troops to execute them and get back here. With or without their General." The leader of the New New Republic watched as the last aid departed to issue his order.

He began a circuit of the cavern, stopping to inspect each of the brightly lit tanks in turn. How had his carefully laid plans to take control of the Inner Sphere come so close to unravelling? His supposedly secret base of operations had been found and assaulted. The bulk of his personal army were now scattered across the landscape of New Wales in chunks of melted plastic. Now he would have to escape the Warriors of the Dropship and travel to the Inner Sphere to take direct control of the House troops his substitute leaders could provide.

It was imperative that Terra fall to him. Possession of the homeworld of humanity was the last thing he required to give his claim to the throne of First Lord legitimacy in the eyes of the Inner Sphere.

Once enthroned on Terra, he would easily eliminate these irritating Warriors once and for all.

"It's all falling apart, isn't it?" Katherine Steiner-Davion asked the pacing Warlord as he completed his inspection.

"Quite Katherine! I must think quickly if anything is to be salvaged from this. I am sure you are as eager as I to avoid capture by the Warriors of the Dropship. As I recall, there is still a Pike with your name on it on Tharkad."

"Katrina! Katrina! How many times do I have to tell you! My name is KATRINA!"

"Quite I said" Amaris turned and walked towards his throne, intending to seat himself in it for the last time. Too late he realised his pacing had taken him too close his irate companion as a loop of chain was thrown over his head and drawn tight around his neck. He struggles were ineffective against the berserker rage of his attacker.

The last thing Stefan Amaris the Seventh, would-be First Lord of the Star League, saw in this life was the grey and unyielding floor of the Cavern of the Scales.

Medron Pryde and Captain-General Isis Marik crouched behind a small forest of ducting on the roof of the dessert factory. From their sheltered position they could clearly see the Landing Craft crew, Jesters men, and the other three Successor Lords where they had been herded into a group beside the Landing Craft. The special operations team had been stripped of their equipment and five guards had the prisoners covered with automatic weapons.

"This doesn't look good. If we make run for my P-hawk, they may not spot us, but I can guarantee they will hear it when I begin the start-up sequence." Medeon gestured to the Ripper VTOL that was parked alongside the Landing Craft. "That thing

doesn't have that much firepower, but it could still kill us before I got weapons control up. Even then, our friends would be toast."

Isis peaked around the vent cover behind which they were sheltering. "So what do we do? We can't just sit here. They might still find us." She glanced back at the emergency exit they had used to gain access to the roof. "And Trane could catch up with us, if Mac can't stop him."

"I think we need some help in on this." Medron pulled out his communicator and switched it to transmit. The Republic troops would be able to triangulate his position, but he had no plans on being here long enough for them to do anything about it. "Fokker, you still out there?"

"Sure thing boss." The transmission was briefly interrupted by a burst of static, a telltale sign that Fokker's Shadow Hawk LAM had been the victim of a hit from a PPC. "Just playing tag with the bad guys." A muffled explosion on the communicator was followed a moment later by a deep rumble from across the installation as the sound caught up with its transmitted twin. "I'm ahead on points."

"Well, disengage and round up Syphon and Freefall. We need you here quick." Medron gave Fokker a brief rundown on his situation, being careful to give precise details on the location of the guards. "Start your run on my next transmission, and make it good."

Isis shook Medon on the arm to get his attention. Looking to where she pointed, he was relieved to see Mac emerge from the emergency exit. Medron could sense the robed figures fatigue as he staggered across to their position, clutching a frozen pudding to its head.

"What happened to Trane?" Isis asked as Mac slumped down beside them.

"He won't be bothering us again. You could say he got his just-desserts." Mac looked up. "What's the position here?"

As Isis explained, Medron checked on the guards positions one more time. "We have something happening here." The Ripper's pilot was walking from his machine to one of the guards. The pair talked for a moment, then the guard spoke into his own communicator. Medron guessed from the way the man acted that he had received no reply. "They must be trying to contact Trane."

"They wont reach him." Mac shook his head. "They'll need to hold a séance for that."

"This is our chance though." Medron talked into his communicator again. "Fokker, attack now! Attack now!"

The three LAMs came howling in barely above the level of the factory roof, spraying laser bolts along carefully selected paths. Unprotected flesh could not survive the hellish power of those weapons for even and instant.

All but one guard literally evaporated.

The remaining guard had survived the assault only because he chose that moment to tie his bootlace. As he scrambled to retrieve his weapon and level it on his prisoners Fokker brought his Shadow Hawk LAM in for a skidding landing on the roof. Unprotected flesh had as much chance against fifty-five tons of fighting machine as it did against battlefield lasers.

"Thank-god that worked." Medron helped Isis to her feet. "Let's finish this rescue before anybody else shows up."

Chapter 29

Star League Council Chambers, Geneva, New Switzerland. Terra, 25th January 3083

As Medron Pryde walked up the steps to the building in which the Grand Council chambers were situated the cold winter wind tore at his borrowed greatcoat. Atticus Longwalker, Mac, Brainburner and his son followed him through the guarded doors and into the warm interior of the classically designed structure of the Star League administrative headquarters.

An official informed them that the council was still in session and were shown into a lavishly appointed antechamber to wait.

The cost of their victory on New Wales had been high, but not as grievous as he first expected when the rescue team reached the Dropship. While most of their 'Mechs had been destroyed or disabled, many of the Warriors had escaped serious injury. Several hours of frantic work repaired two companies of Mechs while the Dropship itself carried equipment to outfit three more. With the Successor Lords safe aboard the ship, Medron took this reinforced Battalion back to deal with the remaining Republic forces. If they could capture Amaris they could bring the whole affair to a speedy end, but if he escaped it raised the possibility of future mischief from out of the Periphery.

Approaching the fortress as night fell, it looked as if they had missed their chance as the main drive of a Leopard Class Dropship lit the sky. With disappointment in his heart, Medron ordered a scout lance forward to check the route to the main gateway.

The scouts reported that the way was clear of traps, but one Locust piloted by Kenneth Shaiere misjudged the distance to the walls. A single blast of laser fire from a Mage Knight Balrog gutted the twenty ton 'Mech.

For a long moment all was stunned quiet, then Owens broke the silence. "Oh my God! They killed Kenny!"

None of the Warriors said anything for several seconds. "Bastards!" Rapier shouted, pushing his 'Mech into a run.

By silent agreement the Warriors of the Dropship change up the ramp towards the gates, spraying the walls with weapons fire. As Medron took his command lance over the wall to wreak havoc in the Knights rear area, Rapier marched the monstrous form of his Marauder III directly at the defenders.

The evil-looking Assault 'Mech just shrugged off the hail of fire that poured down from the fortress. Step by step it advanced towards the doors with Miguel's Yu Huang and Jacobite's Blackhawk KU right behind him. Together, the three poured shot after shot into the portal. The enemy fire took on a sense of desperation as the trio reached the foot of the wall and began to cut and pound on the doors at point-blank range.

For several long seconds the massive armor of those doors withstood the punishment, but then the right-hand panel caved in, opening the way into the fortress. The other Warriors rushed passed their mauled comrades to take the fight to the Mage Knights.

With the doors breached, the Knights attempted to fall back to the inner defences, but found their progress slowed by harrying attacks by Medron's LAMs. There was no escape for them as the advancing Warriors of the Dropship caught up with them before they could reach their objective.

What little fight remained in the conventional troops was extinguished with the destruction of the Mage Knights. They threw down their arms and surrendered immediately. Medron, Tel Hazen and Mac had gone in with Jester and his men to secure the headquarters in the hope of securing intelligence that would allow them to apprehend the fleeing Amaris.

To their surprise they found the madman lying dead in a large cavern that had served as his command centre. The floor was covered from the water that had come spilling out of the smashed fish tanks that lined the walls. As they stood looking down at the body of the bald man the one thing that struck them the most was the longhaired red wig that lay beside him didn't really suit him.

None of the Republic personnel could tell them what had happened to Amaris, or who was aboard the Leopard.

Medron roused himself from his musings and looked up at Mac. Once-more clad in his customary garb, the Highlander had refused to go into the details of how he had survived the destruction of his 'Mech, stating that to do so would uncover far too many holes in the plot. "Mac, We never found any 'Mech manufacturing facilities on New Wales."

“Aye, I was wondering when you would come to that.” Mac sat with his sheathed Claymore propped against the wall beside him.

“But there must be another base out there somewhere, unless...” A disturbing thought came to Medron suddenly. “Unless... Somebody else gave Amaris all that new equipment?”

“Nobody in the Inner Sphere builds any of the Mechs we fought.” Atticus added. “And, apart from ProtoMechs, they didn’t have any Clan Tech.”

“None.” Medron nodded. “Rick is still analysing the salvage we brought back. Perhaps he can tell us if the Protos were Clan, or perhaps somebody else has been able to build something like it.” The thought of another threat out there in the Periphery dampened his spirits. “I was kind of looking forward to some peace and quiet.”

Medron looked round as Mac laughed softly. “Peace you wont be getting. That much I can guarantee.”

“What do you mean?” Brainburner looked up from where he and his son had been examining a tin of shortbread Mac had given them that morning.

“All the Warriors got the keep their ‘Mechs and take them home, thanks to the generosity of the Star League council.” Mac reached up to grip the pommel of his Claymore. “They were still all loaded with the UCS, so I think it’s safe to assume that all the Successor States and the Clans either have it, or soon will.”

“But that will just make things equal. With everybody having the UCS, the balance of power is maintained.” Brainburner paused to hold the tin lid up to the light.

“Ye would think, would you not? But sooner or later one of the Successor Lords, or the Clans, will find it too tempting to ignore it. They’ll start with some raids to test it out, and then the others will launch counter-raids in retaliation. Things could escalate into a series of nasty little wars.” Mac examined his weapon for several moments, and then laughed again. “Think of it as job security.”

Medron was about to reply, but was interrupted as the door opened and the Successor Lords entered (most of them that is, as Kali Liao had declined to attend the council meeting).

The Inner Sphere had been rocked by the unmasking of so many Republic agents in positions of power. While the Successor Lords had dealt with their “replacements”, not a day went by without another of Amaris’ substitutions being uncovered. The process of removal was continuing and cats, which had proven adept at sniffing out the impostors, were becoming popular pets throughout the Inner Sphere.

With the House militaries once more under control by their rightful commanders-in-chief, the attack on ComStar was swiftly halted. Forces on both sides had been badly mauled and some feared that the Clans might see the situation as an opportunity to launch a new invasion.

Isis gave the Warriors a warm smile as she approached. “It has been agreed. Each and every member of the Warriors of the Dropship will be awarded the Star League medal of honour in appreciation of their service to all of the Inner Sphere. I have no doubt that the individual Successor Lords will reward Warriors from their own House too.”

Medron unconsciously fingered the packet of papers he had received that morning. Titles and lands were not something he had thought about, but now his destiny was tied even tighter to that of the Free Worlds League.”

As the other House Lords congratulated the Warriors of the Dropship, Brainburner Jr. came forward with the half-empty tin of shortbread. “Who wants some?”

Brainburner and his son stood at the edge of London Spaceport, watching the Dropship carrying Medron Pryde and Isis Marik to the Jumpship that would carry them back to Atreus. Most of the other Warriors had already departed after the award ceremony.

“Just the pair I was looking for.” Mac approached the pair just as they turned to board the ground car that would take them to their own Dropship. “You did well in this campaign young Brainburner, I foresee an interesting future in store for you,

provided you do as your father tells you and eat your greens.” Mac nodded at Brainburner as he tugged at the clasp that secured the belt to which his Claymore was attached. “This is for you.” Mac placed the scabbard weapon in the boys hands. “Be careful. It has two edges and can cut both ways.”

Brainburner Jr. looked at the intricate patterns worked into the handcrafted leather. The runes that ran the length of the scabbard tugged at his mind, but remained tantalizingly indecipherable. Brainburner laid a hand on his son’s shoulder as he too looked at the weapon.

“Isis told me that Trane said the Inner Sphere doesn’t need heroes.” Mac watched the pair as they contemplated his gift. “Whether it wants them or not, it’s got them.”

Brainburner looked at his son. “Now, how do I explain to your mother why she should let you bring a six-foot sword into the house?”

When they looked up from the sword, Mac was nowhere in sight.

Epilogue

Celestial Palace, Forbidden City, Sian, Sian Commonality, Capellan Confederation, 01 February 3083

Sun-Tzu swam through the water with languid flick of his elegantly curved tail while instinct born of millions of years of evolution allowed him to guide and steady himself with his fins. As he circled his bowl he happily blew a stream of bubbles that burst in mesmerising patterns as they reached the interface between water and air.

Longer than it was wide and rising up to another level, the cavernous room dwarfed any who entered it. In the soft, indirect lighting, the walls of the main floor glowed a dull red that lent a feeling of warmth to the chamber.

At the far end of the room was a dais holding a huge throne. The throne's back had been carved from a single piece of mahogany with symbols and images from Capellan mythology. Behind the throne a giant holographic display showed a map of the Confederation at its greatest extent. To alter the map to match reality was a crime punishable by death.

Kali Liao sat on the Celestial Throne and smiled down at the glass bowl she cradled on her lap, almost hypnotised by the motions of the fighting fish her brother had named after himself. Sun-Tzu was so clever, helping her guide the Confederation through these difficult times. His latest plan was a masterpiece that would win ultimate power for both her and the Liao family for all time. More importantly, the creation of bloodshed on a scale never before even contemplated would please the Goddess from whom Kali's mother had chosen a name for her only daughter.

Kali Liao sat and contemplated the slaughter to come.

To be continued in...

The Clams of Kerensky

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