

The Clams of Kerensky

A New Era BattleTech Novel

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Foreword

Despite swearing never to embark on such a project again, I once more find myself deeply embroiled in the events of the BattleTech universe. For reasons completely beyond my understanding I have been inundated with requests to continue the epic saga of loss, pain, reconciliation, more loss and just a hint of tongue-in-cheek humour that started as a single joke post on a web message board.

Obviously people out there are gluttons for punishment.

In many ways “The Clams of Kerensky” is a very different work from “Tide of Goldfish”, sometimes verging into the realm of a serious story. After the off-the-cuff execution (if that is the right phrase) of the first story, I wanted to try my hand at a better-crafted product.

While some of the characters will be familiar to readers of ToG, I have also tried to get more of those who missed their chance last time into the story, even if their participation is limited to a throwaway reference.

So here is the nerve-rendering tale everybody (well two or three people) have been waiting for.

This is absolutely, defiantly, and positively the last time I do this.

Until the third book in the trilogy I guess.

Prologue

Agren Mountains, Clan Wolverine Territory, Circe, Clan Space, 18 October 2823

Franklin Hallis knew now that he was to die.

He stood at the cliff-edge where the mountains were sheared away, as if by a giant knife. The valley beneath where the darkness was punctuated by the still burning remnants of scrub. The flames illuminated a handsome face that blended his father's Caucasian heritage with softer lines from his Latino mother. His pleasing visage was of no concern to Franklin however. As a member of the Warrior Caste of Clan Wolverine he had no interest in such things. Days before the bone-dry vegetation had ignited when searing debris from the destruction of Dehra Dun had been flung here from the fallout of the mushroom cloud that marked virtually complete destruction of the city.

Franklin turned from the cliff-edge and began to retrace his steps through the dark.

As saKhan of his people, Franklin felt the weight of the responsibility for their safety bearing down on his shoulders. Looking for a way out of the perilous situation into which his Clan had been plunged, Hallis searched his memories, looking for a better understanding of how they had come to this.

When the Star League collapsed after the long years of the fighting to remove the man who had usurped the throne of the Terran Hegemony and the League many loyal troops, General Frederick Hallis amongst them, followed their old commander on a wild leap into the unknown. It had been a roller coaster ride for those who had followed the great General Alexandr Kerensky into exile. The early euphoria of departure was soon dampened by the privation on months of travel in packed ships. Worse was to come when a number of ships mutinied and attempted to return to their old home. The harsh punishment in store for the leaders of the mutiny had shocked many, yet Kerensky held them together until they reached a clutch of five worlds.

They were named the Pentagon Worlds.

Although barely habitable in some cases, the fleet stopped its flight through the unknown and the many soldiers and civilians who had been crammed into virtually intolerable conditions disembarked.

The time that followed had been a bitter-sweet mix of accomplishments and trials as the people of the Exodus fleet worked to make a new home for themselves – far from the terror of war that General Kerensky was sure to be ripping the Inner Sphere apart. But old rivalries flared between the people of the Pentagon Worlds, and here to violence erupted across the five planets. It conflagration may have been contained, but old General Kerensky died before he launch his plan to deal with a situation that was soon spiralling out of control.

Nicholas Kerensky, son of the last guardian of the Star League had issued a rallying call to the people of the Pentagon. But many of the high-ranking officers in the Star League Defence Force had ignored a man to whom they felt no loyalty, preferring to carve out their own realms on the warring worlds. Fleeing from the carnage with his few loyal troops and as many civilians as he could persuade, Nicholas Kerensky led his own Exodus to a near-by star cluster and the world of Stranna Mechty, the "Land of Dreams".

Frederick Hallis and his new-born son went with him, only just escaping from fighting on Circe that had already claimed his wife. Nicholas Kerensky and his followers stayed on their new homeworld, aloof from the carnage that consumed the five ill-fated worlds they had escaped.

During that dark time, Nicholas Kerensky revealed his mind to his people, telling them of his plan to re-forge them into a society free of the divisive forces that had ripped apart his father's dream. A plan that would preserve the spirit of the Star League, and perhaps one day take their decedents back to the Inner Sphere to redeem it from the evil of those who had destroyed the League itself.

The plan had a name.

The Clans.

Frederick Hallis became a founder member of Clan Wolverine, named after the generically engineered species that had escaped from a remote lab on Stranna Mechty and now thrived in a new habitat. Working with the other forty founding warriors, he prepared for the day when they would return to the Pentagon Worlds and liberate them from the petty warlords who waged war across five worlds.

During the years of their self-imposed exile, Franklin Hallis had grown into a fine young man and had entered training as a Warrior. He could barely contain his disappointment when it became clear that the long awaited assault would come just before his graduation.

Just before Clan Wolverine departed for Circe, Frederick confided in his son that he had become increasingly worried about Nicholas Kerensky and his goals. The launch of an extensive eugenics program to produce new warriors had worrying implications.

Frederick's fears appeared well founded in the campaign to retake the Pentagon Worlds. Somewhere in those years of waiting, it seemed, Nicholas Keresnky had lost sight of his vision to preserve the best of the Star League. His ideas had become twisted, and with the fighting to come, so too did the Clans themselves.

The Clans did not return as liberators, but as conquerors.

The Wolverines strived against sinking to the level of many of the others and to maintain the ideals that they held so dear to their heart. But their efforts did little but earn them the scorn and hatred of Clan Snow Raven, one of the three other Clans assigned to pacify their target.

The joy Franklin Hallis felt at testing as a Star Commander was tempered by the sorrow of the news of his father's death. In one of the final battles of the campaign Frederick's Champion had been destroyed in an ambush. Franklin had vowed to uphold the principles for which Frederick had lived and died. His drive and abilities had catapulted Franklin up the chain of command and earned him the coveted position of saKhan in little over a year. But as he had risen to his position, he found the attitude of the other Clans disturbing. Gone was the sense of mutual respect and cooperation, now replaced with thinly disguised ambition. In a society where the martial traditions were considered the apex of being, Franklin soon found a hotbed of scheming and politicking beneath the surface. More often than not, the Snow Ravens were involved. Some of the harsher measures introduced by Nicholas Kerensky, or ilKhan as he now styled himself, had raised cries of protest from amongst the ranks of many Clans, but the loudest voices of decent came from the Wolverines.

In a calculating move the ilKhan had denied the Wolverines exclusive rights to a cache of weapons within their territory. Enraged by Kerensky's actions, Khan Sarah McEvedy had declared the independence of her Clan and stormed from the council chamber. Even before she could return to Circe the Snow Ravens were probing Wolverine defences while the Grand Council deliberated their course of action.

Hallis had remained on Circe with his forces on high alert. McEvedy suspected some kind of action as the ilKhan evidently had singled them out as an example to the others. His troops had no trouble repulsing the Raven's ill-conceived attack. Even more, his counter-thrust smashed through their own defences and his Cluster had driven into the Snow Raven city of Dehra Dun. Staying true to their ideals, the Wolverines endeavoured to minimise civilian casualties, taking great pains to evacuate the civilians caught in the middle of a full-scale 'Mech battle.

Emerging onto the plateau where a clutch of Dropships was being loaded with feverish haste under the glare of crudely strung lighting, Franklin pulled his mind back to the present.

Supplies and equipment were hustled aboard each ship, which surly must now be groaning under the weight of it all. Members of the Warrior caste guided Rows of frightened looking civilians aboard the waiting ships. Hallis smiled with pride at the Wolverine emblem emblazoned on the hull of each ship.

We should not forget who we are.

Beneath the Clan symbol many of the ships also sported the insignia of the 331st Royal Division, taken from the equipment found in the cache over which all the trouble had started.

We should also not forget who we were.

"Ye have heard the news?" The voice behind him was thick with an accent Hallis occasionally had difficulty understanding. He had a sneaking suspicion that its owner did it on purpose sometimes. He turned to face the robed figure that once more had succeeded in approaching unheard.

"Yes. The Grand Council has voted. By decree of the ilKhan..." Franklin spat the title. "By the vote of the Council, the Wolverines are to be 'Annihilated'. Couldn't you get Nicholas to listen to reason?"

The hooded head shook sadly, but the features of the face beneath were lost in shadow as always. The plain homespun robe would not have made a casual observer think the owner a warrior, except for the large sword the figure wore across its back. “Kerensky was in no mood to listen. Those silver-tongued Snow Ravens have his ear, and are telling him exactly what he wants to hear.”

“This is insane!” Franklin punched a balled fist into his other palm. “We weren’t the ones throwing Nukes around!”

With the Snow Ravens driven off, Franklin Hallis had found himself unexpectedly in possession of one of their cities. Not wishing to become isolated and cut off by other Clans, he had elected to withdraw back to Wolverine territory. The decision had proven fortuitous when a Snow Raven air attack delivered a nuclear warhead onto the city half an hour after the last Wolverine had pulled out. “So the Snow Ravens cover up their own weakness and stupidity and lay their crimes at our door?”

“Aye. The ilKhan was lookin for an excuse to make an object lesson of what happens to anybody who defies his will. Now he’s got one.” The robed swordsman turned to observe the loading operation. “Yee best be hurrin along here. There’s not much time left.”

“Can you get them away safely?” Hallis could see the first glimmer of dawn begin to touch the sky above the towering mountain peaks that surrounded the makeshift spaceport.

“Aye, I can, if we move quickly. The Wolves will be here soon, an the Widowmakers wilna be far behind. But I can guarantee no tracking system will pick up our launch...” One homespun-sleeved arm pointed at the lightening sky. “...if we get away before dawn.”

Turning from the Dropships, Franklin studied his mysterious companion. “You aren’t going to get into trouble helping us are you?”

The laugh that escaped the hood reminded Franklin of a caged beast let loose momentarily. It reminded him just how dangerous the figure standing beside him could be. “Noo, the others willna interfere, an they willna go telling Kerensky either. They have secrets to hide too. An investigation would be showing things they willna want comin ot.”

Hallis had made his decision days ago. “I’ll be staying here with the rear guard. I won’t be going with you.”

“Aye, I knew you would.”

“We’ll catch up with you once we throw the Wolves off the trail.” Franklin knew his companion was not fooled. The chances of any of the rearguard force escaping were vanishing small. “Maybe then you can tell me why you freak out the Nova Cats so much.”

Chapter 1

Grand Council Chamber, Hall of the Khans, near Katyusha, Strana Mechty, Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space, 7 February 3084

Samantha Clees, Khan of the Jade Falcon Clan sat on her rock-hard chair and reflected bitterly that even had it been luxuriously upholstered, she still would be uncomfortable. The amphitheatre's tiers, desks and seats fashioned from white streaked ebony granite. With the colourful Clan banners above the chairs occupied by the leaders of the Clans, the chamber was magnificent.

Samantha fought the impulse to look around at the banners of the surviving twelve Clans.

In recent years two new factions had risen amongst the Clans, sweeping aside the old Warden/Crusader divide. Some Clans now supported the Isolationist cause, citing the events that followed the ill-fated return to the Inner Sphere as reason for their belief that contact with non-Clan cultures brought contamination of the ideals of the great Kerensky. The most prominent Isolationists were, naturally enough, Clans who had failed to secure a place in the Invasion or missed later opportunities to acquire territory in the Inner Sphere. The Blood Spirits had been the most fervent of the Isolationists. In fact they had been so effective in this policy that the other Clans did not notice that the Star Adders had annihilated them for several years.

Against the stay-at-home Clans stood those who favoured continued contact with the Inner Sphere, though there were many differences of opinion over what form that contact should take. As a member of the Contact cause, the Jade Falcons still maintained that the preferred method was via conquest of the Inner Sphere. This point of view made them both ally and enemy of the reformed Wolf Clan under the leadership of Khan Phellan Kell.

Samantha had to acknowledge the skill and courage of the Wolf Clan. When the vile collusion between Vlad Ward and Katherine Steiner-Davion was revealed by the foolish actions of the Archon-Princess, other Clans had descended upon them, howling for blood. But with the return of the exiled Wolves, the reunited Clan had survived against ferocious odds.

The weakness state of the other Clans after the battle should have been an opportunity for Clan Jade Falcon, but alas fate itself conspired to rob them. The Steel Vipers placed information before the Grand Council that they had uncovered the source of the Falcons replacement Warriors following the Refusal War. The political backlash had been extensive; the Vipers citing the underhand methods used by Marthe Pryde's predecessors as proof that the Falcons were no longer a viable Clan.

Marthe had once confided in Samantha that the only thing she feared was that the sins of Vandervahn Chistu and Elias Crichell would one day come back to haunt the Falcons. Now, with few allies in the Grand Council, the call for Absorption received an overwhelming vote.

Samantha could still remember the fire in the eyes of her Khan as she answered the outcome by calling for a Trial of Refusal. The odds against the Falcons in the Trial had been impossible to overcome, with one of the Falcons best Clusters virtually wiped out in a valiant attempt to save their Clan.

The right to Absorb the Falcons had go to the hated Steel Vipers.

The next three weeks had been a constant battle for the Falcons as they struggled against the Vipers. Marthe had been possessed by an inner fire that drove, not only her, but all the Falcons to fight beyond what they had once thought was their limit. But millimetre-by-millimetre Marthe pushed their foe back. By the end of the second week the tide had turned and now it was the Steel Vipers who were fighting to avoid being consumed by the vengeful Jade Falcons. The final assault on the Viper capital had been added to the Remembrance as the Falcons greatest victories, but for Samatha Clees it was a hollow one.

Marthe Pryde had fallen in battle, screaming curses at a Star of Viper 'Mechs as she held the line against a desperate Viper counterattack.

The first two Steel Viper 'Mechs, a Crossbow and a Nova, had fallen easily under the deadly aim of one of the best MechWarriors in Clan Jade Falcon. The third attacker was a Summoner identical to the one the Khan herself piloted and it had looked like that 'Mech to would be defeated as rapidly as its Star-mates. As the 'Mech rushed in to attack Marthe at point-blank range a skilful shot from the Falcon Khan tore away the right leg of the Viper Summoner, sending it crashing to the ground. The impact stunned the pilot of the immobilised 'Mech and in his confusion he triggered his Jump Jets.

Samantha Clees could only watch in horror as the fusion driven flames from jets mounted in the remaining leg had consumed the cockpit of Marthe's Summoner, towering over its opponent to deliver the killing shot. She did not know who to curse more

for the event that elevated her to the highest office of her Clan; The Vipers for killing the best Khan the Falcons had ever known, or Marthe Pryde for getting herself killed and landing Samantha in this ridiculous position.

With the fall of their Khan, the Jade Falcons had flung themselves at the remaining Steel Vipers on New Kent. Within another week the Vipers had been eliminated as a Clan.

The terrible losses suffered by the Jade Falcons were as nothing compared to the purge of the Scientist Caste, now that their rouge genetic tinkering had been uncovered. Samantha regretted doing nothing to reduce the casualties, but as Khan of a badly mauled Clan, she could ill afford the Trials that would be directed against her and her people.

With the loss of so many talented researchers, most of the projects to develop weapons to keep the Clans technological edge over the Inner Sphere had been grievously compromised. Only the foolish move by the Successor States to downsize their forces and replace their equipment with inexpensive new designs saved other Clans from being forced out of the Inner Sphere. Shaking her head at such foolishness, Samantha could not help but glance across at the Khans of Clan Roadrunner who had once more interrupted a fellow Khan.

Foolishness was not only the preserve of the Inner Sphere.

With the Viper War behind them, the Jade Falcons had started about the task of once more rebuilding from the devastation of a major campaign. The other Clans had continued to bicker between themselves as usual, but the ever-foolish Asa Taney succeeded in insulting the entire Warrior Caste of Clan Coyote. The irritating Khan of the Ice Hellions had managed to torque-off just about every member of the Grand Council at some point over the previous few years, and so was shown no mercy now. The Coyote forces rolled straight over the lighter Hellion OmniMechs that attempted to prevent the destruction of their Clan.

The fight did not last long.

However the story did not end there, for despite their best efforts to assimilate the surviving Hellion Warriors, the Coyotes found it an impossible task. There were too many differences in equipment, in tactics and in personality. Khan Kufahl finally gave up in disgust and used the precedent created when the Jade Wolf Clan had been formed to remove the most divisive within the Coyotes and form a new Clan. Selecting the most irritating creature in the Kerensky Cluster as this new Clans totem, Khan Kufahl announced to the Grand Council the creation of Clan Roadrunner.

A kind of low intensity war constantly brewed between those two Clans now, often spilling over into the Grand Council chambers, where the other Khans were forced to spend far too much time listening their arguments.

Still, it was something to fill the gaps in the ongoing Isolationist/Contact debate.

“Loremaster! Would you be good as to tell the Khan of the Roadrunners that we have proper procedure in this place? His behaviour dishonours the memory of the Great Father, and the Khans assembled here!” Silas Kufahl managed to inject an admirable amount of contempt into the name he had inflicted upon the Clan he had created.

Loremaster Kael Pershaw hammered a cybernetic fist on the podium before him to silence the assembled Khans. Samantha shuddered at the thought of surviving injuries that Pershaw had. Each year the MedTechs would perform more work to keep the parody of human life that the old Jade Falcon had become going. Too valuable to be allowed to die, Kael Pershaw was now more machine than man. “Order! I call this assembly to order!” The voice, amplified by electronics built into the black mask that now covered all of Pershaw’s face, silenced the assembled Clan leaders. “Before this body is the proposal that Clan Roadrunner be allowed equal access to the Brian Caches once used by the former Ice Hellion Clan.” The Loremaster paused to take several wheezing breaths. “Clan Coyote maintains that they captured those locations when they absorbed the Hellions, and that they were not released as assets when the Roadrunner Clan was created.” Pershaw slowly scanned the faces of the seated Khans. “How say the Khans of the Clans? Should the Roadrunners be given access to the Cache? I will poll you each individually.” Even before Samantha cast her own vote, it was clear that the Roadrunners would fail.

The Loremaster turned to Khan Ivor Cage on tallying the results. “Khan Cage, this august body has found against your claim on the Brian Cache on Hector.” Pershaw waited expectantly. Samantha was almost certain that none of her fellow Khans saw the glance Cage shot at Lynn McKenna, nor the slight shake of the Snow Raven Khan’s head.

When the normally hotheaded Roadrunner did not issue the expected call for a Trial of Refusal, Kael Pershaw turned to address the hall. “The motion fails, buy the will of the Clans. I stand as Oathmaster! Let all abide by the rede spoken here! Thus we shall stand until we all shall fall.”

“Seyla.” All present intoned reverently.

“This session of the Grand Council now stands adjourned.” Pershaw once more struck to his podium with his hand, bringing the proceedings to an end.

Nodding to saKhan Diana Pryde to follow her, Samantha Clees donned the ceremonial mask that has sat on the table before her throughout the meeting and left the chamber with as much speed as dignity would allow.

Once they were alone in the corridor, Samantha pulled the beautifully enamelled mask off once more and turned to Diana. “Those Snow Ravens are up to something. I can just smell it!”

Removing her own mask, Diana nodded in agreement. “Probably, but whatever they are up to, it is aimed at the Coyotes. They have never been out allies, so should we concern ourselves with their petty plotting?”

“Anything that makes those buzzards stronger is not good for us. You remember the games they played during Operation Revival? Worse, Marthe told me just before she was killed that she suspected it was the Snow Ravens who gave the Steel Vipers the evidence they used to try and Absorb us.” Samantha clenched her fists in furry once more as she remembered that battle. “They will try something else against us sooner or later, unless we act first.” Striding through the corridors to her office Khan Clees began to think carefully. She had to find a way to foil whatever game they accused Snow Ravens were playing.

Sometimes they were almost as bad as the Inner Sphere.

At that though, a savage smile touched her lips as she halted and turned once more to Diana. “Locate Tel Hazen. Inform him that his Khan wants to see him immediately.

It was not every day that you get pulled in from the testing grounds to see the Khan. Galaxy Commander Tel Hazen would have liked a chance to change into a clean uniform, but he was also familiar with the impatience his Khan was known to exhibit when off the battlefield.

His battles that morning had been depressing, with only two cadets managing to defeat their first opponent and challenge his Timber Wolf. Both had been simple for him to dispatch, though he was careful not to kill either of them. They had, after all, proven themselves qualified Warriors, just not good enough to rate the rank of Star Commander.

Not with Tel Hazen, conqueror of the Goldfish Hoard on the battlefield.

It was strange how he had a pack of Savashi Inner Sphere Freebirths to thank for the outcome of what, on the surface, had been a dead-end mission intended just to get him out of the way. His part in the defeat of the spawn of Amaris had kick-started his career once more, elevating him to the command position of Iota Galaxy.

Tel paused before the plain door that led to the Khan’s office, pausing to straighten his jumpsuit. His firm knock on the door was instantly answered by a shouted summons to enter. The room beyond was an austere collection of minimalist furniture. Everything was in a strictly regimented position, with no consideration given to comfort. Only function was important. Such was the “Way of the Clans”.

Khan Samantha Clees was seated behind a standard issue field desk on which a ruthless order had been imposed on stacks of paper and data-pads. “Sit down Galaxy Commander.” Samantha nodded to one of a pair of basic tube-work and plastic chairs. “I have a very special task for you Tel Hazen.”

“I live to serve my Clan.” Tel spoke the ritual phrase without a moment of thought.

“Good.” A slight smile played across her face. “This task will require you to use the unique insight your sojourn into the Inner Sphere has given you. Rather than a challenge on the battlefield, you must fight for your Clan in a different arena.”

“My Khan, I am a Warrior...” Tel began, but was cut off by a sharp gesture.

“You are a Warrior, which is why I need you for this task. No member of the other Castes is suited for it. I need you to examine the records and archives. I need some kind of ammunition to use against those thrice-cursed Snow Ravens in the Grand Council.” Samantha looked down at her balled fists. “They are up to something now, not against us yet, but they are up to something.”

Tel nodded in understanding. “So you want to throw a spanner in the works to keep them busy?”

“Yes. If I can keep them off balance, it will give us more time to rebuild to the point where nobody can challenge us.” The Khan passed an encoded electronic key to her subordinate. “Here are the access codes you will need to access all the archives. This gives you unlimited access to all the records in our possession, as well as all the communal Clan archives.”

Tel took the key and examined it for a moment. “I will not fail you, my Khan.”

Samantha Clees smiled savagely. “I know you will not.”

Chapter 2

Canteen Number Three, New Avalon Institute of Science, Avalon City, New Avalon, Crucis March, Federated Suns, 7 February 3084

Throughout the Inner Sphere there is one place that has become a symbol of learning, progress and hope. Created by Hanse Davion in the early thirty-first century in a bold attempt to halt the crippling slide into ignorance that threatened to engulf the human race, the New Avalon Institute of Science quickly became the centre of learning and excellence. With the resources that each successive leader of the Federated Suns devoted to the project, the Institute easily drew to it the best minds from across the Inner Sphere, and students of a calibre to match. Famed as the first establishment of learning to unlock the original Star League memory core uncovered by the Grey Death Legion on Helm before the 4th Succession War, the NAIS was also home to such remarkable units as Team Bonsai and their enigmatic leader, Dr. R Raisley. Even before the First Clan War, the institute had always made places available to students from beyond the Federated Suns borders, and an extensive system of preparatory schools attached to the facility had also sprung up to supply the brightest and the best.

Brainburner Jr. sat in one of the great refectories that served the most famous institution of learning in known space and munched sourly on a chicken sandwich. Around him his classmates were busy tucking into their own meals, sharing stories and jokes in this brief period of respite between classes. As he watched their eager faces and listened to the conversations around him, BB Jr. realised he had been doing a lot of sour thinking of late.

It was not until he forced himself to really listen to the young people around him, really listen and not just let the noise flow over him, that he finally began to pinpoint the source of his dissatisfaction.

“You catch the fight from Solaris last night on the vid?” Duane, a self-confessed ‘Mech-freak, was yammering away to Simon and Morgan. The three often ran as a group, but despite their similar interests BB Jr. somehow never managed to join pack.

“Yeh! That guy Slacker was incredible!” Simon could barely control his excitement at the spectacular performance of his idol of the ‘Mech arena. “Three heavy ‘Mechs against his Templar, and he still toasted them.” Not content with singing the praises of his hero, Simon could not help but add more. “He is one of the Warriors of the Dropship. He was in the Goldfish War.” Duane and Morgan nodded sagely, as if this last piece of information was new, but not unexpected after witnessing the vid of the epic contest in the Steiner Arena with their own eyes.

As on so many other occasions, BB Jr. almost blurted out his own impressive combat record. However, his father had been careful to shield his son from publicity and the other Warriors had agreed to keep the identity of the MechWarrior who had been so devastating both on the battlefield and on Solaris a secret, especially from Brainburner’s wife. With First Princess Yvonne Davion as a reference, BB Jr. had been accepted into the NAIS prep school where his father had gone to great pains to impress upon him the importance of a good education. The only concessions BB Jr. won was the chance to fight anonymously on Solaris during holidays and to keep possession of the heavy Claymore presented to him by Mac after the Warriors rescued the Successor Lords. He could not take it with him to classes however.

The conversation had switched topics while BB Jr. had been reflecting on the past. Morgan had stared to go through the plot of the latest “Immortal Warrior” episode, having been lucky enough to acquire a pirate copy ahead of the official air-date here on New Avalon. Listening to the trio, BB Jr. finally understood his problem. Many of his classmates were here at the NAIS with the desire to become MechWarriors. With every fiber of their being they dreamed of going into battle and carve themselves a ledge. They dressed, acted and talked in the manner that they believed “real” MechWarriors would. They eat, slept and breathed ‘Mechs.

But BB Jr. had already lived that dream.

He had been there in the fusion-hot core of combat, fighting side-by-side with the other Warriors of the Dropship. At the age of fifteen, he had more combat experience than most of the MechWarriors in the Inner Sphere. His experience set him so far apart from the MechBunny wanabees in his class that the gap was almost unbridgeable. Not for the first time, BB Jr. wished he could talk to Mac, but the mysterious robed warrior was gone; the last report was that a giant Octopus had dragged him out to sea on Pacifica. While BB Jr. was almost certain that even a tentacle-festooned attacker as large as the one reported could not do away with the secretive Scotsman, he also had to admit to feeling some trepidation about when Mac would eventually surface. In the past such reappearances were always a harbinger of chaos and destruction across the Inner Sphere.

Despite the brief appearance of a band of rouge Clan Warriors who insisted that the Smoke Jaguars were not dead, the Inner Sphere had seen several years of semi-peace. While units from the Successor States and Clans would skirmish on occasion, no one had committed to a full-scale campaign. Everyone was still struggling to reverse the damage cause by fifteen years of

foolish military downsizing and reorganisation that even the possession of the Ultimate Combat System could not mitigate on the battlefield. While the Draconis Combine was absorbed in their continuing leadership problems and coming to terms with their new image, the Capellan Confederation was now, if reports as to the nature of Kali Liao's chief advisor were to be believed, was now being run by the previous Chancellor's pet fighting fish. The whole situation in the Liao space had uncomfortable echoes of events during the Goldfish War, and the rest of the Inner Sphere was watching House Liao most carefully.

Meanwhile, information filtering out of Clan Space hinted that the two major political movements there were evenly matched and could quite easily keep themselves out of affairs in the Inner Sphere indefinitely. Epaminondas, a Team Bonsai MechWarrior who worked as a history lecturer here at the Institute, had taught BB Jr. well, drilling into his young mind the lessons of the past. It would be foolish to rely upon such a delicate balance forever. The same kind of precarious situation had existed before the First Clan War and had been tipped in the favour of the Crusader Clans by the arrival of a single ComStar deep-range survey ship.

"BB!" Morgan, who attempted to swat the inattentive diner with a data pad, interrupted his musings. Combat honed reactions cut in automatically and BB Jr. easily ducked under the clumsy attack.

"What?" He remained ready to fend off further attacks from his classmate.

"We were thinking to taking the mag-lev out to the coast after class. You want to come? The weather's great and the beach will be a change from Sims." Both Simon and Morgan added their voices in support of the plan.

Determined to throw off his current introspective mood, which he was sure was unhealthy for someone of his age, BB Jr. nodded in acceptance of the invitation.

The frictionless ride of the magnetic-levitation, or mag-lev, train rocketed the four young men from the capital and to the popular coast-side city of Tintagel. During the comfortable journey, BB Jr. tried to shake his earlier mood, but could not help brood on the loss of his prized Hatcherman during a mid-term holiday break into the Periphery two years before. The upgraded design had been impossible to replace because of the voracious demand the House militaries were placing on the newly revitalised arms industries. Not even the resources of Bob could provide a replacement. The glorious weather that greeted the four as they walked through stern neo-gothic entrance to the mag-lev station burned away such dark musings however.

Tintagel was unsurprisingly busy, with NAIS caps, tee-shirts and towels abundant evidence that many of the students were taking advantage in the unseasonably fine weather. After grabbing a refreshing drink for which they were grossly overcharged, the students drifted apart as they took in the sights.

Brainburner Jr. found himself walking along the beach, pausing occasionally to watch some of the activities and sports taking place there. This year beach volleyball was back in fashion and several games were in progress. As he strolled across the fine white sand his attention was captured by one game in particular. A quartet of female students were engaged in a particularly energetic match which demonstrated a number of gravimetric principles far more entertainingly than the lecture he had the misfortune to sit through the week before. Indeed the game held his attention so effectively that BB Jr. failed to notice the ten-foot tall wooden pole jutting from the sand until he walked into it.

Lying on the soft sand that cushioned his fall, BB Jr. fought to make his eyes focus properly, but the blow he had received was making his head pound and the double vision he was experiencing was making him slightly queasy as well. The afternoon sun was hammering down upon him, aggravating the pain in his forehead. He closed his eyes in an attempt to fight the effect, but opened them once more when he sensed a shadow fall across him, blocking the heat of the sun.

Two hooded figures stood over him, dark against the blazing azure sky.

"Brainburner Jr." Familiar voices emanated from the shadows that hid the faces of the robed figures.

"Mac?" BB Jr. struggled to focus but giddiness from his encounter with the pole defeated his efforts and imparted the beach with a surreal spinning motion.

“BB Jr. Yea ‘twill go to Scotland, Terra. There yea ‘twill go ta Stanely Castle.” Brainburner Jr. winced, for the accent was hard enough to handle at the best of times, but in his current condition he was having a hard time dealing with both of the Scotsmen. Seeing the young man’s discomfort, both the silhouettes paused a moment before continuing. “Find Stanely Castle, lad. There you will learn from Juan Sanchez Villa-Lobos Ramirez.”

“Learn? Learn What? Did he teach you?” The effort of speaking brought an alarming tunnelling of vision and BB Jr. could feel he was losing the battle to stay conscious.

“No lad. He is the man who taught the man, who taught me.” Both figures started to turn away, but then turned back to look at the prone warrior. “You don’t have much time left. Dark powers are gathering their forces and the Chaos Lords are preparing to strike.” All the figures then turned and walked down the beach, pausing only to use an old Jedi mind trick on the quartet of volleyball players, and their identical twins, who had been so distracting.

All ten of them walked away across the sand without looking back.

“Wait! Chaos Lords? Who?” Brainburner Jr. tried to rise, to follow these mysterious visitors and get some answers. “Mac!”

But the exertion plunged him into darkness.

Chapter 3

Ruins of Pothos, Roche, Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space, 28 February 3084

The heavy tread of the Timber Wolf kicked clouds of rust-coloured dust into the baking desert air. Once airborne, the dust was twisted and ripped apart by the incessant winds that howled down the narrow streets of the ruins chosen by the Goliath Scorpion Star Colonel as the site for the Trial. From the uneven timing of the OmniMech's footfalls and the way they rattled his teeth, Tel Hazen could tell that while his encounter with a Summoner had left his opponent as a burning pile of spare parts, his own war machine had not come through the encounter unscathed.

Pothos had been one of the first settlements to be established on this world as the Clans expanded from the Pentagon Worlds they had liberated those five war-torn planets from the faithless fools who had rejected the wisdom of the great Kerensky. Clan Widowmaker had expanded the first modest structures into a small city as part of their extensive holdings on Roche, only to see it reduced to ruins under the onslaught of the Wolves as the warriors of that Clan attacked with savage abandon to avenge the death of the ilKhan at the hands of Widowmaker Khan Carl Jorgensson. Ultimately the luckless Widowmakers were absorbed by the victorious Wolves, but the ruined city where one of the final battles was fought, along with much of the losers enclave was gifted to Clan Goliath Scorpion in recognition of the aid they gave to the Wolves following a dishonourable ambush by their opponents.

The new owners had elected not to rebuild, but to leave the dusty ruins alone for over two centuries as a monument to the fate that would befall all those who went against the "Way of the Clans".

Tel had studied the Jade Falcon records on the area extensively in preparation for the Trial, but his knowledge was little advantage because this was the Goliath Scorpion's home ground and he had no doubts that the Warriors of the 3rd Scorpion Cuirassiers were not only intimately associated with the layout of the city, but were also adept at fighting in this high-temperature environment.

Even though he had been ready for it, Tel Hazen had experienced a moment's panic when his heat gauge jumped towards the red zone after his first exchange with a Fire Scorpion. The quad 'Mech had been ideally suited to fighting in the heat of the Roche day. The two heavy autocannon generated much less heat than the big lasers on which the primary configuration relied upon as the heart of its weapons payload. It had taken every ounce of the Jade Falcon's skill to exploit the weaknesses of his opponent, punching through the torso armor and detonating the explosive ammunition stored within. Although the Cellular Ammunition Storage System had saved the Scorpion Warrior from a fiery death, the explosion had sent both legs on the quad designs right hand side cart wheeling away into the ruins, effectively taking the heavy 'Mech out of the fight.

Tel moved the Timber Wolf into a narrow side street and paused to examine his sensors in an attempt to locate one of the two remaining enemy 'Mechs that were somewhere within the city limits. He was not surprised that his Magnetic Anomaly Detector was giving intelligible data, what with all the metal used in the construction of the city. Likewise thermal imaging was no use with the high ambient temperature and the large expanses of sun-heated wall surrounding his position. Those same walls provided his opponents with cover and blocked line of sight, turning the whole battle into a point-blank slugging match.

If the antagonists could find each other.

A thunderous detonation shook the Timber Wolf and threw dust and debris into the air, filling the street in which Tel had halted with a bloody murk through which it was impossible to see five meters unaided. The communications system, silent throughout the trial until now, burst into life. "Librarian Two to Librarian Leader, I have just eliminated the opposing Gargoyle. If you will be so good as to finish the Hellbringer we can call this Trial concluded." Nicholas Kerensky; Wolf Clan MechWarrior, fellow veteran of the Goldfish War and namesake of the Great Father himself, had joined Tel Hazen for his mission to Roche, partly because Khan Kell had somehow discovered Tel's mission, but mainly because the Wolf Warrior was board with his duties as a member of Wolf Clan honour guard on Strana Mechty. Kerensky had eliminated a Scorpion Ice Ferret early in the fight, savaging the lighter machine with the caress of the powerful lasers that comprised the bulk of the weapons carried by his Nova Prime. With the first kill going to the Wolf, the two had elected to split up and hunt down the defenders through the streets of Pothos. With his second kill, only one of the Goliath Scorpion Star set to oppose them remained somewhere in the ruins.

Looking out his OmniMech's canopy, Tel could still hardly see beyond the end of the outthrust weapon pods that made up the arms of the deadly combat vehicle. "Freebirth!" Tel smashed his fist down on the padded armrest of the command couch into which he was strapped securely. "It is like fighting blindfolded!" He started to bring his fist down on the unoffending upholstery a second time when a memory made him halt the violent motion.

It had been after the defeat of the forces of the utterly insane Stefan Amaris the Seventh when the Warriors of the Dropship had been preparing to return to the Inner Sphere after their climatic battle in the Valley of the Goldfish on New Wales. The Dropship had docked with the experimental Star League Destroyer, the Xenophobe, and they had been waiting for the KFC drive to recharge. Most of the Warriors had been resting or recuperating from combat wounds, but Tel found himself restless after the climatic storming of the madman's stronghold and the discovery of his corpse. Wandering the corridors of the Grav-Deck, he had happened across some of the younger troops in the gym along with Mac.

Previously though to have died early in the campaign against the New Republic, the enigmatic Warrior had reappeared to help Medron Pryde rescue the Successor Lords kidnapped as part of the scheme to take over the Inner Sphere and destroy the Clans. Upon reaching the Xenophobe Mac had been quick to swap the makeshift attire he had acquired on New Wales for the customary homespun robe, with a deep hood that concealed his features. Now the apparently tireless figure was coaching a Locust pilot who went by the handle "AMP". The Mechwarrior was standing in the centre of a practice mat with a wooden Kendo sword while Mac would loft wooden blocks towards him. After watching for several minutes, Tel had to admit that the Spheroid displayed remarkable speed and coordination in deflecting the projectiles. While not as good as he would expect from a genetically superior Trueborn Clansman, it was still an impressive display.

"Aye, that's good." Mac walked over a rack of storage bags attached to the bulkhead and retrieved an Aerospace helmet. After adjusting the visor he tossed the heavy object to his pupil, who deftly caught it, then looked questioningly at his instructor. "Put it on lad." AMP eased the tight-fitting headgear on, and then reached up to adjust the anti-glare visor.

"No, just let it be." Mac told his now visually impaired student.

"But with the blast shield down I can't even see!" AMP wined while the other Warriors tried to stifle their laughter.

"So ye think ye will always be fighting in clear weather and at mid-day?" Mac shook his head. "If ye are lucky enough the pick the time and place of a fight, ye will still have ta contend wi smoke and dust." Mac threw two wooden blocks at the helmeted figure in rapid succession. The first hit AMP in the shoulder, jerking him around, while the second slammed into his stomach.

The Kendo sword clattered to the floor as the surprised student doubled up, clutching his midriff.

"Here now." Mac gently removed the flight helmet from his stricken pupil. "Ye have to learn not to rely on yer eyes so much." Mac looked up from the still groaning Warrior and looked at those gathered around the mat. "If ye are blind, don't forget ye can still hear." Tel could not help but get the impression that this last comment was directed at him specifically. "And never" Mac helped AMP to his feet. "Never, ever fight at a disadvantage if you can help it."

Tel looked out at the dust filling the air outside his cockpit again, then reached over to the controls for the external microphones connected to his 'Mechs comms system. While in battle they were normally turned down, else a MechWarrior could be distracted or deafened by the sound of battle. But now those mikes were the only method Tel had of locating his opponent. Slowly he adjusted the volume and listened to the passage of the wind through the ruins. Degree by degree, Tel moved the directional microphone as he scanned his surroundings.

Now it was not only the heat generated by his Timber Wolf that was making him sweat.

There! Off to the right! Faintly he could here the distinctive sound of 'Mech footfalls. From their cadence they could only be from a heavy 'Mech. Long minutes passed as Tel forced himself to listen to the laborious progress of his enemy, working to judge how close it would pass to his current position. His best guess was that the Goliath Scorpion Hellbringer would pass the other end of the alleyway in which he had halted his own OmniMech.

The effort it took not to throttle up his Timber Wolf and head out after his target was excruciating, but Tel held position, peering through the slowly thinning dust for the telltale silhouette of his prey passing his hiding place. As the sound of the 'Mech footsteps increased in volume, Tel dialled down the volume on the external pickups – he had no wish to give himself perforated eardrums when the time came to unleash the destructive power of his OmniMech.

For a moment the dust at the end of the alley darkened, then brightened again as something large passed by. Hazen instantly throttled his OmniMech up and pushed it forward, intent on catching his opponent in the back with the hellish power of his large lasers. As he pivoted around the corner to attack, he silently cursed as the Scorpion 'Mech spun with the speed only a superbly bred Clansman could achieve, presenting him with a flank shot, and not the back shot he had hoped for.

No matter that his ambush was not the complete success he had wanted, for now Tel Hazen had a target and the time for killing had arrived. A rapid left-right salvo from the large lasers that were mounted in the arm weapon pods above matching medium

lasers cut deep into the offered flank, vaporising armor and sending molten ribbons of the ultra-hard material raining down into the dust. Moments later Tel followed the first salvo with shots from the medium lasers, gnawing into the right arm and fusing the field initiators for the PPC mounted there.

The skill of the enemy MechWarrior was evident in the way in which the Hellbringer hardly wavered, despite having two tons of armor sheared away within seconds. Tel had only moments to brace himself as his foe completed the turn and unleashed a blast from the Extended Range PPC mounted in its undamaged arm.

The whole world rocked as the blast of charged particles hammered home, sending the left arm of the Timber Wolf spinning off into the ruins. The electrostatic discharge blew out several of the auxiliary displays in the cockpit and Tel could feel every hair on his body stand on end as blue arcs of electrical discharge leaped to earth. The follow-up SRM attack was as a summer breeze compared to a gale in comparison.

“This ends now!” Tel unleashed the last salvos of LRMs from the boxy launchers mounted above the shoulders of his bullet-shaped ‘Mech, subconsciously counting the tremors as each of the forty missiles hurled themselves from the launching tubes.

At such short range the missiles did not spread appreciably, and the confines of the street left little room to dodge the swarm as they bore down on the unfortunate OmniMech. Although the Anti-Missile system mounted on the primary configuration Hellbringer did a valiant job in trying to swat the incoming warheads aside, the time allowed for it to react was far too short and only three of Tel’s missiles were detonated by the stream of high velocity rounds.

The rest tore the heart from the target, smashing it to the ground and completely wrecking the fusion powerplant and the vital gyroscope. Safety systems shut down the stricken ‘Mechs reactor, but as the heavy ‘Mech ploughed into the dust at the feet of Tel’s Timber Wolf it was quite clear that it would take no further part in this Trial.

Tel Hazen and Nicholas Kerensky stood to attention at the feet of their battle-worn OmniMechs and watched as a trio of Goliath Scorpion Warriors marched towards them. While the first two MechWarriors appeared to be in good shape, the third moved stiffly and it was evident that his right side was swathed in bandages and dressings that concealed the wounds received when his Hellbringer was reduced to spare parts by the final devastating LRM barrage Tel had unleashed against the ‘Mech.

The other two MechWarriors of the Star that had opposed Tel and Nicholas had not survived the destruction of their ‘Mechs. Even now the salvage teams were busy with sponges, mops and buckets.

The thing that surprised the Clan Warrior the most about the assignment given him by his Khan was that he had begun to genuinely enjoy his research into the history of the Clans. While every Clansman could recite the version of the Remembrance, that epic poem of the great deeds of their Clan, few truly immersed themselves in the history of all of the Clans. Also, the fall of the Star League and the creation of the Clans were now so shrouded in myth that Tel has been surprised and shocked at the number of inaccuracies that had been allowed to creep into the popular version.

He had quickly run into an unexpected problem during his assignment however, as a large portion of the early historical records were just not present in the official Grand Council Library. It had taken almost two days of paper chasing to discover that the material he was looking for had been exclusively acquired by the Goliath Scorpions in a series of Trials early in the Golden Century and now resided in their extensive subterranean museum, the Temple of the Nine Muses.

During his search for the missing records, Nicholas Kerensky, with whom he had worked alongside when the Warriors of the Dropship had been assembled to battle the Goldfish threat had unexpectedly approached Tel. It transpired that the Wolf Clan was also suspicious of the Snow Ravens and were as interested as the Jade Falcons in finding any information that would give them some leverage. Khan Kell, through Nicholas, proposed an unofficial alliance, which Tel passed on the Jade Falcon Khan. To his surprise, Khan Clees agreed to the proposal, and he found himself with an unexpected aid.

Together they formulated a plan that would gain access to the records held by the Goliath Scorpions.

The defeated MechWarriors lined up to face their conquerors and assumed positions of attention. After several formal moments of stillness, the wounded Warrior took a pace forward and addressed the two Clansmen before him.

“I am Star Commander Michel Kirov, commander of Charlie Battle Star, 3rd Scorpion Cuirassiers, Gamma Galaxy. We salute your victory over us in this Trial of Possession and hereby acknowledge that the Trial was conducted fairly and in the spirit of the intend for which the Great Father created such Trials.” The Star Commander paused for a moment, fighting not to show the distress his wounds must be causing him. “As was agreed in the bidding for this Trial of Possession, the two Warriors known as Tel Hazen of the Jade Falcons and Nicholas Kerensky of the Wolves are hereby granted unlimited access to the knowledge stored in the Temple, with the provision that they may not remove original materials nor publish such material without the consent of the Khans of Clan Goliath Scorpion.” Kirov drew two computer cards from his tunic and handed them to the waiting Clansmen. “Let all abide by the rede spoken here! Thus we shall stand until we all shall fall.”

“Seyla.” Tel joined the others in acknowledging the binding oaths that had been agreed upon in the bidding for this Trial, then looked down to examine the library card that had cost the lives of two people.

Chapter 4

Unknown Location, Inner Sphere, 01 March 3084

Katherine Steiner-Davion (or Katrina as she preferred to be called) pulled at the rough cloth from which the robe she wore was fashioned with distaste. At the current fashion amongst the elite of the Inner Sphere was velvet and the homespun material her associated insisted she wear was just so unfashionable. The only concession allowed her was that she could at least choose her own footwear. Pulling her thoughts away from matters of fashion, she surreptitiously regarded the others robed figures who sat at the council table.

Clad in the same irksome material and with their deep hoods drawn up to conceal their faces in the dim light of the ancient chamber, the only immediately obvious difference between the seven figures was their size and build. Katherine had only met two of the seven previously, but it was easy to pick out the intimidating bulk of Kroydon, an Elemental who had survived the Annihilation of the Smoke Jaguars and had survived in the Periphery working as a tour guide until induced to join this select group. The other member of the group with whom she was familiar was Zane, the cruel-eyed Feng Shui Master that had recruited her after the debacle with the Word of Blake.

The eight of them were seated at a table carved from a single piece of granite. The polishing process had been so thorough that the surface took on a translucent effect that drew the eye deeper and deeper into the delicate swirls that almost appeared to crawl within the stone. The seats they occupied were arranged with four along each of the long sides of the table. At the head of the table was an almost throne-like chair that appeared to have been fashioned from the shell of some titanic shellfish. Katherine looked with envy at the plush upholstery installed within the gaping jaws of what must have been the biggest Clam in known space.

While they waited in silence, Katherine's thoughts were drawn once more to the bitter memory of how her glorious plans to dominate the Inner Sphere had come to naught. Just when everything had been going so well, her whole plot had collapsed faster than the Capellan military during the Fourth Succession War.

Katherine had been overjoyed with her success at ceasing control of the Federated Commonwealth while Victor had been off on his crusade against the Clans, and had been overjoyed that he refused to attempt a military operation to regain the throne she had usurped. It had appeared that she would have plenty of time to consolidate her hold her growing empire and position herself to take the title of First Lord of the Star League.

And once she had that exalted title, she would not settle for a just a three-year term. She would never give it up.

Content that everything was proceeding according to plan, she chose to take a quick holiday and pay an unannounced visit here co-conspirator and lover, Khan Vlad Ward of the Wolves. She had arrived in the Wolf Clan Occupation above Tamar free from the cares and worries that steeling an interstellar empire are want to give a person and she was looking forward to spending some quality time with Vlad.

Using the security codes the Wolf Clan Khan had provided her on a previous visit, the Dropship Katherine travelled aboard was able to land uncontested and without revealing the identity of its passenger. Dressed in the most fetching of her new outfits and with a stunning new hair style, Katherine had rushed through the chill Tamar night to the private quarters of the Khan, using the authorisation documents from her last visit to get past the Elemental guards.

But she found that Vlad was not alone in his bed.

After taking one look, she had stormed from his rooms, shouting and screaming hysterically. She closed here ears to Vlad as he ran after her, explaining that it was not what she though. He loved her, pleaded. It was just the "Way of the Clans", he shouted. He and Galaxy Commander Warren Stiles where "just good friends", he declared as she slammed the door of her hover-limo.

She returned to her personal Dropship and departed as soon as fuelling was complete.

The trip back to New Avalon gave her plenty of time for her rage to simmer, and by the time the Command Circuit had transported her to the old capital of the Federated Suns, she was ready to unleash her vengeance.

Her return was greeted with the news that a few small areas of resistance to her rule had exploded into violence. Her military commanders had completely failed to deal with the situation and now she was looking at a full-blown civil war.

She quickly instructed her troops to be more forceful in winning the hearts and minds of the people, and then turned her attention back to Vlad.

Revealing Vlad's collusion with the Inner Sphere called down a firestorm upon the Crusader Wolves, many of who renounced their allegiance to the disgraced Khan. The return of the Warden Wolves saved the Wolf Clan from complete destruction, but Vlad was kind enough to return the favour, providing her enemies in the Inner Sphere with evidence of her own treachery.

While she could take some comfort in the fact that her ex-lover's bleached skull adorned a pike set before the Triad on Tharkhad, the fact that there was a second weapon placed alongside it that was reserved for her was somewhat unsettling. It was all so unfair for the people of the Inner Sphere to hold a handful of assassinations against her; especially after all she had done for them.

Katharine's attention was brought back to the present by the low rumble of the council chamber doors grinding open.

A ninth robed figure strode into the chamber, carefully carrying a glass bowl in which a brightly coloured fish circled restlessly. Taking his place at the head of the table, the newcomer addressed the assembly.

"As you all know, the untimely demise of Number Seven left a critical gap in our organisation. To address this issue, I had Number Five recruit a suitable replacement." The figure reclined into the deep upholstery of the shell-throne and nodded at Zane. "Kath..." the speaker paused a moment before continuing. "Katrina Steiner-Davion will now run our Public Relations and Propaganda section, where I am sure she will enjoy more success than her recent attempt to use the renegade Work of Blake forces to achieve her aims. I present you with the new Number Seven."

The others at the table nodded welcomes to the newest member of their select group while their leader sat, idly caressing the glassy surface of the fish bowl balance on his lap.

"Now, Number Two." The figure turned to the man on his immediate right. "What is the status of our military build-up?"

"The equipment we supplied to Stefan Amaris was only a small portion of our equipment, and not our best. It has been replaced with ease. Where we are deficient is in skilled MechWarriors." Number Two paused to look across at the figure in the seat across the table, which nodded agreement. "Number One, while we have been able to entice some skilled troops from their previous employers, we are still short of the numbers required by Number Three's projections."

Number One considered the report his underling had given for a few moments, while the occupant of the bowl halted it's transit of the water-filled globe to regard the people arrayed before it.

"Number Four, what of recruitment? Will we have to rely on the work of Number Six?"

The woman Number One addressed tugged at the sleeve of her robe nervously before replying. "With the strict security screening required, it is difficult to provide troops in the quantities called for by The Plan. I fear we will have to depend on Number Six and accept the timetable his work imposes on us. While Amaris was able to build a force very rapidly, his methods resulted in a much lower quality of recruit than what we will require."

"Number Six, what progress do you have to report?" All heads turned to the figure slouching in his chair.

"With the genetic material and breeding protocols we have acquired over the last fifty year we have been able to initiate our own program for breeding superior warriors and are now in a position to expand our Sibco program. In addition to that, our genetic screening operation has allowed us to identify a number of promising donor candidates from amongst the best Warriors in the Inner Sphere."

"Have you included them in the program?" Kroydon interrupted Number Six, who looked in mute appeal to Number One.

"Number Eight, would you be so kind as to save your comments until after the briefing in future?" The enthroned figure looked back at Number Six. "Proceed, but you may answer Number Eight."

Bowing to his leader, Number Six proceeded. "We have acquired some of the candidates for processing, but have to move with care. If too many top Warriors were to die or disappear at once, the Inner Sphere security services could become suspicious if they detect a pattern." Number Six paused to clear his throat before continuing. "You yourself directed us to examine one very promising candidate."

“Ah, yes...” Number One slowly traced a finger around the rim of fish bowl. “Brainburner Jr... You have finished your analysis?”

“Indeed we have. He is a perfect candidate and would make a fine addition to the project, though it would be some time before we would see any results. Despite that, I recommend we acquire him for processing immediately.” Number Six looked over to the sullen Clansman. “I would recommend that Number Eight take care of the collection process in person. Now that the candidate is no-longer at the NAIS, it should be a simple matter to secure the genetic material we need.”

Kroydon brightened at the thought of the assignment. “It will be a great honour to defeat him in combat and bring back his head.”

“Actually, I would prefer the rest of the body to be honest. Just so-long as it’s fresh.” Number Six could not resist tossing a contraction at the one-time Smoke Jaguar.

“Enough of this!” Number One moved to head off what could be a prolonged argument. “Number Nine, what is the progress at the NAIS?”

A strange whirring noise originated under the hood of the final figure at the table as it straightened slightly. “My agents have successfully penetrated the Team Bonsai labs and have been working as quickly as possible to plant the information we selected. We estimate that Dr. R Raisley will complete work on the UCS 2 in no more than eight months. We could accelerate the process, but if we do so the good doctor will likely become suspicious of his rate of progress.”

“No, eight months is within the timeframe for The Plan. With the Inner Sphere forces outfitted with an improved UCS, they should be ready for what we require of them.” Looking down at the fish that returned to its eternal circling, their leader thought for several moments. “Number Three, what of Kali Liao? Are her plans still on schedule?”

“Yes, Number One. We believe her minions will secure Isis Marik within the week. We already have reports that they have secured some of the other items they have been told are required for their scheme.” Number Three laughed softly as he thought of the master-plan created by the Chancellor of the Capellan Confederation. “The whole idea is complete nonsense however. Kali Liao and her Thugee Cultists are all completely insane, and their plot will never work.”

“However, it will create opportunities we can exploit...” Number One continued to watch the fish as it increased speed. “...and it should serve to distract the Lords of Chaos while we prepare the way for our final victory over them. Is there any reason why Kali selected the Captain-General as a sacrifice?”

Number Three nodded. “The analysis section thinks it is a combination of the hereditary Liao hatred of the Free Worlds League and the fact that Isis came top of the recent ‘Best Dressed Inner Sphere Personalities’ poll run by ISN. Kali came last as you may recall.”

“Very well. You all know the plan and have your assignments. Number Eight, you have the assignment to collect the material Number Six requires.” The enthroned figure looked down at the popping sound of bubbles bursting on the surface of the water in which the fighting fish was swimming and nodded. “Number Seven, while I understand your dislike for the Warriors of the Dropship because they disrupted your plans, I request that you delay your revenge for the moment.”

Katherine bit back an angry denial, having quickly learned that little escaped the attention of the leader of this secretive band. “But after everything they did...?”

“No, your petty revenge will have to wait. I still have one or two tasks for them. After that, I don’t care what you do with what’s left of them.”

Chapter 5

Atreus City, Atreus, Marik Commonwealth, Free Worlds League, 02 March 3084

Medron Pryde sat back in the plush upholstery of the antique 27th century dinning room chair and sipped the excellent Palos wine that had accompanied the second course of the fine meal he was sharing with the Captain-General. As Isis Marik described the delicate affair of state that had kept her occupied during his excursion beyond the Marik space, unobtrusive servants quickly tidied away the used dishes and drew the heavy purple drapes shut as the last glimmers of light fled the skies above the capital of the Free Worlds League. As military advisor to the Captain-General, Medron often found that his duty could call him to any world within the Successor State to which he owed loyalty. However this last trip had been a personal one that had taken him much further afield than normal.

“...it really was quite difficult to get the two of them to sit down and actually talk everything through.” Medron realised his mind had wandered and now he had no idea what Isis was talking about. As ever, she was a picture of style and grace. The teal-coloured gown would be the envy of half the high society of the Inner Sphere.

Medron nodded vigorously to cover his laps of attention.

“Now, what exactly was so important that you had to rush half way across known space to see Rick Raisley?” Medron had been wondering how long it would take for the conversation to work its way around to his sudden departure on receipt of the cryptic message from the famed leader of Team Bonzai.

“Well...” Medron looked down at his beautifully crafted crystal wine glass and absently rolled the delicate stem between his fingers. “...you know that Rick took blood and tissue samples from us all after the New Wales campaign?”

Isis nodded. “Yes, he wanted to check to see if those foul chemicals Amaris had been feeding his troops had any effect on us.”

“Well he finished his tests, and it looks like there’s nothing to worry about on that score, but there were some other things that worried him.” Medron continued to toy with the crystal glass. “Some of the samples have gone missing.”

“Missing? Why would somebody want to take them?” While the Clans held samples of genetic material in an almost religious awe, the people of the Inner Sphere regarded such things as mere routine. “It can’t be the Clans. They are only interested in their own genetics.”

Medron shuddered slightly at the mention of the decedents of the people who had followed Alexander Kerensky into exile. One of his own ancestors had been amongst the select few who had gone on to form the Clans, and so the name of Pryde had risen to prominence within Clan Jade Falcon. On more than one occasion his name has provoked extreme reactions from the Clansmen he had encountered. “No, not the Clans.”

Isis frowned in thought as she considered possibilities. “Who were the victims of this ‘Body Snatching’?”

“Well, one sample that disappeared very soon after Rick got back to the NAIS was taken from Mac. A lab technician was supposed to be watching it, but the moment he turned his back, Poof! It was gone. Nobody was really that surprised about it though. All the thefts have taken place more recently, within the last three or four months. The last one to disappear was from BrainBurner Jr.” Medron drained his glass, and then set it down with care on the fine polished surface of the table. “Everyone was real worried, because BB Jr. also disappeared. BrainBurner was there with some of the Warriors. They were just about ready to start dismantling the Inner Sphere looking for him until they found a message in a tin of Shortbread he had left in the dorm.”

“So where is he?” Isis waved a servant over to refill the glasses.

“He was last seen heading for Terra, muttering something about going for advanced training.” Medron eyed the large chicken dish placed before him by another servant with suspicion.

The ruler of the Free Worlds League paused for a moment before wrenching a drumstick from the roasted bird placed before her. “I always said it was a mistake letting that young man spend his holidays on Solaris. I hope he’ll be alright, but you better not tell Owens, or he’ll be off to Terra too.”

Picking dutifully at his own bird, Medron continued to disclose the information his trip had netted. "Rick also said that he thinks somebody is tampering with his research." Somehow the food was not particularly appetizing, but then he had never been that keen on chicken after travelling so far aboard the SLS Xenophobe.

"What is Rick working on then? Is somebody trying to sabotage his work?" Isis nibbled delicately while waiting for an answer.

"That's the weird thing about it. If anything, Rick thinks somebody is feeding him the information he needs to complete his project. He is not happy about being led around by the nose, I can tell you." Pushing his plate away in distaste he took a sip of wine from his recharged glass. "Rick is working on some improvements to the UCT."

"But what's wrong with the current one?" Isis beckoned for the servants to remove the chicken course. "What's beyond the 'Ultimate Combat System'?"

After breathing a sigh of relief at the departure of the last course, Medron responded. "It turns out that it was not as 'Ultimate' as we thought. Rick says that some things were rushed when we were trying to get it set up. We were in a hurry to come and get you, so we were quite rushed you know. It needs some tweaking."

Remembering the dark clad figures that had penetrated tight security intended to protect her, the Captain-General shuddered. They had busts into her study and spirited her away before she could even raise the alarm. Worse, their cleverly planted substitute had continued to fool many of her servants and ministers until the Warriors of the Dropship rescued her and her fellow Succession Lords from the clutches of a madman. "It's odd that you should mention strange occurrences." Distressed by the dark memories, Isis changed the subject. "There have been a series of very strange robberies all across the League. Pre-spaceflight artefacts from Terra have been going missing from museums over the last week. If I didn't know better, I would say Snord's Irregulars were back in business, but it's not quite their style."

"Weird!" Medron smiled as he remembered one last piece of information. "Rick was also running some genetic comparisons on the samples. You know, just in case somebody turned out to be a long-lost brother." Medron sipped again from his glass.

Isis was immediately curious. "So? Any surprises?"

"Yes there was. According to Rick, none of the Warriors of the Dropship are closely related in any way. He says it is almost a statistical impossibility." Medron shrugged. "On top of that, none of the Warriors are related to the rulers of the Successor States. I guess Rick wanted to check after the scare with Rave Zero." He sampled the excellent wine once more.

Isis looked at her military advisor speculatively. "So, what are your views on marriage?"

Choking and spluttering, Medron somehow managed to avoid spilling most of his wine, but the fine white linen tablecloth still receives a goodly number of stains as the MechWarrior fought to regain his breath.

"Is there something wrong?" Although Isis maintained a straight face, her eyes smiled mischievously at his discomfort.

"Aahh.. What exactly did you have in mind?" Medron cleared his throat several times before retrieving his glass and taking another sip of wine to cover his surprise.

"While you were off on your trip, I received a petition from a lady in the Federated Suns, Baroness de Gambier." Isis broke off as another fit consumed Medron for several moments, further ruining the tableware. "Do you know her?"

"Only by reputation." Medron struggled to recover his composure once more.

"Well..." Isis continued her explanation. "...she is an extraordinarily wealthy and well connected member of the Federated Suns nobility. A link to her family would be of enormous benefit to the League."

"But...But she has to be in her seventies!" Medron glanced around to make sure that there was a clear line of retreat to the door.

"True, but she is on the lookout for a husband of good standing for here daughter. The poor dear married late in life, to some Clan War veteran. Now the girl is of suitable age, Felicity wants to get her married off quickly. I guess she doesn't want to make the same mistake her parents did." Isis shook her head sadly. "I believe you are her first choice."

Medron was surprised to find that he was sweating more than he normally did when strapped into his Phoenix Hawk LAM in the midst of battle. “Err...So what’s the girl like?”

“I don’t know.” The Captain-General shrugged. “But if her mother is going this far-afield in her search...” Isis smiled at Medron brightly. “Anyway, you have plenty of time to think about it. If you can give me your answer any time before mid-day tomorrow...”

“Tomorrow!” The door was starting to look very attractive to Medron Pryde right now.

“Well, I would like to give them an answer when they arrive...”

Medron was about to give a definitive answer to the proposal when the door flew open and six men, each garbed in tight fitting black clothing and concealing hoods burst into the room. Even as Medron sprung from his chair and bellowed for the guards, the intruders pulled wicked curved knives from their belts and dispatched the unfortunate servants. Then they came at the Warrior in a pack.

The first died as the blade of a skilfully thrown steak-knife caught him in the throat, and the second was dispatched by bringing the antique chair Medron had been sitting on down across the assailants head. As the flying wood splinters momentarily stunned the remaining four mysterious figures, Medron launched a short, but powerful kick at the nearest man. He was rewarded by the sound of a breaking kneecap and a scream of pain before the remaining three started towards him again.

“Medron!” Isis shouted from behind him. “Catch!” He half turned at the call, only to have the bottle of Palos wine Isis had thrown glance off the side of his head, spinning him to the ground. He was certain he heard Isis voice some un-ladylike comment as the three invaders jumped over his prone body and close in on the Captain-General.

The last thing Medron Pryde remembered before sliding into unconsciousness was the voice of Isis Marik as she cried out indignantly. “Oh no! Not again!”

“Hey, Boss! Wake up. Wake up now.” Medron opened his eyes to see Owens kneeling beside him, applying a chunk of ice from the wine cooler to the aching mass that represented his head. “You O.K. Boss?”

Pryde nodded, immediately wishing he had remained still as pain hammered through his skull once more. “Isis?” He looked around the shambles of the dinning room.

“They got her Boss. Got away clean before anybody could raise the alarm.” Owens looked sadly at the crumpled bodies of the servants then helped Medron up onto one of the intact chairs. “They lifted off from the Starport and linked up with a Dropship at a pirate point. Either they were crazy or had very good navigational data.”

“How did they get past security?” Medron noticed that the bodies of the ones he had tackled were missing. Only the dark stain from the blood of the man he had knifed remained.

“I checked with security.” Owens prodded a chunk of wood with his foot. “Looks like they go in posing as Pizza Delivery Men. You know how that goes.”

“Yes.” Medron nodded, once more wincing at the pain the movement sent searing through his head. It was an old ploy, but an effective one. He had used it himself on more than one occasion.

Medron hauled himself onto shaky legs and started for the door. “Get me everything we have on their ship, and have forensics go over this place.”

“Then what?” Owens hurried to steady his friend.

“Then? Then I call in some old favours. Get the message out Owens. I’m calling in the Warriors of the Dropship. We rescued her once, and we’re damn well going to do it again.”

Chapter 6

Temple of the Nine Muses, Roche, Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space, 02 March 3084

“Freebirth!” Tel Hazen looked around guiltily at his outburst, but fortunately there were no other Clansmen in the archives section of the Temple of the Nine Muses at the moment. Once the military headquarters of Clan Widowmaker, the massive fortress of Spiderholm was gifted to the Goliath Scorpions for their unsolicited aid during the final stages of that Clan’s Absorption by Clan Wolf. The Scorpions had established their priceless collection of artefacts from the Star League within the fortress, renaming it in the process.

These archives of the past were buried deep under the solid defences of the half-natural, half-manmade edifice. Impressive as the fortifications were, the bulk of the facility was entrenched beneath the surface. Row upon row of low of long chambers, massively buttressed and with low ceilings held every scrap of printed or recorded information the obsessive Seekers of this eccentric Clan had been able to gather from across Clan Space and beyond. Everything brought in by the enigmatic veiled wanderers was carefully recorded, categorized and archived.

Down here.

Tel had been working for several hours trolling his way through the extensive collection the Goliath Scorpions had assembled, looking for anything that could aid him in his mission. For the most part, the information was dry and tedious in the extreme; laundry lists, shipping manifests, officers mess menu of the day. Every record had been lovingly preserved by the fanatical Goliath Scorpions as part of their hoard of Star League artefacts.

Finding himself board out of his mind after an hour, Tel had concluded that he needed some way to sift through all the information for items he would find of more use, or at least, more interesting. Unable to bring in members of any of the lower castes to aid in his search, Tel had been reduced to programming a search avatar himself.

Perversely, the Scorpions were using antiquated Star League computer systems as part of their prized museum. While such systems were still in wide use within the Inner Sphere (and were considered state-of-the-art), the Clans had long-since developed more powerful systems. Tel found the antiquated Star League era operating system to be full of more tricks than any opponent he had ever faced on the battlefield, and his patients finally snapped when system helpfully informed him that it could no-longer find source-code he had been working on just moments before.

It was that innocuous and completely unhelpful message reporting that the last two hours of effort had vanished into nothingness that had precipitated his outburst.

Pushing his chair back, Tel began to pace back-and-forth, trying not to look at the computer terminal he’d been working at least he do something constructive, like draw his holstered pulse laser pistol and vaporise the accursed thing here and now. In his current state, the Clansman would have gleefully launched a Trial of Annihilation against the company responsible for the user interface. Bringing himself back under control, Tel conceded that such an action was not possible. Not only would the Inner Sphere oppose such an armed incursion on the part of the Clans, but also the company in question (Micro-something-or-other) has ceased to exist in a blast of nuclear hellfire during the capture of Terra by the Usurpers forces during the Amaris coupe. The destruction of the Succession Wars had eliminated what little was left of their corporate identity.

Clearly it was time to take a break.

It was a journey of ten minutes to get from the archive and up to ground level. Tel was halted three times by vigilant Scorpion guards, who insisted on scrutinising his pass in exacting detail. Tel suspected they were just board with the dull routine of an assignment that, while prestigious, did not offer much action.

It had not been until his sojourn into the Inner Sphere that Tel Hazen fully appreciated the differences between the Inner Sphere and the society the Clans had build for themselves. Here, in the Clan Space, Tel could walk into any place where food, or any other goods, were available and take what he needed. All that was required was for him to present his Codex and the transfer of materials would be recorded, allowing the provider to be recompensed through the supply of a replacement.

In the Inner Sphere the process was much more convoluted and involved. Operating in the Inner Sphere required the use of money. While this was not a completely alien concept to the Clans, the use of actual hard currency was somewhat of a rarity, usually restricted to large financial transactions between members of the Merchant Caste. The Merchants of the Jade Falcons were renowned as sharp moneylenders, but they did now wander around with several kilos of Kerenskies clanking in their pockets. No, the handling of money had never sat well with Tel Hazen. All that mucking around with change made him feel

like a Merchant, and there are few things as dangerous as a Clansman who is being made to feel like a member of a lower Caste.

As an old military installation, the Temple was well equipped with barracks and refectories for the large number of people required to operate the facility. With the constant activity within the Temple, the main refectory was busy throughout the day, and so Tel Hazen entered the large room and made his way to the Warriors section, glad that the Scorpions did not expect the different Castes to mix at when eating. With a plain metal tray dispensed at the door by an old man from the Worker Caste, Tel worked his way along the bank of food dispensers. He quickly chose his meal from a selection that consisted primarily of the bland, but nutritious Clan dishes. He paused momentarily before also adding a Tharkhad Toffee Crispie to his tray. More and more of these Inner Sphere products had been making their way into Clan space, courtesy of the Diamond Sharks. While they were rarely available to the members of the lower castes, Tel knew that enough Inner Sphere luxury items were making their way into their hands to cause an increased level of discontent amongst the civilians of the Clans without Inner Sphere holdings. This was one of the foundations on which the Isolationists were building their case.

While Tel agreed that the lower caste members should be protected from the decadence of the Inner Sphere lifestyle, he also felt it was fitting that a Warrior such as himself be allowed to enjoy the spoils of conquest. Besides, he had come to really like Tharkhad Toffee Chrispies after Atticus Longwalker introduced him to the confectionary on his last journey into the Inner Sphere.

Ignoring the questioning glance of the labourer caste woman who scanned the bar-coded items on his tray, Tel presented his left wrist, on which he proudly wore the Codex of a Clan Warrior. The data-chip embedded in the wristband communicated with her data-wand in a sequence of high speed data pulses, and the transaction was over. Ignoring the stares his distinctive Jade Falcon uniform attracted, Tel Hazen found an empty table as settled down to enjoy his meal.

Tel Hazen had barely taken three mouthfuls from the highly nutritious yeast-steak when a shadow fell across the table, pulling his attention away from the meal.

A Goliath Scorpion Warrior stood across the table from where he was seated. The man was clearly a member of Gamma Galaxy, resplendent in the red and gold uniform with the four disks of a Star Captain on his chest and the hilts of two daggers close to hand in his belt. Before Tel could finish sizing up the newcomer, the man spoke.

“You are Galaxy Commander Tel Hazen, quiaff?” The belligerent tone of the Scorpions voice was not aided by the gravely rattle that was the sure sign of too many days spent in the parched lands surrounding the Temple.

“Aff, Star Captain..?” Tel remained seated, refusing to treat the man as his equal by rising; a calculated insult.

“I am Star Captain Enrico Yeh, commander of Bravo Trinary of...” The Clansman was certainly intent on drawing as much attention as possible to his confrontation with the Jade Falcon, for his voice carried with ease to the far corners of the room, silencing the hum of other conversations.

“Yes, I am sure you are. Very commendable! So good to have talked with you.” Although Tel was careful to keep all expression from his face, he could not repress the gleeful feeling he experienced at fury his interruption sparked in his visitor.

Nostrils flaring in anger, Star Captain Enrico Yeh glanced about, looking for an angle of attack against his apparently unperturbed adversary. His gaze alighted on the Toffee Crispie, still sealed in a brightly coloured wrapper on Hazen’s tray. Jabbing the forefinger at the Inner Sphere product, the Scorpion launched his challenge. “Such a prize does not belong in the possession of a Jade Falcon. Only a true Warrior deserves to possess it. I, Star Captain Enrico Yeh, commander of Bravo...”

Tel Hazen could just not resist the temptation to once more interrupt the bombastic Star Captain. “Yes, yes we have done all that! Star Captain, if you wish to issue a formal challenge, we will require an Oath Master, quiaff?”

Angered further by the interruption, but also thrown off guard, Enrico could only agree the point. “Aff.” Gesturing to one of his fellow Goliath Scorpion MechWarriors, Enrico continued. “Perhaps Star Commander Ranuf, commander of...”

“I do not think we need bother the Star Commander.” Tel was beginning to enjoy himself. “A neutral party would be best. How about Star Captain Nicholas Kerensky? Surly you could not turn down one who holds a Bloodname from the line of the Great Father?” Tel gestured to Nicholas, who had been making his way over to join him when Enrico had stepped up to the table. No love was lost between the Jade Falcons and the Wolf Clan, so the confused Goliath Scorpion had little option but to accept the nomination.

Setting his tray aside, Nicholas Kerensky drew himself up into a formal stance and waited for the crowd to laps into silence. "I, Nicholas Kerensky of the Clan Wolf, stand as Oathmaster! Let all be bound by the reed spoken here until the end of time and beyond." He paused, letting the formality of Clan ritual make a suitable impact on the minds of all present. "Star Captain Enrico Yeh. You wish to issue a challenge, quiaff?"

"Aff, I so wish it. I, Star Captain Enrico Yeh, commander of..." The powerfully build Warrior paused imperceptibly, waiting to see if Tel Hazen would violate the solemn rite by interrupting him yet again. "...Bravo Trinary of the 14th Scorpion Grenadiers. I challenge you, Galaxy Commander Tel Hazen to a Trial of Possession. With what forces do you defend this Tharkhad Toffee Chrispie?"

Rising to his feet at last, Tel Hazen looked Enrico Yeh in the eye and began his part of the ritual. "I am Galaxy Commander Tel Hazen, commander of Iota Galaxy of the great Clan Jade Falcon." Now was the critical point, for the opening bid would reveal wither Enrico Yeh was operating on his own, or with the silent approval of his superiors. "I defend this Tharkhad Toffee Chrispie with a full Cluster of battle-tested Jade Falcon Warriors."

A murmur ran through the crowd at his announcement, and Tel was rewarded with a look of complete surprise that darted across the face of his opponent.

So, he was working alone.

"I..I see no reason for a conflict so wasteful." Enrico was clearly off balance from the surprisingly large opening bid. Even if the Goliath Scorpion could muster a force of comparable size, he would have a difficult time justifying the operation to his superiors. "One Trinary will be more than sufficient to decide the issue."

Tel nodded to himself. By cutting down the bid to his own command, Enrico was on safer ground, though if his troops were to be badly mauled he would find himself in more than one Circle of Grievance over the matter. But waste was not the Way of the Clans and the Jade Falcon wanted to push the presumptuous Goliath Scorpion further. "Indeed! Waste is not our way. Let us settle this personally. I bid myself and my Timber Wolf."

Technically, Enrico could elect to deploy several 'Mechs against the one opponent, although they would be bound by the Clan rules of Zellbrigen; the body of rules covering duels. However, if Enrico were willing to bid lower, then he could move the whole event into the arena of personal combat. Given his obvious strength and size, such a move would be to his advantage, and he would not have to explain away the equipment damage a 'Mech duel would cause.

Evidently, the Scorpion had the same thoughts. "I will face you in personal combat, with these!" Enrico patted the hilts of the daggers he wore at his belt. "We will dance the Dance of the Scars!"

Tel had heard of the ritual combat in which two Goliath Scorpion Warriors duelled with matching knives, attempting to inflict five exactly located cuts upon each other. This painful, but rarely lethal combat still required great skill and ability. While he would rather bid down to unarmed combat, doing so would concede the choice of location for the Trial to his opponent. Tel knew that to do so would find him battling under the blazing sun in the dusty lands outside the Temple. His foe was clearly accustomed to that environment.

"Such a contest would be acceptable to decide this Trial of Possession." Tel nodded to Enrico. "Bargained well and done."

Nicholas Kerensky once more came forward to resume his role in the proceedings. "Enrico Yeh of the Goliath Scorpions, as you have selected the format of the Trial, it is the right of Tel Hazen of the Jade Falcons to select the venue."

Tel glanced around the refectory one last time before looking Enrico in the face and smiling his evil smile.

"Are you sure about this Tel, quiaff?" Nicholas looked at the proposed site of the Trial.

Tel nodded. "Aff. But more importantly, Enrico is not." Looking over the steaming circular vat, which had been hurriedly moved from the kitchen, at the confused look on the face of his foe as he removed his uniform jacket. "I am ready to proceed, Oath Master." Tel picked up the two wickedly curved knives with which an accommodating Goliath Scorpion had armed him.

Nicholas Kerensky looked over the edge of the large vessel at the bubbling yellow contents above which a narrow wooden plank had been suspended, and shook his head. Stepping back from the heat he addressed the waiting Warriors. "Warriors, here is your Circle of Equals! Here you will battle until one is victorious. Should you break the circle, you will admit defeat." Nicholas looked at the two men one more time. "Warriors! Take your places."

The two Clansmen used the chairs placed by the Labour Caste who had prepared everything according to Tel's instructions to climb up to the lip of the vat and onto the narrow walkway across it provided by the plank. Both gingerly edged onto it until they were both within the limits of the seething cauldron's edge.

They were now separated by a distance of four meters, knives at the ready.

"Let the Trial begin!" The call from Nicolas Kerensky unleashed both of them like coiled springs.

Tel Hazen found out how fast and strong Enrico was when he received a deep slash across his right shoulder. The follow-up cut to his left was almost as effective, but his Jade Falcon reflexes and training kicked in to allow him a successful parry.

Enrico darted back to his end of the plank to avoid the quick cross cuts Tel used to stave off another effective attack. The Goliath Scorpion gave him a nasty grin, evidently relishing Tel's discomfort as he glanced down at the bleeding wound.

Daggers held outstretched before him, Tel advanced down the plank towards his foe, stamping his feet as he went. However, Enrico was too skilled a warrior to be distracted by an old fencing trick like that, and kept his attention on the approaching blades.

Except this time, he would have done well to pay attention to what Tel Hazen's feet were doing.

Tel was ready for the wild vibrations he sent coursing through the wood, but his opponent was caught unawares by the onslaught. Arms cart-wheeling frantically, Enrico just could not stop himself over-balancing and plunging into the viscous yellow substance above which they battled.

Unable to endure the heat, Enrico Yeh scrambled for the edge of the vat, abandoning his challenge as he crawled out of the searing custard, only to flop helplessly to the floor where Med-Techs rushed to see to his burns.

"Here. This is yours." Nicholas Kerensky handed the Tharkhad Toffee Chrispie to Tel Hazen as he sat at a table while a Med-Tech attended to his wound. "That was a really nasty thing you did to Enrico. The prestige of his Bloodname will suffer greatly after such a humiliating defeat."

"He called the tune. Perhaps these Scorpions will let us get on with our assignment with not additional interruptions." Tel took his prize from the Wolf with his left hand and ripped the wrapper open with his teeth. Taking a bite and leaning back, Tel Hazen savoured the taste.

It was sweet, just like victory.

Chapter 7

Stanely Castle, Paisley, Scotland, Terra, 05 March 3084

A grey and featureless plain stretched way in all directions until merging with the horizon at some indeterminate point in the distance. The sunlight, if it was sunlight, was filtered to an eerie twilight by a sky of grey clouds so devoid of motion that they gave an appearance of having been nailed there. Standing with no landmarks in sight, Brainburner Jr. looked around in confusion. Where was the Castle he had travelled so many light years to find? Where was the mysterious Ramirez he had been directed to seek out? The air itself felt strange, almost more substantial than the very ground. Walking against the pressure, even the act of breathing, was a chore.

A hint of movement in the distance caught his attention.

A moving dark spot soon resolved itself into a ragged column of people led by several figures bearing banners of grey. As they approached Brainburner Jr. could see they were garbed in a kaleidoscopic array of uniforms and paramilitary garb, the condition of which was as varied as the selection. Some were pristine in parade-ground perfection while others were worn and soiled with dirt and blood. All carried some kind of weapon. Hundreds of voices were raised in songs and chants of battle, and the languages were almost as diverse as the uniforms themselves. Faces were painted with varied emotions. Some were alight with anticipation, some blank with resignation, and others were clouded by fear. Some of those faces were disturbingly familiar as the young man picked out people he knew.

Some of the Warriors of the Dropship marched along with the rest. Was that Fokker over there in his red flight suit? And over there was Owans, who had piloted a Wolverine alongside his lost Hatchetman during the Goldfish War. At first BB Jr. thought they had come looking for him, but as the column drew nearer it became clear they would bypass him. Drawing in a painful breath, he shouted a greeting to the leaders with their tall banners, but they paid him no heed. Again he shouted and waved as the mass of men and women passed. Their passage kicked up surprisingly little dust for such a large group and still they ignored him and marched on, apparently not impeded by the thickness of the air. He tried to join their ranks with difficult steps, but the column soon outdistanced him.

Struggling after the receding warriors, BB Jr. noticed more movement in the distance. Other columns were marching from the horizon under grey banners of their own, converging at an arbitrary point on the featureless plains. He was almost exhausted by the effort to move, but he continued on, curious to see what events would transpire at that meeting. As the four other masses drew closer he perceived that, like the first group, those people wore costumes and uniforms drawn from across human space and history. He would almost have concluded they had ransacked a fancy dress costume shop or a holovid set but for the authenticity of a handful of uniforms he was more familiar with.

At some unseen signal a mighty shout went up from the marching figures. The columns broke up as their members brandished whatever weapon they carried and rushed to attack other charging columns. The fighters attacked each other with disturbing savagery, eschewing the deadly potential of their weapons and seemingly content to use them a primitive clubs as they closed for hand-to-hand combat. It was impossible to tell how the battling figures could differentiate friend and foe. Wanting no part of the chaotic conflict being played out, Brainburner Jr. backed further away lest the swirling mass of bodies catch him up.

“So. Who de ye think is goin ta win this time?” On hearing that familiar accented voice from behind, BB Jr. spun round to see a pair of figures standing several meters away watching the conflict. Both were clad in hooded robes of homespun cloth. With the hoods drawn up, their faces were hidden in the first shadows the confused young man had seen in this place. One was cradling a Claymore in the crook of one arm while the second mirrored the pose with a finely crafted Katana.

“Mac?” There was no mistaking that voice, but with two near identical figures before him BB Jr. could not be sure which had spoken.

“At a guess, I t’would say....Grey”. The figure with the Claymore gestured with the large weapon at the frantically waving banners still bobbing above the human maelstrom. The accented voice that issued from the hood of the second figure was identical to that of the first.

“Ye were always optimistic.” The voice continued as the other watcher observing the conflict. “Ye really think ye can change things enough ta make a difference this time?”

“I can try. Look...” The second pointed towards the horizon. “...here it comes again.” Looking to where the cloaked figure pointed, Brainburner Jr. could see a dark and menacing cloud rolling in from the horizon, blotting out everything as it

advanced. "They better get themselves organized, or twill all be over very quick." The darkness continued to sweep in at a frightening rate as the warring figures battled on obliviously.

"Ye can'ne save them all. That's bin tried before. It never works ye know." The first figure sounded sad.

There was a hard edge of determination in the voice of the second. "I can try."

"Mac?" Brainburer Jr. lurched forwards to stand before the two figures, feelings of unreasoning terror biting at his mind as he glanced over his shoulder at the darkness. "Mac? What's happening?" The two watchers appeared ignorant of his presence even though he was now standing between them and the continuing battle. He looked desperately at both of them, unsure of which of the two he should direct his appeal to. A chill began to bite as the air stirred for the first time in this place. The very air itself appeared to grow darker as the back wall advanced to engulf the battling figures and sweep onwards towards where the three of them stood. "Mac!" Desperate to make the cloaked men acknowledge him Brainburner Jr. reached out with both hands and pushed down the hood shadowing the face of the one with the Claymore.

He was shocked into immobility as he found himself staring at his own face just as the darkness engulfed them all.

Clutching the folds of the blanket with white-knuckled hands, Brainburner Jr. jolted awake, a last desperate appeal still on his lips and his head still full of confused images from the dream. Beneath him the blankets of his narrow cot were crumpled and soaked with sweat while above the ceiling was illuminated by the glimmerings of dawn creeping through the small window of his room. Swinging his legs around, he sat up and rubbed his eyes to clear them of sleep while vowing to avoid cheese as part of his supper in the future.

The chilly flagstone floor gave no more time to contemplate his strange experience as his feet were rapidly turning into blocks of ice. Reaching for his clothes, he dressed quickly. Before leaving his small room, BB Jr. stopped to pick up the scabbard holding the great bladed Claymore that Mac had gifted to him at the end of the Goldfish War. Looking at the mighty weapon brought back echoes of the dream.

It was time to resume his training.

The narrow stairway outside his room took him to the ground floor of the castle, though that term could only be used loosely perhaps. The ancient edifice was more a keep than a true castle. Established over a millennium before, Stanely Castle had been established to control the road to the coast winding down from the soaring heights of the Glenifer Brehys, an imposing wall of rock that marked one edge of a rift valley in which the city of Glasgow had flourished even before the construction of the castle. The town of Paisley later grew up at the foot of the heights and the natural knoll where the fortifications were erected was later surrounded by water when a Paisley mill owner established a reservoir to supply fresh water to his workers. Local history tended to gloss over the fact that this was not done out of the goodness of his heart, but to reduce the loss of production due to illness.

Brainburner Jr. found most of this out after he arrived. All he had really cared about after the short journey from Glasgow Spaceport was that his destination was in the middle of a manmade lake, and he had yet to find a boat.

He had been standing for some time looking at the square keep rearing out of the reservoir water when a small row-boat appeared from behind the knoll and moved laboriously across the still waters. As the vessel approached the shore he was surprised to see a curious figure seated in the centre of the craft, working the oars and casting the occasional glance over it's shoulder to check the bearing. The first thing that stood out was that the rower was wearing a wide brimmed hat of archaic style, complete with the adornment of an improbably large ostrich feather. As the boat bumped gently against the bank it became clear that the rest of the stranger's clothing was equally outlandish. The russet-closed doublet was rich with exquisitely detailed embroidery, and semi-precious stoned glistened amongst the elaborate patterns. Mud splattered the finely crafted knee-length boots as the boatman jumped ashore and tied his small craft before turning to face his visitor.

The flamboyantly dressed man carried a sheathed sword with an ease and familiarity that were the hallmarks of years of practice. BB Jr. was surprised to see the weapon was not a Claymore as he would have expected, given his current location. Neither did the weapon match the clothes worn by the bearer. Having known more than one Kurita MechWarrior, BB Jr. instantly recognised the weapon as a Katana and a well-crafted example at that. Yet another jarring inconsistency was the fact that there was no sign of a matching Wakizashi, the short bladed weapon would normally make a set with the Katana.

“I am Juan Sanchez Villa-Lobos Ramirez. Greetings.” Ramirez doffed his hat, exposing a head of thinning hair that matched the colour of a carefully trimmed moustache, and bowed with a flourish to the stupefied MechWarrior. “I have been expecting you, young Brainburner.” Smiling eyes twinkled from a deeply lined face as they examined the speechless youngster.

The old man possessed a magnetic personality that mesmerised his visitor and it was not until BB Jr. had rowed them both almost back to the Castle that refusing to do the hard work even occurred to him. He wondered if this was one of the “Jedi Mind Tricks” Mac had often talked of.

Much of the castle was in a state of disrepair with most of the habitable rooms located in the lower half of the crumbling pile of masonry. The upper half was all but open to the elements and surmounted by ragged battlements haunted by evil-looking crows. After being shown to his small room BB Jr. spent a restless night wondering what was in store for him in this dilapidated fortress.

The next day marked the start of backbreaking labour for the young warrior. His first task involved working on hands and knees scrubbing the large worn flagstones of the hall that comprised the ground floor of the castle. The task consumed most of the day and in the end his hands had been rendered into stiff claws by the buckets of cold water drawn from the reservoir. The only thing that took his mind of the state of his hands was the pain of back muscles unaccustomed to such exertions.

He persevered though, figuring that it was all part of the training process, just like in an old pre-holovid movie he once saw. He had no trouble sleeping that night.

After taking two days to painstakingly work over the floor of the hall his next task was to lime-wash the walls of one of the disused storerooms on the floor above. The rough surface of the un-plastered walls conspired with the ragged large-headed brush with which he worked to make it an arduous job. The wash did not apply to the surface well and dried unevenly. What had appeared to be a quick chore consumed the whole day before Ramirez was satisfied. On the third day he began to have doubts when he found the rolls of wallpaper awaiting him. Wondering what skills this task was intended to impart, he laboured into the evening to paper the walls of the spare bedroom.

After spending a week cleaning, repairing and redecorating Brainburner Jr. was beginning to wonder if he had got the wrong castle. After spending the morning wrestling with the balky plumbing he decided the time had come to get a few things straight. Snatching up his Claymore, he went in search of Ramirez. He found the old man in the kitchen, mixing batter for the fish that BB Jr. presumed was going to be lunch. In place of the fanciful clothes Ramirez had worn on their first meeting, this time he was wearing the uniform of a Soviet Navy officer. Just why the old man was wearing the uniform of a power that had ceased to exist a millennium before was completely lost on the irritated youngster, but he had started to become accustomed to these frequent changes. The Katana the man always took with him was close at hand.

“Look, I’ve been here for days and so far all I’ve learned is how to become an interior decorator.” Brainburner Jr. stated without preamble.

“And you don’t think that would be a useful skill to have?” Ramirez looked up from his preparations.

“Not very.” Emboldened by the mild reaction to his complaint, BB Jr. pressed on. “I was kind of wanting to learn how to become a better Warrior. That was the whole point of having me come here, at least I thought it was.”

The old man looked at his student with a searching gaze for several moments. “So you think you are really ready for the hard stuff?”

“Yes.” The young man managed to force a confidence into his reply that, at heart, he did not completely feel. However he was certain that whatever was to come would be preferable to more chores around the castle. “Yes, I’m ready.”

“Well, it’s your choice.” Setting aside the wooden spoon, Ramirez took up his sword and beckoned his student to follow as he walked over to a narrow wooden door. “Through here then.”

Beyond was a section of the castle that BB Jr. had never been, indeed had never suspected existed. Overhead lights illuminated the large room; the gleaming white walls reflecting the bright light and making the very air itself glow. A gentle movement of air and the faint hum of machinery told BB Jr. that the area was air conditioned, though the temperature was perhaps slightly too cold for comfort. Banks of computers and electronic equipment dominated the far end of the chamber, but it was to the construction in the centre of room that they eye was drawn.

“That looks like a Clan HoloTank!” He had seen something similar during his time at the NAIS, but it was incredible to find such a piece of valuable technology in this ancient edifice. “Who did you get it? The Clans don’t exactly give these things away.”

“You’re correct. Nice bit of equipment, though it took some time to persuade the Diamond Sharks to supply it. They drove a very hard bargain you know.” Picking up a small control pad, Ramirez led the way into the tank itself. “So, let’s start shall we?” The old man pointed the pad at the computers against the far wall and pressed several keys. The air around them simmered into a white mist, which then faded as quickly to reveal new surroundings. They were now standing in the centre of what looked like a classical Japanese Dojo, visually complete down to the last detail. Only the lack of warmth from the sunlight streaming through the high windows broke the illusion that this was not real. “This is a sparring simulation.” With a sweep of the control pad Ramirez took in then illusion of light he had just created. “Here is where your training begins for real.”

“Is this the part where you tell me to try and hit you with this...” BB Jr. smoothly drew his big weapon, once more feeling a twinge of annoyance when the rune-graven blade once more failed to shine as it did in the hands of its previous owner. “...then you wipe the floor with me just to show how much I have to learn?”

“No, no.” The old man threw his head back and laughed, reaching to steady his fur-rimmed cap with the hand holding the pad. “That training technique went out of fashion centuries ago!” Levelling the holotank controls at a spot on the mats in the centre of the Dojo, Ramirez conjured a ghost of light with a deft touch of several buttons. The silent figure was dressed in Kendo armour with a matching wooden weapon. “Here is your first opponent. He’s not much at conversation, but he has much to tell you.” BB Jr. eyed the figure while his teacher began to circuit the room. “For now we’ll just go with the basic simulation. Later we’ll suit you up in a special force-feedback suit that will let you know when you’ve been hit.”

“That sounds like fun.” Tightening his grip on the Claymore he inched to the side of the holographic fighter as an experiment. Although his opponent made no move to attack, it did turn to remain facing him. “So? What do I do now?”

“Have at him! I want to see how you move, how you handle that big knife. I need to see where you are strong. I need to see where you are weak.” Ramirez emphasised each point by jabbing his own weapon towards BB Jr.

“Here goes nothing, I guess” Raising the heavy weapon, he swung at the computer-controlled figure. He had intended to pass the wide blade through his target at waist height, but even as he started to move his sword through that wide arc his illusory opponent smoothly slid back two paces, well beyond the tip blurred tip of the hard driven attack. There was nothing he could do as the shear mass of the Claymore pulled him off balance. After moving back to its starting point, the figure in Kendo armour tapped him with the wooden sword via a lightning flick of the wrist.

An illusory bell chimed from somewhere in the rafters, announcing the hit. Brainburner Jr. could almost feel the non-existent weapon brush the back of his neck.

Ramirez shook his head at the display. “I can see we have out work cut out for us.”

So over the next week Brainburner Jr. spent much of his time in the illusory worlds the holotank spun from thin air. His early problems with the large weapon were soon rectified as Ramirez showed him how to adjust the weighted rings in the hilt to balance the weapon to his own hand. More instruction on the finer points of the art of sword fighting followed, supplemented with training with other weapons and unarmed combat techniques.

The force-feedback suit added a new level of realism to the tank, with every hit landed by the legion of opponents held in the computer banks left a good number of bruises.

Even as he trained the young man’s body, Ramirez all worked to hone his mind into a weapon as sharp as the sword. “Remember.” During a rest break after an exercise in which BB Jr. had sent what he figured must have been a full company of phantom opponents to an electronic Valhalla. “Always try to fight with an advantage, whether it be in numbers, terrain or equipment. If they pull a knife, you pull a gun. If they put one of your mates in the hospital, you put one of theirs in the morgue!”

“It’s not just a case of physically defeating your opponent.” Another time the old man lectured him from the stern of the small boat as Brainburner Jr. rowed them around the reservoir. “You must destroy their will to fight. Humiliate them. Make them look foolish in the eyes of their compatriots.”

Such ruthlessness shocked BB Jr. “How?”

“Well, for instance, dropping them into a vat of... well custard for example.” The old man smiled as some secret memory. “That one never fails.”

Brainburner Jr. had just reached the foot of the stairs and had half opened the to the main hall when the ironbound main doors were blasted from their hinges by a shattering explosion that filled the air with dust and smoke.

Through the wrecked portal strode the familiar shape of a Clan Elemental who stopped to survey the damage the first of his two backpack-mounted missiles had wrought on the old structure with apparent relish. The battle armour bore the unmistakable markings of Clan Smoke Jaguar. BB Jr. stayed where he was with the door slightly ajar.

“Hold it right there!” Ramirez, dressed in the flowing robes of the Arkab moved into his field of vision. “And just what possessed you to blow a hole in my home? You could’ve knocked.”

The Elemental’s voice was harshly distorted over the suits external speakers. “Do not use such foul language in my presence. Get out of my old man, I have come for the boy.”

“You’re too late. I’ve taught him what he needs to know.” Ramirez drew his Katana and assumed a ready stance. The razor sharp blade began to glow with a pale blue light. “You can’t have him!” An enraged snarl emerged from the towering armoured figure, and then it turned slightly and launched the remaining missile at the impudent figure before it. The detonation shook the castle and BB Jr. was almost deafened by the sound. The shaking itself did not subside however. Rather it increased as the whole far wall collapsed into the reservoir, bringing half the castle down with it.

As the dust settled once more the Elemental was still standing arrogantly before the wrecked entrance. The spot where Ramirez had stood was now covered in several feet of rubble.

“No!” Without thinking BB Jr. pushed the stairway door open and scrambled to the spot where his teacher had stood, searching frantically for any sign that he could still be alive under the tons of masonry. “Ramirez!”

“All too easy. I expected more from the great Ramirez.” The Elemental opened his visor with a hiss of escaping air. “I am Kroydon, once of the great Smoke Jaguars, and now one of the Chaos Lords. I have been charged with the task of securing your body. I am willing to be reasonable about this however, and will let you face me in honourable combat.”

“Chaos Lords? Who in Kerensky’s name are the Chaos Lords?” Brainburner Jr. turned to face his opponent while freeing the Claymore from his scabbard. “Even if you kill me, my dad will come looking for you. So will the Warriors of the Dropship!”

Kroydon laughed evilly as he began to remove his armour, but always keeping one weapon trained on BB Jr. “I think not. Brainburner and those other sorry excuses for warriors will never escape Sarna alive.” From his armour’s backpack the laughing Clansman drew a vicious looking sword that was even bigger than BB Jr. Claymore. In the big hands of the Elemental it looked more like little more than a knife.

“Sarna? What’s on Sarna?” Brainburner Jr. moved to a clear area of the floor where the rubble would not impede his movement. Looking at the powerfully muscled Elemental he understood the odds in this fight looked lousy.

“Enough talk boy. Now we fight!” Kroydon moved into a ready stance with his menacing blade held high.

As he mirrored the move a glimmer of pale blue light shimmered up the length of his blade for a second.

Run boy! Swim!

A faint voice seemed to echo from his weapon. He did not pause to think, but whirled and ran up the debris pile to the edge of the castle. He could hear the scrabbling sounds as the Clansman struggled to follow him over the treacherous footing. Every moment he expected to feel the sharp pain of his opponent's blade, but he did not look back.

He did not stop.

Kroydon stood at the edge of the knoll and snarled at the dark waters that had swallowed his prey.

He was just about to rush back to his battle armour so he could go in after the boy when the faint shrill of powerful fans drew his attention to the far bank. Troops of ComGuards hover tanks were approaching, doubtless to investigate the explosions. Cursing their rapid response, he turned and scrambled back to where his discarded suit lay. The aircar he had used to reach the castle would be able to outpace the heavy military vehicles.

He would have to return later to recover the body.

Chapter 8

Temple of the Nine Muses, Roche, Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space, 05 March 3084

The pervading darkness of the archives was broken here and there by tiny lights. Lights that danced and shifted in patterns whose meaning hovered just beyond comprehension as the dated Star League computer burrowed through mountains of information. With his right arm still aching from the slashing cut of Enrico's blade, Tel Hazen sat back to relax after his labours over a keyboard. The ancient input device was so caked with dirt and dust that it was impossible to guess what colour it had been when new. He had set the search parameters and now the vast electronic caverns of data collected by the Goliath Scorpions was being mined. Tel was sure his electronic helpers would unearth the gems of information for which he was seeking, but it would now take time.

Time during which there was little to do but wait.

Although the waiting grated on his Clan tuned nerves, Tel was reluctant to climb the long stairway back to the surface and seek refreshment. He did not like to think about what would be involved in obtaining a cup of coffee.

But there were advantages to this assignment, particularly having access to records normally reserved for Khans. Records like those documenting the genesis of the Clan, events that had grown to mythical proportions in the psyche of Kerensky's Children. While it was not forbidden, historical pursuits beyond the Remembrance and military operations were frowned upon as unproductive and wasteful for a Warrior. Tel Hazen could not deny that his assignment had given him a taste for the subject and he had taken the opportunity for study afforded by the occasional break from his investigation of the Show Ravens. Now he used his terminal to call up a list of archived recordings.

Tel had already worked his way through the archives documenting the exploits of the great General Alexandr Kerensky; the Amaris Civil War, the Fall of the Star League amidst the bickering of greedy House Lords, the call for the Exodus to preserve the spirit of the League, the trials and tribulations of the journey from the Inner Sphere and the arrival at the Pentagon Worlds. From there he had started into the recordings of the Founder - Nicholas Kerensky – son of Alexandr. But there were few recordings from the time of the Exodus Civil War, and those that had been preserved were scattered and fragmentary. In each one Nicholas Kerensky appealed to the troops and the people to cease hostilities and accept his assumption of the post of Protector of the Star League. With the enthusiasm displayed by the crowds the Founder addressed it was hard to understand how the Civil War could have continued.

Unless somewhere along the line somebody had been selective about what had been saved.

From his travels into the Inner Sphere and his dealings with the other Warriors of the Dropship, Tel had noticed that the media there had a tendency to manipulate reports and information, putting a different "spin" on events. Now Tel was beginning to recognise the same kind of techniques, though more clumsily applied, in these recordings. It was a disturbing thought; the Clans had demonstrated that their society was far superior to that left behind in the Inner Sphere, so why the need to alter the records?

The next sequence of recordings covered the second Exodus in which Nicholas Kerensky and his followers withdrew to Strana Mechty while the fools who had rejected his leadership pounded themselves into dust. Kerensky's people faced hardship as they worked to create a viable community on their new world but, in comparison to the Pentagon Worlds, they prospered under the guidance of the Founder. This next recording promised to be the most interesting yet.

The Founding of the Clans.

This historic event had been immortalized in the Remembrance and every Clan child had seen the educational programs that included the key address, but now Tel Hazen had the golden opportunity to see the complete recordings of the event.

A growing sense of anticipation filled Tel Hazen as he set the recording running with the single press of a key. Even with advanced image processing the holographic image that was displayed suffered from an uncommon degree of graininess that combined with the occasional spurious visual artefact. Were it not for the momentous events unfolding in the image, events that held Tel's attention more inflexibly than bands of steel, he would have shut down playback before the end of the first minute.

At first it was hard to judge where the open-air auditorium into which the Clan Warriors, each brightly dressed in the ceremonial garb of their Clan, trooped. The sky and the colour of the sunlight would have told Tel it was somewhere on Strana Mechty, had he not already possessed that information. As the viewpoint panned across the gathering host Tel began to pick

out distant landmarks, allowing him to identify the location of this historic event as the current location of the Hall of the Khans. Yes! There in the distance the embryonic city of Katyusha was just visible. Now looking more closely at the founders of the Clans as they gathered to hear the address of their two things struck Tel at once. Firstly, the warriors of each Clan did not gather together, each Clan into its own group. Instead they mingled freely; Falcon beside Steel Viper, Wolf beside Ghost Bear, and Blood Spirit beside anybody. They were of the Clans, but no inter-clan rivalries had yet arisen. The second oddity was that the occasional figure only appeared as an amorphous grey form. It took several moments to recognise that he was seeing the founding members of the "Not-Named" Clan. Nicholas Kerensky had ordered all trace of them erased from Clan history and now Tel was seeing the results of that directive. As the last of the Clansmen entered the arena and a hush fell over the gathering as all present watched the raised stage at the northern end of the auditorium expectantly.

Alone and garbed, not in Clan costume but the uniform of an SLDF Commanding General, Nicholas Kerensky entered and strode with solemn purpose towards the stage. His features were like those of his father; a strong chin and angular cheekbones produced a face that spoke of confidence, of ability, of determination. The close-cropped hair and shaved temples marked him as a MechWarrior while the uniform only enhanced an aura of command Kerensky projected. It was so easy to see why the survivors of the Pentagon Civil War could mistake Nicholas for his father when the Clans came to take control of their worlds. Having recently viewed recordings of Alexandr, the biggest difference between the two men to strike Tel was the eyes. General Alexandr Kerensky's eyes, while hard, also spoke of compassion. Such things had been driven from his son by the Brain Fever sickness and having to watch impotently while everything his father had striven for collapsed.

Three steps brought the Founder to the front of the stage where he stood for a moment with the banner of the Star League as a backdrop while he gazed at his assembled Warriors. Silent and motionless they looked a field of outlandish statues, each one transformed from a human by the fierce Totem mask that was part of their costume.

"Trothkin! Near and far. Seen and Unseen." Nicholas began his address with what was to become the traditional opening for ceremonial occasions amongst the Clans. Already he was shaping his new society. "I stand as Oathmaster. Let all be bound by the rede spoken here, until they are dust and memories and then beyond that time until the end of all that is." A tiny radio microphone carried his voice to the auditorium speakers, ensuring that none of the faithful would miss a single word. "This day we come together to forge something new. Not just an army superior to any other in history, but a society in which the petty bickering of politics and the greedy grasping of politicians for power will forever be cast out. A society from which, one day, will come people worthy of the task of creating a new Star League and uniting the worlds of the Inner Sphere under one banner." Nicolas paused as applause erupted from his audience and more than one cheer made itself heard. He raised his hands to signal for silence after a minute and the crowd obediently lapsed into silence once more. "All have been assigned to a Clan, and now the task of forging ourselves into a weapon fit for the grand Crusade we must undertake will begin. Be warned that there is much to be done, for while you may wear the same uniform as your fellow thirty-nine Clansmen, you will not truly be of the Clan until all of you act and think as one!"

The wind stirred the Star League banners that acted as a backdrop while Nicholas paused to study his followers. "Each Clan has been given a totem with traits, admirable traits that you will do well to emulate. Blood Spirit, the keepers of the esprit de corps that has brought us to this place, cunning and intelligent Coyote, and the aggressive Fire Mandrill. The Goliath Scorpion that defends the nest to the death and the proud Jade Falcon."

Watching the recording, Tel experienced a flush of pride at the mention of his Clan by the Great Father.

"The Ice Hellion displays speed and the cunning of the pack, and the Hell's Horses are aggressive and free. Not even solid rock will stop the resolute Burrok and the..." Here the recording suddenly jumped, "...stands its ground regardless of the odds." Tel realised this must have been a reference to the traitorous Not-Named Clan. "The spirit of the Cloud Cobra, the respect the Sea Fox shows for its prey and the aggressiveness of the Smoke Jaguar are examples to all Warriors." Instinctively Tel made a sign to ward off bad luck at the mention of the Clan that had been brought low by the forces of the Inner Sphere. Normally Clansmen were not superstitious, but the Great Refusal was still a raw and open wound in their psyche. Many were also still unsure about the change the Sea Foxes had wrought upon themselves when they changed their name to Diamond Shark. The recording of Nicholas Kerensky's address to the newly formed Clans continued. "The Steel Viper is relentless in pursuit and the Nova Cat is ever alert to danger. The agility of the Mongoose and the persistence of the Star Adder are the match of the merciless Widomaker. The Wolf has Warrior spirit and the Snow Raven is a true survivor, able to exist where no other can." Kerensky paused a moment to survey his Warriors, who continued to watch with rapt attention. "And let us not forget the undeniable majesty of my own..." Again the recording jumped. Mystified, Tel ran that part of the recording again, but could not guess at what had been deleted.

The Not-Named Clan had already been mentioned in the litany of attributes Nicholas though befitting his Warriors. Why would he mention them twice? What had been deleted? Why mention one of the twenty Clans twice? Tel sat gazing through the halted holographic image, pondering this strange inconsistency. He could not recall it from the educational tapes he and his

sibkin had watched years before in the Sibko, but they had been carefully prepared and edited. That last sentence must have been excised in whole from those copies.

Then an outlandish thought came to him. An absurd notion, the likes of which he would have expected from one of the undisciplined Spheroids he had been forced to work with when he battled as one of the Warriors of the Dropship. Curious now, he loaded one of the military intelligence analysis packages he had found on the computer system and directed it to analyse the recording. Normally the software was intended to try and create an assessment of troop strength from visual reconnaissance data. Now Tel directed it to provide him with a count of how many people were in the recording. With the distinctive Clan ceremonial outfits and the reasonably static positions of the audience the accuracy of the estimate should be fairly precise. The result was not long in coming.

Tel Hazen read the holographic numbers hanging before him and cursed under his breath. Then he processed the recording once more, setting even tighter criteria of a match.

The answer was the same impossible number.

There were eight hundred and forty individuals in the recording.

Every child in Clan Space knew the tale of Nicholas Kerensky and his brave and loyal eight hundred. Twenty Clans, each assigned forty of those who passed a series of rigorous trials to prove their worthiness to form the new military force with which they would retake the Pentagon Worlds from those who had torn apart the Star League Defence Force.

But in this recording there were too many people. To be exact, there were thirty-nine too many. Once more Tel ran an analysis on the recording. This time he was interested in how many of the figures had been blanked out.

As he suspected, the obscured figures accounted not only for the forty of the Not-Named Clan, but also for the additional thirty-nine he had just discovered.

Another Clan? But that made no sense. The history Tel knew told of how Nicholas Kerensky announced that he would join the Clan that was the most successful in Operation Klondike, the conquest of the Pentagon Worlds. Out of the twenty Clans Kerensky had judged Clan Wolf was the one to which he would pass his blood legacy, much to the annoyance of the Jade Falcons. The event had just been the start of the feuding that had marred relations between the two Clans for centuries.

Thirty-nine. A curious number to say the least. Tel could not dismiss the fact that when Nicholas Kerensky was added to the count he ended up with precisely the number of Warriors required to form a Twenty-first Clan.

A forgotten Clan.

So why had this escaped attention? The answer was obvious really. Almost everyone in the Kerensky Cluster would have seen the prepared recordings Tel had been raised with. The original was not widely available for viewing and had been ignored for years. The Clans had purged the Not-Named Clan from their records and doubtless that had been assumed to be the reason for any gaps. Absently he shut down the analysis program while he pondered some more over what he had discovered.

His attention was wrenched back to the holographic display as it sparked into life. Once more he saw the same open-air auditorium, but this time it was apparently empty. From the length of the shadows Tel judged it to be some time in the day after the recording he had been watching, but whether it was the same day was hard to tell. Looking closer though he could see where the earlier assembly had disturbed the ground.

So it was after the first recording.

A quick check of the computer informed Tel that what he was now seeing had been triggered as he shut down the analysis software. The recording was a file hidden within the program itself.

In the image a single figure entered the auditorium from the same direction Nicholas Kerensky had come. Dressed in a hooded robe made from homespun cloth there was something very familiar to Tel about the person now approaching the camera. The great bladed Claymore strapped across its back only highlighted the impossibility of what he was seeing. Although the shadow of the hood obscured the face as usual, the voice was instantly recognisable. "Galaxy Commander Tel Hazen, greetings."

"Mac? What..? How? In the name of the Kerenskys, how..." Tel's questions were cut off as the recording continued.

“Sorry, this t’will be a recorded message, Ah ken ye have a’ thousand questions, bu’ that t’will ha ta wait.” Tel was not sure what caused him to wince more; the contractions or the accent. The apparition continued to talk. “Now ah ken ye were looking fer ta dirt on yon Snow Ravens. I kin tell ye noo that some of yer suspicions are correct.” Tel was having a hard time making out what in the name of Kerensky the mad Scotsman was talking about. The sheer impossibility of the message had the Clansman’s mind doing back flips. If the recording was genuine then it had to have been recorded over two hundred years ago, for the great Hall of the Khans had been built on that very spot just after the Clans were founded. But if that were accepted as true, then there was no way whoever it was could know his name, or his task.

Then there was a little matter of the impossibility of somebody living several hundred years.

The, apparition was about the only name Tel Hazan could put to it, continued. “If’n ye get yer’self ta Sarna, I kin promise ye more information ta guide yer quest. An I think ye twill find that Medron will be needing a wee hand there too.”

With that the robed figure turned and started to walk away from the camera. However, a few paces away it halted and turned once more. “Hay! Tel!”

“Errrr.. Yes?” Tel Hazan was too confused to avoid the natural reaction.

“DUCK!” The figure motioned violently with a sweep of one arm.

As a Warrior, Tel had long ago learned that when somebody told you to duck, you don’t stand around and say something brilliant like “Where?” or “Pardon?” Instinctively he rolled from his chair.

A hail of bullets reduced the terminal Tel had been sitting before to a sparking tangle of junk.

Chapter 9

Solaris VII, Freedom Theatre, Lyran Commonwealth, 16 March 3084

The acrid smell of burning insulation filled the cockpit of the ruined 'Mech as choking smoke enveloped the cramped space. Slacker coughed spasmodically as he struggled to release the straps holding him into the command couch, a task complicated by the angle at which the stricken Stalker now rested. The last surviving Elemental had executed a successful "kneecap" attack, sending the eighty-five ton combat vehicle crashing to the ground and crushing the already mauled right torso.

With the XL powerplant disabled the Assault 'Mech was finished.

After what felt like an eternity the buckle release popped open, dumping Slacker onto the debris-strewn cockpit sidewall. The fire suppression system must have failed somewhere within the wrecked body of his war machine, if the volume of smoke now streaming in was any indication. It was only a matter of time before the remaining missiles stored in the blocky torso of the dead BattleMech cooked off.

It was definitely time to get out of here.

With vision useless, Slacker scrambled to find the cold metal of the safety cover by feel. Intended to prevent the emergency canopy release from being activated by flying objects, or flailing MechWarriors, the boxy cover was distinct from the switches populating that control panel. Time dragged into endless second after endless second of feverish fumbling as the MechWarrior expected scorching flame of a thunderous detonation at any moment. I felt like a lifetime passed before searching fingers found the smooth surface of the red-painted guard. Snapping the cover open and flipping heavy toggle underneath, Slacker curled himself into a tight ball to protect his face. A series of charges blew away a section of the cockpit's heavy armor protection. The built-up smoke billowed after the flying panels, to be replaced by bright sunlight that streamed onto the back of his neck. Slacker scrambled to the edge of the opening, took one look at the sandy ground three meters below, and jumped for it.

He landed hard on his left shoulder, knocking the breath from his lungs, but he rolled with the momentum of the jump and was on his feet and running for cover. With each stride the MechWarrior expected a blast from the exploding ammunition to slam into his back. But the fates had finally decided to be kind to him this day and he made it to the beckoning safety of cover in time.

Just.

With no Cellular Ammunition Storage Equipment, the blast of detonating long and short-range missiles was not contained, but instead ripped the ruined Stalker apart. The surroundings for tens of meters in all directions were peppered with deadly fragments of armor and internal structure. Some of the more robust components survived ejection from the disintegrating carcass to rain down seconds later in a barrage that was no less deadly.

Slacker rolled to his feet before slumping back against sheltering rock outcrop. He exhaled explosively and closed his eyes to relax for a few moments. That had been close, possibly as close as he had ever come to death. But the slight sound of stealthy footsteps brought his attention back to the present. As a shadow fell across him, Slacker hurled himself away from the rocks just in time as a large stone smashed into the place where his head had rested. Spinning to face the attacker, his right hand automatically scrambled for his holdout pistol, only to find it missing. No doubt the weapon had been lost in his scramble to escape a hellish death.

The figure atop the rocks had the intimidating size and build of a Clan Elemental. Having shirked his ruined Battle Armor, the Clansman was clad in the tattered remains of a body-stocking comprising myriad cooling tubes, wires and sensors; all caked with dirt, blood and a sticky tar-like substance. The savage grin and wild-eyed look told Slacker that his opponent was probably doped to the eyeballs by the automatic medical systems of the discarded suit. Even as the MechWarrior reached for his survival knife the Elemental leapt from the rocks, slamming into him with stunning force as he pulled the blade clear of its sheath. The knife span away, the finely crafted blade glittering in the sunlight as it sailed far beyond reach. Slacker fell back hard, the impact knocking his air from his lungs and leaving him stunned.

As his vision cleared a heavy weight landed on his legs as his attacker straddled his lower body, pinning him in place. The Clansman raised his arms and Slacker saw that the giant had snatched up a jagged shard of blasted armor, which he now held in both hands. Slacker looked up into manic eyes as for a moment before mighty shoulders tensed to plunge the improvised weapon into his heart...

“CUT! CUT!” The noise of bustling activity returned to the set as the director, clad in an eye watering Hawaiian shirt, and screamed instructions. “OK! That’s a wrap! Get set up for the next shoot! Come on people! We’re on a tight deadline here!”

Malcomb handed the resin “armor shard” to one of the prop people as he rose to his feet, then turned to offer Slacker his hand. “So, how do you get out of this one?”

Slacker took the big man’s hand and was hauled to his feet. “I don’t know yet. That’s the last scene for the season finally. I don’t think even the script writers know yet. Hell, they just make this stuff as they go along anyway, just look at the continuity!”

Malcomb nodded as they walked to the converted MASH vehicle that served as a mobile wardrobe vehicle for the production team. “Yes, this is the fourth episode of ‘Immortal Warrior’ I’ve been in, and they’ve already killed me twice. You’d think the audience would’ve started to notice.” Despite his build, the actor was not truly an Elemental, but work was hard to come by for somebody of his size. Malcomb had earlier confided that he was worried that he was being typecast. “At least you don’t have to worry luv, they’ll want you for the next season if the ratings are anything to go by.”

What had started as a guest appearance on the popular Inner Sphere Tri-Vid action show ‘Immortal Warrior XXIX’ set up by Slacker’s agent had unexpectedly led to a contract for the next season. With his fame from the Solaris VII arena circuit, his role in the show had boosted viewing ratings to new records. With the last scenes of ‘Immortal Warrior XXX’ all but finished there would be a break in filming, but the production company was already in talks with his agent for the next one. Until they were completed, his fate at the hands of Malcomb’s character would doubtless remain in the balance.

The two actors entered the busy wardrobe vehicle and took the only two vacant chairs. Immediately the makeup team set to work removing their handiwork with special solvents. Water-soluble makeup was not a good idea for on-location work, not on Solaris VII.

“What’s next for you?” Slacker asked the big actor as they were attended to.

“Shakespeare. A Midsummer’s Night Dream with a troupe playing on Luthien, of all places!” Malcomb was pleased at the prospect of playing a role in which he was not cast as a blood-crazed Clan Elemental who invariably got killed at some point in the proceedings. “I’m playing Bottom.”

With the makeup removed, Slacker said goodbye to his fellow actors, showed and changed into one of the expensive suits his agent had persuaded him to favour as part of his “image”. As he left Wardrobe he saw a small group of familiar figures approaching from across the set.

“You’re looking like you’re doing alright for yourself.” Atticus Longwalker admired the fine tailoring and quasi-military cut of Slacker’s suit.

“Getting by” Slacker grinned, and then nodded to Medron. “I got your message about wanting to assemble the Warriors of the Dropship. What’s the problem? More fish?”

Medron Pryde shook his head. “No, but we’ve got trouble.” He looked around the film set with worried eyes. “I can’t talk here though.” Medron gestured to the MechWarrior who had accompanied Atticus and himself. “You remember Hunter?”

“Yes” Slacker nodded in greetings then turned back to Medron. “Let’s take my limo back to the city. You can tell me what’s up on the way.”

As the expensively appointed hover vehicle whisked the four Warriors back to Solaris City Medron Pryde covered the events surrounding the abduction of Isis Marik. “The problem was that the trail was stone cold once they managed to jump out-system. With a KFC drive they could have gone just about anywhere! We just can’t track jumping ships!”

Slacker agreed it was a tricky problem. “So, you can’t track the ship. But do you have any clues to go on?”

Medron smiled thinly. “Examination of the bodies quickly showed that they were Thugee Cultists...”

“Kali Liao?” The Chancellor of the Capellan Confederation was widely regarded to be insane, but Slacker never though she would go so far as to risk all-out war with the Free Worlds League.

“We don’t know for sure. If it is Kali she is either hopelessly mad or brilliant; with no clear line of succession the whole League could be plunged into Civil War and the Confederation would have easy pickings.” Medron looked down at his clenched hands for a moment. “Naturally order would be returned to the League eventually and we would smash the Capellans for their actions, but it would probably be too late Isis.”

“I gather news of the abduction has not been made public then?” Slacker watched his friend with concern.

“Not likely!” Atticus spoke out from the far side of the hover-limo passenger compartment. “What we’re all worried about is that this whole thing could blow up into a much wider conflict. We don’t want the Clans the clans to perceive any weakness and get adventurous.”

“We have one lead. It’s thin, but it has possibilities.” Medron continued briefing Slacker. “Rick has been seeing a pattern in a series of thefts across the Inner Sphere.”

“Thefts? How is it connected to the Thugee Cult?” Slacker could not see the connection.

“Ah! But the trick is, the eyewitness accounts all point to the being perpetrated by the Thugees. The description of mysterious black-clad figures matches the lot who snatched Isis.”

“Your right. It’s thin” Slacker thought for a few seconds. “So why does Rick think they are connected?”

“Apparently all the artefacts are related.” Medron shrugged.

“So where does that get us? We still don’t know where they are taking all the stuff.” Slacker didn’t like to crush what little hope Medron had left, but the situation was perilous and he had to be realistic.

Medron gave a more genuine smile this time. “Rick was able to track down the one artefact that they haven’t got yet. It’s in Confederation space, so perhaps they thought they could just scoop it up at their leisure once they’d done all the hard work of stealing the others.”

Slacker smiled back. “So you plan to get there ahead of them?”

“If we can grab them...” Medron emphasised the plan of action by making a fist then smacking it into the palm of his other hand. “...we can get a line on their base and, hopefully, Isis. But we have to move quickly. Only a few of the Warriors are here yet, so I’ll take those and that are while Atticus forms up the rest of them. I reckon we’re going to need them.”

“I’m with you.” Slacker reached over to grip his friend’s shoulder. “Besides, I’ve finished filming and the new Arena season doesn’t start for over a month.” They both laughed and the mood in the limo brightened. “Is Rick here yet?”

“No.” Medron’s mood sobered again. “He’s getting some equipment we will need together on New Avalon. He’ll bring Team Bonsai to rendezvous with us in a week, perhaps ten days.

“OK, so where are we headed then? Some nice sunny holiday resort planet?” His last trip with the Warriors of the Dropship had dumped Slacker into the swamps of Stein’s Foley.

“No such luck.” Medron didn’t need to go into details. “It’s Sarna.”

Precentor Martial Pyro shook his head as he surveyed the destruction that had been visited upon Stanely Castle. Fully half of the old structure had collapsed, and he suspected the other half would soon collapse of its own accord, if it wasn’t pulled down to make the site safe. He turned to the robed figure standing in the centre of what had once been the main hall. “I’ve been granted a leave of absence from my position and have a ship waiting for us at a Pirate Point three days out. We’ll be at the Council within the week.”

“Your mission did not include attaining the post of Precentor Martial. You were only supposed to observe. Still, I’m not the one who will judge. That is for the Council.” The hooded head turned to look over the ruins for a final time. “You saw the boy away.”

Pyro answered before he realised the figure was making a statement, not asking a question. “Yes. I put him on a ship bound for New Avalon. He was lucky that big sword had a canister of compressed air built into the hilt.” He gestured at the water surrounding the ruins. “He would have drowned down there otherwise.”

“Luck had nothing to do with it.” One gloved hand reached under the hood and, after a series of sucking noises, emerged to throw a startlingly life-like mask onto the rubble. “The Chaos Lords have taken an interest in him. They will try again.”

“I’m confused. You speak of these “Chaos Lords” and “Lords of Chaos” as if they are two different groups.” Pyro looked down at the discarded mask. It portrayed a handsome face, but an old one, lined with many wrinkles. Lying lifeless now on the stones, it was still vaguely familiar. “You no longer need to be ‘Ramirez’?”

The hooded figure shook its head and a wild hope surged in Pyro’s heart. “Is it time? Do we reveal ourselves to the Inner Sphere?”

“Soon.” The robed figure lifted a dust-covered Katana from the rubble then turned and walked to where Pyro had moored his boat.

Pyro followed, nodding to himself. It was time to go.

The Council was waiting.

Chapter 10

Grand Council Chamber, Hall of the Khans, near Katyusha, Strana Mechty, Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space, 16 March 3084

The granite chairs felt as uncomfortable as ever to Samantha Clees, sitting and listened with distaste as her peers broke the traditional order of the Hall of the Khans with their chatter. Even though the meeting had yet to be called to order many had already removed their ceremonial masks. The wide stone tables into which screens and input devices were set were now decorated with the finely crafted and colourful headwear that was part of each Clan's ceremonial uniform. They were chattering; her fellow Khans. Chattering excitedly with their neighbours, each was afire with curiosity. Why had this hurried emergency meeting had been called? Khan Clees clenched her fists, digging short fingernails into the palms of her hands and fighting the desire to stand and scream for them all to shut up.

There was only one pool of calm in the magnificent chamber, where Khan Lynn McKenna of the Snow Ravens sat, nodding vaguely to acknowledge comments from the Steel Viper saKhan while his own sat in silence.

Khan Ivor Cage had yet to arrive, despite the fact that is was he who had called this emergency meeting of the Grand Council. Khan McKenna had (predictably) seconded the call and Samantha took this as additional proof that the two were up to something. She cursed the timing, for Galaxy Commander Tel Hazen was due to land within the hour with a report he deemed to sensitive to risk to a transmission. She had been hoping he could giver her something with which to put a break on whatever scheme was brewing, but now it looked like she was out of time. Now they all waited for those upstart Clan Roadrunner Khans to arrive.

And meanwhile her fellow Khans all chattered like a battery of hens.

Kael Pershaw (or whatever was left of the man under all those artificial parts) was again acting as Loremaster for the Grand Council. The crippled Warrior clutched the edges of the podium from which he officiated, almost as if he feared to sit in case he should find himself unable to rise when the time came. His attempts to bring order to the hall had so far met with total failure. Samantha admitted regretfully that the time was fast approaching when the Jade Falcons would have to do without the skill and experience of the old man.

The way Ivor Cage strutted into the hall only served to reinforce Samantha's conviction that whatever the he and Lynn McKenna were plotting was about to be set in motion. Despite the seriousness of the occasion she found herself smiling and wondering if Khan Cage realised just how ridicules he looked in the ceremonial garb the Coyote Khan had designed when forming the new Clan from the remnants of the Ice Hellions. The purple leather of the body-hugging suite would not have looked out of place had it not been for the yellow leggings and the abbreviated cloak intended to give the impression of wings when the wearer moved their arms to any position except tight against the body. The mask was a masterpiece with a comic perpetual smile on the up-curved beak, all topped off with a mass of plumage. Samantha was grateful that her own Falcon mask hid the wide grin that split her face every time she saw the outfit.

Apparently oblivious to how ridiculous he looked, Cage took a nondescript bag from his saKhan and motioned her to assume a seat amongst the others, and then strode to the podium where the Loremaster waited. Nodding curtly to Kael Pershaw, he turned to face his peers.

"Trothkin! Near and far. Seen and Unseen." Pershaw started with the traditional words Nicholas Kerensky first used over two centuries before. "I stand as Oathmaster. Let all be bound by the rede spoken here, until they are dust and memories and then beyond that time until the end of all that is." The hall settled into silence as the waiting Khans broke off their chatter and settled into some semblance of order.

"Seyla." Samantha Clees, along with the other Khans, spoke the word with reverence.

"The call for this emergency council was issued by Ivor Cage of the Roadrunners." Samantha could not be certain, but she though the side of his ruined face not covered by the half-mask he always wore twitched for a moment into an unconscious smile. "Khan Cage will now address this august body and reveal what matter of import prompted this call." Pershaw turned and nodded to the waiting Roadrunner.

Ivor Cage reached up and removed his mask, tucking it under one arm as he ran his gaze over the waiting Clansmen. The few who still work their masks, Samantha included, removed them and waited in silence. "My fellow Khans! The Way of the Clans is harsh and demanding. Only the strong – those who follow the way set down by the Great Father – prosper. Those who stray from the path, those who demonstrate they are unworthy or unwilling to follow the Way are discarded, absorbed or

annihilated!" Samantha did not like the sounds of this opening, for it boded ill of what was to come. Others were equally discomfited and a ripple of murmured conversations washed through the hall for several seconds. Cage paused for his audience to settle once more before he continued. "The Clans exist to pursue martial excellence. To be the ultimate Warriors and eventually return to the lands of our forefathers –that is the goal set before us." Cage paused a moment to draw breath before delivering his bombshell. "So what can you say when I bring news that one of our number has turned away from this goal? What can you say when I present the evidence that one of our number has become corrupted by the ways of the weakling peoples of the Inner Sphere? What can you say but that such a Clan can no-longer be permitted to continue under misguided leaders who would allow their Clan to fall so far from grace?"

The hall erupted into excited chatter as Khan spoke to Khan, or others called shocked questions to the grim-faced Ivor Cage.

"Silence! Silence!" Kael Pershaw hammered his artificial hand against the edge of the podium from which he officiated. "Order!" A final bellow brought silence to the great hall once more. "These are serious charges Khan Cage. Against whom do you raise them, and what proof do you wish to submit as evidence?"

Samantha knew instantly where this was headed, and so was not surprised by the answer. "Oathmaster, I accuse Clan Coyote of having fallen from the ways of the Clans." There was no mistaking the look of pure hatred Cage threw at Khan Silas Kufahl.

"This is preposterous!" the Coyote Khan was on his feet in an instant, eyes starting from his face in fury. "There is none amongst you more dedicated to the Way of the Clans than the Coyote!"

Kufahl would have continued but for Kael Pershaw's interruption. "Khan Silas Kufahl! Be seated and be silent! You will have an opportunity to refute these charges at the proper time." The Oathmaster pinned the enraged Khan a steely gaze until the man subsided back into his seat. "Continue, Khan Cage."

Cage continued to gaze at the Coyote Khan as he once more launched into what was clearly a carefully prepared speech. "When Nicholas Kerensky created the Clans, he set before us the Caste system."

"Five, Nicholas proclaimed, was the foundation
 Upon which our true society was to be built.
 Labourers to till the land, to do the tasks:
 They shall have our undying gratitude,
 For they are the muscle behind us all.
 Merchants to buy and sell with fairness:
 They shall have our commerce and respect,
 For they are the bones upon which we are built,
 Technicians to build and fix the machines:
 They shall have our admiration,
 For they are the fingers with which we grasp life,
 Scientists to create and discover:
 They shall have our awe and our attention,
 For they are the minds of our society.
 And above all, the Warriors who protect:
 They shall have our cooperation and worship,
 For they are the blood and soul of us all."

All present recognised the recital of a section of the Remembrance.

"But, I fear that the order of things are not as they should be in Clan Coyote. I fear that the Warriors are too much in awe of their own Scientists. They pay them too much attention. The Warriors no longer control the Scientist. No! Indeed, the Scientists now hold control over all Castes in Clan Coyote!"

"Proof? What proof? These accusations are baseless!" Silas Kufahl was on his feet once more, his face red with fury.

"Khan Kufahl!" Once more Pershaw silenced the Coyote. "If you can not be silent, perhaps you should remove yourself from the council chambers until you are called upon to defend your Clan." The wreck of a man turned back to Ivor Cage. "These are indeed serious accusations. What proof do you offer?"

Samantha Clees found the triumphant smile on Cage's face depressing. Whatever his plan was, he appeared supremely confident of it succeeding.

“The first duty of the Scientist Caste is to improve the performance of the Warriors of the Clan they serve. Not only do they oversee the eugenics program with which the we, the Clans, produce our superior warriors, but they also should research and develop new and improved weapons with which we fight.” The Khan of the Roadrunners launched his verbal assault once more. “So, what can I think when I fortuitously had a copy of a report fall into my hands.” Reaching into bag he was carrying, Cage pulled out a data disk that he presented to Kael Pershaw. “You will find this a most disturbing document.”

There were a number of legitimate ways Cage could have come into possession of the files, but there were just as many unsavoury means by which he could have acquired them. Samantha concluded from the satisfaction on Lynn McKenna’s face that the wily and resourceful Snow Ravens had supplied the information, and possibly the plan on how to use it.

Cage turned back to the Khans as the Loremaster inserted the data disk into his podium – making the files available for access by all the council members via the terminals imbedded in the stone tables at which they sat. “And so, what have the Coyote’s been up to?” His words almost dripped with venom as he continued. “Have they been investigation ways of improving the Iron Womb? No! Have they perhaps been developing more penetrating warheads for their missile launchers? No!” Fury and contempt almost threatened to strangle Cage’s voice. Samantha found herself wishing it would, but knew nothing would stop him delivering his damning evidence like a well-aimed PPC shot. “They. Are. Researching... Consumer electronics!”

Shocked silence filled the grand chamber as the Khans absorbed this announcement. More than one turned to stare uneasily at Silas Kufahl.

“Yes my fellow Khans! Consumer electronics!” Samantha had to admire the contempt he worked into that phrase. Cage must have been exceptionally well coached to deliver this denunciation. She glanced once more at the Snow Raven Khan as Ivor continued. “Tri-dee video games. Personal stereo systems. Toasters!”

A cursory glance over the evidence against the Coyote Clan did indeed look damaging, but Samantha knew there must be something more. Something that Cage was certain would hammer home the last nail in the lid of the coffin he was constructing here for his hated enemy.

“And what will these demented Scientists do with the fruits of their research? Will they not corrupt the other Castes of their Clan with soft living and luxury items like the barbarians of the Inner Sphere? How long will it be? How long before the lower Castes are seduced by these...these abominations? How long will it be before the Scientist and NOT the Warriors are the ones in charge of Clan Coyote?” Cage pointed as Samantha Clees with a sharp gesture. “Ask the Jade Falcons of the perils of a Scientist Caste that forgets its place.”

Samantha silently cursed. Trust Cage to dredge up that incident now. In a single stroke he had neutralised any attempt she could make to derail his argument. Now she could do nothing without inviting renewed scrutiny into an event that had already cost the Jade Falcons dearly.

“And just how long would it be? How long before these upstart Coyote Scientists begin to corrupt the lesser Castes of other Clans? Your Clans?” Cage encompassed all present with a sweeping finger.

To her left Samantha noticed that Khan Phelan Kell of the Wolves had risen and was waiting to be recognised.

“Yes Khan Kell? You have something to add?” Kael Pershaw, not without some relief, halted the ranting of the Roadrunner.

The Wolves and the Coyotes had long been allies; it was no surprise that Phelan should come to there defence now. “Your pardon Khan Cage, but surly this is an internal matter for the Coyote Clan?”

Ivor Cage nodded. “That would normally be true, but I have yet to reveal more of the dastardly deeds of these uncontrollable Coyote Scientists. Just see what their dastardly genius has spawned!” Here it comes, Samantha said to herself as Cage reached into the bag once more. Pulling out a small object and holding it high above his head, Ivor Cage pronounced the final Coyote indiscretion. “Action figures! Action figures of Us!” One after another he pulled more figures from the bag, handing them to the Khans on the front row for their inspection. This new evidence slowly worked its way to the back of the council hall.

Samantha found herself examining the figures as they were passed back. At first she found the rendition of her fellow Khans in plastic to be slightly amusing, until she was passed her own plastic image. The people of the Clans, especially the Warriors, lacked the obsession of personal beauty that infected the people of the Inner Sphere, but even so she found something oddly dissatisfying in the way her features had been rendered in plastic. Something irritating in the way the figure was posed just felt wrong. *Is my bum that big?* She found herself thinking before relinquishing the figure and taking the next one handed to her.

“This is preposterous!” Disbelief at the turn the proceedings had taken was written across Khan Kufahl’s face.

“Khan Kufahl. What defence do you have against these accusations?” Kael Pershaw asked the furious Coyote Khan gravely.

“Defence? Defence against what? These so called charges are meaningless!” Kufahl didn’t even bother to stand to answer the enquiry. But from the murmurs of dissatisfaction she could hear from the other Khans Samantha Clees knew that Ivor Cage had scored a killing shot.

From the tone of triumph in his voice it was clear that Khan Cage knew this also. “My fellow Khans! What else can this be but an attempt to undermine our authority? How can the respect and obedience of the lower Castes be maintained when our greatest Warriors are reduced to mere toys?” Curiously, Samantha Clees felt an inexplicable emptiness once she had passed on the final figure. She had a strange urge to get one of them back, or maybe two or three? In fact she had an irrational urge to get all of them. The feeling subsided, but the longing remained. “Is it not clear that the Warriors of Clan Coyote can no longer control their own Clan? As such I say the Coyotes have demonstrated that they are no longer a viable Clan!” Nodding to herself, Samantha knew what was coming next. “The Clans abhor waste, and in the past any Clan declared unviable has been Absorbed!” Khan Ivor Cage turned to Kael Pershaw. “Oathmaster, I propose a motion that this esteemed body vote on this matter. Should a Trial of Absorbtion be declared against Clan Coyote?”

Kael Pershaw addressed the waiting Khans. “A motion for a Trial of Absorbtion is before this council. Is there a second?”

Unsurprisingly, it was Khan Lynn McKenna who stood to answer. “I second the motion. Further, I propose that Clan Roadrunner be given the task, should this council determine a trial of Absorbtion is necessary.” McKenna nodded once to Ivor Cage as he sat once more.

“Kerensky damned that scheming pair! Khan Samantha Clees hammered her fists on the plain desk she sat behind. Apart from Galaxy Commander Tel Hazen she was alone in her office, and free to vent some of her frustration at the way things had proceeded in council. “If the Coyotes do not win their Trial of Refusal, those thrice cursed Roadrunners are going to Absorb them! And you can be sure the Snow Ravens will be circling, ready to gobble up the scraps – regardless of the outcome.” Again she hammered a fist onto the desktop, causing the neat stacks of data pads to jump. “It is not as if Clan Coyote is an ally, but they are a useful break on Snow Raven ambition. Khan McKenna has the whole thing wrapped up in a nice little parcel. He cannot lose. If the Roadrunners win, then they owe the Snow Ravens, but if the Coyotes win they will be so weakened that they will be easy pickings for those vultures.”

“Is there nothing that can stop them?” Tel was still fatigued from the high-G burn his dropship had performed, but in true Clan style he fought to hide any sign of weakness.

“Obviously it was the Snow Ravens who gave Cage his evidence. If that was to be proven to be suspect somehow... if the Snow Ravens were to announce it was wrong...that would pull the rug out from under the whole argument.” For a third time the Jade Falcon Khan hammered the desk surface, scattering papers and data pads. “I need something I can use against them. I need some kind of leverage.” Samantha mastered her frustration with difficulty. “The Goliath Scorpions were far from happy with the damage to their archives. It took a great deal to compensate them. You have no idea who took a shot at you?”

“No my Khan. The place was a maze and there was no way to find whoever took a shot at me. While I did not exactly make many friends there, I cannot believe that any of the Goliath Scorpions would execute such a dishonourable attack.” Tel was still confused by the paradox created by the recorded warning that had saved his life.

“What did your research uncover? I trust the unexpected interruption did not interfere with your mission?” Khan Samantha Clees watched her subordinate closely.

“My Khan, I have the pieces of a puzzle, but I still cannot see how they fit together.” Tel Hazen placed a data disk on the desk before continuing. “As you suspected the Snow Ravens are hiding something, that much is clear from the discrepancies in the records.”

Samantha inserted the disk into her desktop computer and scanned the contents quickly. Shipping records, maintenance and inspection reports; had it been for any other item of equipment it would have been meaningless. She looked up at the Galaxy Commander. “You know what this implies. Quiaff?”

“Aff.” Tel nodded. “My Khan, I believe I can confirm my findings, but to do so I must ask your permission to travel to the Inner Sphere.”

“The Inner Sphere? But the Trial of Refusal will take place in weeks. There is little time for an extended journey.” The Khan looked once more at the data on the computer screen. “You are sure it is necessary. Quiaff?”

“Aff, my Khan. I have already secured the services of Trader Clark of the Diamond Sharks. He has a KFC equipped Jumpship and can get me there and back, if not in time for the Trial of Refusal, then perhaps before the Coyote and the Roadrunner do too much damage to each other.” Tel also glanced at the screen. “If I am successful I will have the information that you need.”

“You have my permission to proceed, but I do not like this Galaxy Commander. The manoeuvrings in the Grand Council are bad enough, but this?” Samantha Clees again looked at the incredible data on her screen. “That the Snow Ravens may have “lost” a nuclear weapon fills me with dread.”

Chapter 11

Team Bonsai Research Centre, New Avalon Institute of Science, Avalon City, New Avalon, Crucis March, Federated Suns, 16 March 3084

“...and then I jumped into the water – it was real cold I can tell you!” Brainburner Jr. chatted excitedly as he looked around cavernous ‘Mech bay while telling Rick Raisley, the enigmatic leader of Team Bonsai, of his narrow escape. “Luckily I’d found the emergency air supply in the sword hilt a few months ago ...” the boy reached up to pat the hilt of the large weapon strapped to his back. “... so I could stay under long enough for the local ComGuards to show up. I guess that Elemental decided not to stick around and face a combined arms company on his own.” His young face darkened as he recalled the aftermath of the attack. “They started digging through the rubble, looking for Ramirez, but the Adept in charge wasn’t hopeful. And then they were ordered by Precentor Martial Pyro to bring me in ‘for my own safety’. He arranged a ship to get me here. He even saw me off at the spaceport in person.”

The Warrior-Scientist looked troubled as he motioned for his visitor to follow him down one long row of maintenance gantries. The high-roofed underground bunker was a hive of activity as teams of Techs, AsTechs and Team Bonsai Warriors worked on a staggering array of combat equipment. The air was thick with the smell of ‘Mech coolant, oil and burnt out BattleTechnology. To the untrained eye it was a picture of confusion; to the trained eye it was utter chaos. “You have no idea what this Elemental wanted with you?” Rick had to shout to make himself heard above the booming noise of half a ton of Ferro-Fibrous armor slamming into the ferrocrete floor on the other side of the bay.

“No! He just came in and blasted the old man, then...” BB. Jr. stopped in his tracks, gazing up at one of the maintenance gantries. “Whooooo! Is that what I think it is?” Towering above him was the lean shape of a Hatchetman, the deceptively slim limbs and narrow waist combined with the forward jutting cockpit to create the image of some alien predator. The haft of the vicious hatchet for which the design was named was clamped in the powerful right battlefist and the characteristic multiple barrels of a Rotary Autocannon jutted out from the machine’s chest. “I didn’t think they still made the HCT-6D anymore!” It was the same model as the ‘Mech the young warrior had piloted during the Goldfish War. The same machine that had fallen to Word of Blake sponsored bandits over a year ago. The young MechWarrior still felt the loss of his first BattleMech keenly.

Rick pulled the young man to one side as a team of Techs staggered passed at a trot, lugging fire extinguishers, to deal with a small fire that had started in the leg moyomer bundles of a partially disassembled Lightray. “This was the last one they built and we were lucky to get it. You know how popular this model was.” He looked up at the medium weight design, still deadly looking despite the flat grey primer that covered all surfaces. “ We never got around to painting it though. We’ve been using it as a test-bed for thought controlled targeting systems.”

“Wow! That sounds cool!” BB. Jr. continued to gaze at the ‘Mech with undisguised longing. “How’s it work?”

“It used the impulses from the NuralHelmet to augment fire control and improve reaction time. Right now there are still lots of bugs to work out.” Rick nodded absently to the returning band of soot-stained Techs as they hauled their expended extinguishers to the collection point at the end of the row. “The biggest problem at the moment is in the translation and interpretation sub-systems. They just don’t work well outside a specific range of parameters.”

“What? So it works, but only if you speak the right language?” BB Jr. was intrigued.

Rick smiled but shook his head. “Think, not speak. You have to *think* with a Scots accent.”

“So it was one of Mac’s ideas?”

“How did you guess?” Rick shrugged and turned to continue along the row of gantries and repair platforms. “Come on.”

Brainburner Jr. gave the Hatchetman one more look of longing before following the Team Bonsai leader. “If you paint that baby up right, I’d be happy to take it off your hands.”

“I’ll think about it, but what would your father say?” Rick chuckled for a moment, then frowned as they picked their way around a low-slung electric trolley onto which a team of AsTechs was manhandling the hand actuator array from a partially dismantled Caesar. The array appeared to be jammed with the middle finger extended. “Your little adventure isn’t an isolated incident. Strange things have been going on all over.” Stepping over a pool of coolant, Rick made a metal note to have another stern word with his technical teams about keeping the place clean. “The Thugee Cultists have kidnapped Isis Marik.” Rick had already informed his visitor of Medron’s call for the Warriors of the Dropship to help find and rescue the Captain-General. “They’ve also grab the legendary Staff of Xenocattle is stolen from the Museum of Comparative Theology on Keystone.

Next they're busy breaking into the Great Library on Alexandria to carry off the only surviving copy of the Necrocomicon. They'll be after the R'lyeh Disk next, mark my words!"

"That sounds...bad." BB Jr. was looking around the 'Mech bay, mesmerized by the wealth of BattleTechnology arrayed as if for his inspection.

"Bad?" Rick laughed mirthlessly. "Obviously the Thugees think that with these ancient artefacts they'll be able to locate 'Dread R'lyeh' and raise the Great Cthulhu from his age-long slumber to rampage across the universe and doom humanity!"

"You...you really think the Thugees can do that?" The young man asked fearfully.

"Don't be ridiculous! It's all a load of old twaddle. Only a complete and utter fruitcake would actually believe any of it." The brilliant Warrior-Scientist's tone was sceptical.

"So you think Kali Liao is behind it all then?" BB. Jr. was relieved at that answer. He already had enough things to worry about between exams, the kidnapping of Isis Marik and being pursued by a Smoke Jaguar Elemental obviously intent on killing him. Having a super-powerful alien god rampaging through the Inner Sphere on top of that lot would have been more than he felt he could handle right now. A looming shape to right snatched his attention away from talk of Thugee activity. "What the He... heck is that?" BB Jr. only just caught himself from using bad language (something his father did not approve of) as he stared at the titanic shape of the largest BattleMech he'd ever seen.

Even crouching on massively reinforced legs, the barrels of the four Gauss Rifles jutting forwards over the elongated main body almost touch the 'Mech bay roof. Boxy arms ended, not in hand actuators, but with multiple ports of deadly laser weapons. Arms, legs and body were clearly layered with an awesome amount of armor and the whole construct screamed firepower and endurance beyond anything his experienced eye had ever seen on the battlefield.

"Ahhh, yes." Rick was clearly enjoying his stunned reaction. "A prototype we got from the Lyran Commonwealth. Some of the engineers over at Defiance Industries decided to try and create a more *suitable* 'Mech for their armed forces. You know how the Lyrans are. With these new SuperHeavy 'Mechs they can relegate their lighter units; the Atlas, Banshee, Salamander and such, to tasks more fitting light units. Recon for example."

"Just how big is it?" BB. Jr. wondered if it was his imagination, or was he really hearing creaking sounds from the ferrocrete bay floor upon which the titan was standing.

"The Mobile Assault Cannon weighs in as 200 tons. You don't think those Lyrans would settle for anything less than twice the weight of an Atlas do you?" Rick paused to inspect a data pad hanging from the scaffolding that surrounded the gargantuan machine, nodded to himself once, then put the pad back. "Just a pity this beasts top speed makes an UrbanMech look fast."

"Mobile Assault Cannon? What kind of name is that for a 'Mech?"

Rick smiled at the disappointment in his companion's voice. It was true that BattleMechs usually had appropriate names, if not dramatic ones. "I think there's a committee somewhere trying to come up with a proper name, but the best suggestions they've been able to come up with is are in Germans or just don't roll of the tongue right. Or both." Rick shrugged and led his guest away. "Come, we have a lot still to do. I don't like this talk of the Warriors of the Dropship not surviving on Sarna. Medron is headed that way because we think he can pick up the Thugee trail there. I'm thinking Team Bonsai should divert there, rather than head out to Solaris."

"I can help! Can I come? Pllllleeeassse!" BB Jr. had been waiting for an opening to suggest joining in to the operation.

"I don't know. I mean you don't have a 'Mech with you, and what would your dad say if I show up with you in tow?" Rick couldn't help grin at the look of disappointment that washed over the young man's face. "Ohh! All right! I'll send a message to Brainburner and see if we can't dig up something for you to pilot. I'll wager your father will say its OK, but only if you behave yourself and..."

"...eat my greens!" BB Jr. finished with a resigned sigh. "Yes. I know the routine."

As they finally reached the end of the row BB Jr. noticed that the last gantry was shrouded in canvas tarpaulins that totally obscured what was within. Fortuitously, the main bay doors opened at that moment, stirring the thick atmosphere of the 'Mech bay and moving the edge of one tarpaulin to give Brainburner Jr. a glance at what was hidden there.

It was a 'Mech, but one unlike anything he had seen before. While all BattleMechs (even a lowly UrbanMech) gave an impression of might and deadliness to anyone who ever stood and looked up at one of the armored giants, this impossibly sleek and deadly looking 'Mech screamed of power. The armor was an impossible glossy black that soaked up the light but reflected none. The eye was drawn in, deeper and deeper, but never quite seeing the surface. It was almost like looking into a dark pit. No paint could produce that kind of effect. What BB Jr. was seeing was the unadorned surface itself. It was only as the tarpaulin began to fall back into place that he also realised that there were no seams. Each body section of that incredible machine was cast as a single piece from, *something*.

"What *is* that?" He asked Rick with awe.

Rick Raisley looked uncomfortable as he gazed down at the ferrocrete floor for a moment, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "You're not supposed to know about that, yet." He looked at the silent appeal in his visitor's face and shrugged. "I guess knowing the name can't hurt. It's an Ultra Hawk, one of the new UltraMechs we've been working on here. For later...I can't tell you any more right now."

BB Jr. gave the hiding place of the UltraMech one last inquisitive glance before Rick led him away.

Rick's desk was a mess of paper printouts, data pads and doodle filled notepads while a forest of post-its festooned the edges of the display for the computer terminal that took up what space was left. While Rick checked his messages, he directed BB Jr. to the coffee maker. The device was a triumph of engineering, proudly bearing the Team Bonsai insignia and the "HeavyMetal" brand name. As he drew two mugs of the powerful brew he noticed that beside the coffee maker was a watermelon, clamped between the plates of a tensometer. "Rick? Why's that watermelon....?"

The scientist looked up from his terminal for a moment. "I don't know. It was here when we moved in. I guess the previous lot who were using this facility must have left it, so I didn't want to mess with it until I'd figured it out." Rick glanced around at the equipment littering the office. "I just go a little side-tracked and never got around to it."

BB Jr. carried two steaming mugs over to the desk. Handing one to Rick, he sat in one of the big comfortable chairs and sipped his own coffee, finding it to be a superior brew.

"You could be in luck." Rick said without looking up from the computer screen. "We still have your NuralHelmet settings on file, so we should be able to get you up and running with something. Let's see what's in working order..." At that moment the room was filled with a deafening siren wail, which also echoed from the corridor outside and the main 'Mech bay.

"What's that?" Brainburner Jr. barely avoided spilling his coffee in surprise.

"Either the soft drinks machine is empty again, or..." Rick looked grim. "...or the NAIS is under attack!"

The office door burst open as David Richards, one of the Team's Warrior-Technicians rushed in. "Rick! We've got incoming 'Mechs on the south perimeter!"

The Team Bonsai commander struggled from the deeply padded comfy chair and grabbed his cooling vest from the coat rack. "How many?" He ran for the door, gesturing for Richards and BB Jr. to follow.

"A Lance, maybe more. They've already toasted a Pizza delivery van and broken through the defence cordon. We've got ten minutes, maybe less, before they get here." David ran along side his leader as he told of the destruction wrought by the raiders.

Rick nodded as he pulled off his shirt and replaced it with the cooling vest. "Get everything we have moving and crash-prepare the Mobile Assault Cannon." He threw a glance at BB Jr. "Get the Hatcherman on line too. Let's show this bunch we don't like strangers around here."

To be continued...