

MECHWARRIOR

LIVING LEGENDS

THE NOVEL

FRANCISCO DUARTE

BOOK II

The human equation

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Francisco Duarte

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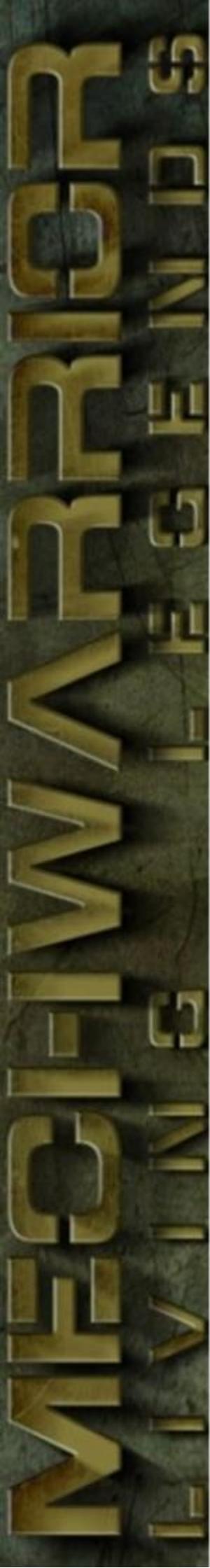
Like any other project, the writing of a novel is seldom a lonely work. While stories are usually written by a single person, the whole process involves the help and input of several individuals that, through kindness and interest, help the author plough through the many and inevitable obstacles of creation: this novel is no exception. My warmest thanks to the following people, without whom this novel would never have come to be:

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Thank you! Hope you have fun and if you haven't downloaded Living Legends yet, go on and do it now! You won't regret it!

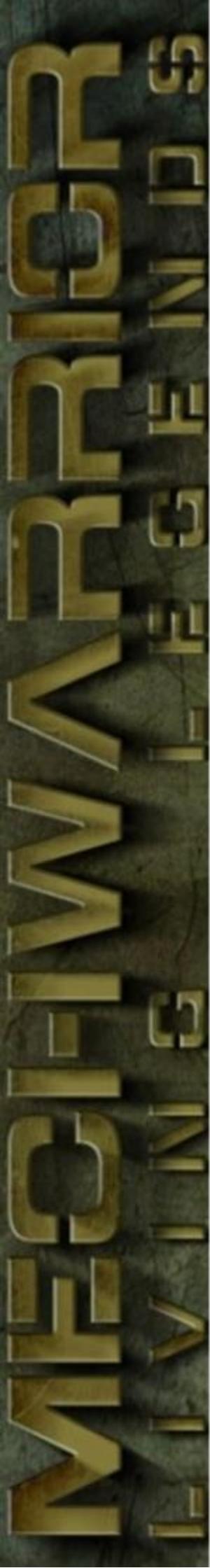
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BOOK II

THE HUMAN EQUATION



>>>>>> ENTRY LOG 0601-25

USER(BOX) JOYEUSE to USER(BOX) SANGLAMORE
RECEIVED 07-08-3059

DECRYPTING

< They have fallen for it, the little moths! So proud of themselves and yet so gullible, so easy to push into whatever direction we wish! Oh, the irony behind which befouls such a foul bunch of so-called saviours of civilization, whom yet only assist in destroying it further!

Oh, love, we will have our objective on our grasp so very soon, I can feel it in my oh-so-damaged head! The brothers are already uneasy with the wait, so much do they want to show those pests who are the real defenders of our race!

Soon we will be falling over our objective! You shall have news from us! >

ERASE? Y/N

<<<<<<<

VIII

Contrary to what was expected, the survivors from 1st Davion Guards Lobo Company weren't sent back to Galatia III once their mission in Port Arthur was finished. That would be the easy way out, it seemed. Instead, they were sent to Tanh Linh, a frontier world being used as staging area for part of the invading army. And there they waited for new orders, as entire units were rebuilt and sent back to the front line. They even saw a few come back, terribly battered by their encounters with the Smoke Jaguars. And while all of this happened, and the war kept developing, they waited, without knowing if they would be finally sent home, or back into hell.

During those days, Arthur Cassini had nightmares.

He was always in a dark alley, looking at his family, Fátima, Francis, John, bracing themselves as a huge monster walked slowly, but steadily, in their direction. Cornered into a dead end, his family couldn't escape, and just waited for their demise, horrified as the gigantic beast approached them. And Arthur tried to save them, but he was stuck in his cockpit, the BattleMech he could use to save his family ruined, and incapable of even lifting its remaining arm to fire at the monster. Then, just when that dark and amorphous mass was about to crush his family it seemed to lose any interest, and turned back at him. The V-shaped visor glowed in the night, as the Clan OmniMech just stood there looking at him, dazzling him with the red light.

It was at that point that Arthur would wake up. It was always the same, every night, sometimes several times in a row. The waiting, he thought, was beginning to wear him down.

One day he simply gave up on trying to sleep and went to the hanger where the remaining 'Mechs of his unit were stored. The monster of his dreams was there, too, being repaired by the techs. The data recovered from its on-board computers classified that machine as a *Blood Asp*, a 90-ton assault 'Mech, state of-the-art technology, never-before seen in the Inner Sphere. Big as it was, it managed to be agile and heavily armed, even if not very well-armoured. The machine was a frightening sight, and it was obviously designed to be that way, to use fear as a weapon in itself. With the *Thanatos* destroyed and his personal assault-class *Awesome* BattleMech still stored in his homeworld, Arthur decided to use the captured machine as his personal ride

until he was sent back home, regardless of the horror he felt for it. He wasn't even sure if he would have the courage to seat in that cockpit, if the need arose...

His digression was interrupted when the awaited orders finally arrived. A corporal came rushing at Arthur, telling him to make haste to the major-general's office. The simple prospect of finally having something to do erased most of Arthur's uneasiness, almost without him noticing, and he gladly went to meet his superior. Unknown to him, those orders would be very different from what could ever expect.

Lieutenant-General Taylor Reese was waiting for him in the Officer's Room of the main quarter's building. The corporal stayed outside, closing the door behind Arthur, who nodded to Reese while he approached the metal table at the centre of the room. Only then he noticed that there was a second person in the room, a female figure half-melded in the shadows near the farthest wall, with both hands over a pile of papers and holoplates. He decided to ignore her for a moment.

"Congratulations for your promotion, Taylor," Arthur said.

The woman smiled faintly. Of course, it was good to be promoted, rewarded for the dreadful efforts made. But both of them knew of what that promotion cost. She wasn't nearly as happy as she would like to. Regardless, there wasn't that much time to think about it, either. The war was still going on and she had a whole new set of responsibilities over her shoulders.

"Thank you, Arthur," Lieutenant-General Reese said. "I'm sorry that you and your men remained somewhat forgotten during these days, but your unit... The whole regiment for that matter... Well... There's isn't that much of a Lobo Company left now."

Colonel Arthur Cassini flinched so slightly. She was saying the plain truth, in all honesty, but her frontal manners were something he had never gotten used to, not even during the few weeks of hell under her command in Port Arthur. Using euphemisms to describe dire situations was part of the Davion military culture.

"Somewhat... At this moment I only have three pilots, plus myself, and four captured BattleMechs available."

"I see." Reese turned to the other woman, who had been silent during the whole conversation. "Is that enough?"

She nodded, and then said:

“It is. We do not expect to use a full combat unit for this, only a few warriors that can act as our delegation and perform under the laws of the Clans, if needed.”

Arthur looked surprised at Reese.

“An operation in Clan space?”

“You should probably describe it as a cover-up of sorts.” She pointed to the other woman. “This is Agent Beatrix Shirazi, from the Department of Military Intelligence. She has been assigned a mission of the outmost importance, and needs a small group of elite Mechwarriors to accompany her.”

“I see...” Arthur said bluntly to Shirazi, while crossing his arms. So, she was a spook. *That’s good to know...* He would never trust an Intelligence operative, it really wouldn’t matter their supposed loyalty. Even if Arthur told himself that they were just doing their jobs, the old soldier’s prejudice against spooks, that predated space travel itself, was still there, keeping him alert.

Still, he was a professional, and was been given an assignment.

“So, what is this mission about?”

“We’re being called to save the Ghost Bear’s arses?” Master Sergeant Pavlos de Cyrhus asked in astonishment.

“It’s not that simple, Pavlos.” Major Jazebel Solá replied, looking away from her comrade, and back towards Arthur. “From what I understood, the Bears are suffering pirate raids.”

The colonel leaned against the back of the coach, while looking at the two Mechwarrios, sat on front of him. Pavlos and Jezebel had miraculously survived their fight inside the town of Redstone. Jezebel had to spend a week in a field hospital recovering from her wounds, but now she insisted to be ready for anything. After the briefing, he assembled what remained of his team on the officer’s rest room, which was usually empty at that hour of the day. He closed the door, just to make sure no one would interrupt their meeting, nor hear any of the confidential information they had to discuss.

“It’s even trickier than that, it seems.” The team leader admitted. “According to the spook that’s going to accompany us in this, the Bears are, for the moment, dealing

with these attacks as pirate raids. They're also relocating a lot of troops to the attacked worlds, and asking us if we have anything to do with it.”

“That doesn't make any bloody sense!” Pavlos exclaimed. “Why would we attack the Bears? I mean... We're already at war with the Jaguars, and it's not being exactly easy, now is it?”

“I do believe the Ghost Bears share the same opinion. That's why they're demanding us some explanations. And that's why we do have to go there.”

“But there's more, I believe.” Antonios' voice came from the nearest wall, against which he was leaning. He looked directly at Arthur, who nodded in agreement.

“Yes, there is. And this is where the situation gets complicated, too.” He supported his elbows over the sofa, and leaned forward, thoughtful. “This kind of goodwill missions into Clan territory is not as uncommon as one might think. The Clanners are aggressive, and sometimes someone needs to go there to access the situation. But there's a further reason for them to have chosen us, and why this operation was taken over by the Davion Intelligence.”

Arthur let a measure of silence fall over the room, creating some suspense, calling all of his warriors' attention. After a few heartbeats, it was Jezebel who made the question.

“And what would that be?”

The leader then reached for the holoplate in the pocket of his uniform, pressed the small switch on its side to light the projector, and pushed it across the table. Everyone looked at the half-metre tall image showing an anonymous industrial area and a few 'Mechs. Even Antonios came closer to inspect it. The image was terribly dark, but, still, the major details were discernible.

“What are we looking at?” Arthur's second-in-command asked.

“Those are Lyran BattleMechs seen by one of our spies in Fort Loudon. They were boarding dropships that were sent on some undisclosed operation. The DMI analysts believe they were heading into Clan space.”

“But why?” Jezebel glanced at Arthur, obviously confused with the sudden turn of events.

“That's something we must find out. We'll have to put ourselves in good terms with the Ghost Bears and, if possible, ask for their help to solve this mystery.”

Pavlos let out a sardonic laugh.

“Just when I was thinking this was going to be simple...”

IX

Farn Jorgensson strode into the room, the urgency of the situation making his movements look like those of a predator on patrol. Star Colonel Chou Vong was already there, with some of his command staff, looking at the picture displayed in the big screen covering most of the farthest wall. The fighter pilot halted in the middle of the room and saluted.

“Star Captain Farn Jorgensson present, sir.”

Chou Vong glanced at him. He seemed thoughtful, arms crossed and alert posture.

“Ah, you deigned to join us, Star captain?”

The scorn again... Farn let it slip by, although he noted that sentence on his mind, next to all the others. The situation called for all of his attention. He turned to the big screen, where a slightly distorted image of two spherical dropships could be seen. On the flank of the nearest one the symbol of a horse head with a flaming mane was clearly visible, even through the interference. A Clan Hell’s Horses’ ship. His fight had finally come to pass

“So, they are issuing a formal *batchall*, now?” He asked to the commander of the planet’s defenses.

“Why are they not doing this closer to the planet? Why doing it from the middle of nowhere?”

“That is a good question, Star captain. But the 201st Mechanized Assault Cluster is an unusual fighting unit, to say the least.”

“The Bearslayers...” Farn mumbled. “Is the commander...?”

“He confirmed a few minutes ago. Star Colonel Emilio Houan himself.”

The fighter pilot frowned. Garrison duty was usually quite eventless and warriors tended to show some degree of disdain for it, regardless of the orders. That week on Ardoz, though, was turning out quite hectic.

First, a courier ship had arrived in the system, and with it the news about the so-called pirate raids harassing a few worlds on the Smoke Jaguar Occupation Zone at the border, and about the troop deployments made to counter them. Then, a few days later, another unexpected ship materialized on the zenith point of the star in the core of that system. It was an *Invader*-class vessel, the most common transport across human

space, so it was of no use to try to search the databases for it. It did send a few hailing identifying itself as a Clan Hell's Horses ship. By the rules of engagement, it should be left alone until orders in contrary. Still, Vong ordered a *Fredasa*-class warship patrolling the area to keep an eye on it.

A few hours after the arrival of the jumpship, a pair of *Union*-class dropships disconnected from the docking rings and headed for Ardoz. Despite the electronic interference created by the active star, the patrol ship was capable of taking a few pictures on the spot, one of them being the low-quality image displayed on the screen.

Still, a few days passed before the dropship's crew sent any message regarding their credentials and intentions. And when they did, it was a request for a Trial.

"What are they bidding for?" Farn asked.

"That is actually quite interesting of a question." Vong rubbed his jaw while saying those words. Something about the whole situation was intriguing him deeply.

"How so?"

"They are bidding for all the data uncovered on the excavation site between March 3056 and December 3058."

"They are interested on the Installation?" Now Farn was actually surprised. "How do they know about the excavation site? And about what the Scientists are doing there?"

"I know as much about that as you do, Star captain." Vong turned to the rest of the command staff. "Star Captain Jocelyn, have someone inquiring the scientists associated with the excavation site. I want to know what they have discovered there that made the Hell's Horses so interested in coming here. Also, I want to know how the information did transpired. Use any means necessary to ensure results, *quiaff*?"

"*Aff*, sir!" The big, muscular, elemental woman exclaimed.

Vong nodded, and then turned back at the screen, his index finger hovering over the record button on his wrist computer.

"Now, let us see the best way to answer their request..."

"Will you accept their *batchall*, sir?" Farn asked, all of a sudden. Every Mechwarrior and elemental turned at him, surprised and slightly infuriated. The Star colonel's eyes became narrow fissures.

"You are starting to annoy me dearly, Star captain... How can a warrior refuse a challenge, especially coming from such a hated adversary as those Hell's Horses?"

"Sir...?"

“Still... I do want to listen to your reasoning, Farn Jorgensson. Just make it plain and clear, if you please.”

The fighter pilot dry swallowed.

“Something about his seems odd to me, sir. Why are those Bearslayers issuing a *batchall* form the middle of space, having to wait several minutes for a response, when they could do that once they reached our orbit? Our people are not known for their patience, if I may say so.”

“You may...”

“*Aff*. I do not recall any *batchall* being requested in this fashion. Even more, the timing for this raid is quite strange, now that we are suffering several pirate raids. It just seems too much of a coincidence. But, still... It is their intended target that really bugs me.”

“It would not be the first, or the last time a raid is made in order to secure technological breakthroughs, Star captain. If I am well remembered, it is by this way that our people spreads their technology and knowledge.”

“Indeed, sir. But, still, I would like to give the advice of posting my binary on alert during your engagement with the Hell’s Horses, just in case.”

“Your interest for those Spheroid tactics, if you can call them that, really broke your spirit, Farn Jorgensson. Consider your request as under review. You are dismissed.”

The Star colonel gave no further attention to the fighter pilot, and started to choose the words for his answer to the challenge. Containing his fury, Farn Jorgensson saluted and turned over his heels, leaving the room. He had given just a few steps into the adjacent corridor, when Star Captain Jocelyn appeared on his side, placing a hand over his shoulder. The fighter pilot turned to meet her hazel eyes.

“Are you trying to get yourself killed, Farn Jorgensson?”

He looked away from her, somewhat intimidated. Although the elemental phenotype was a usual sight in any Clan, he believed he would never be used to deal with a woman who was so much taller and more muscular compared to him. Whenever he thought about that, a small voice inside his head asked him if some Spheroid manners were really slipping into his mindset.

“Not yet.” He admitted.

Jocelyn smiled.

“Is that so? Because I would say that you are making amazing efforts in that regard.”

“It is just... We are ill prepared for facing the Spheroids. Look at the Smoke Jaguars! They are being eradicated. How much time do you think we have before the Inner Sphere powers turn against us?”

“Do you think I do not know that? These are interesting times to be alive, you know? So many things changing... So many battles to partake in...”

Farn shrugged and turned his back at her.

“If you say so.”

The elemental women smirked.

“You know... You can always...”

“I know.” The fighter pilot raised an arm to stop her midsentence. He didn’t turn to her, though. “But I will not do it now. Not now...” And then he walked away.

“Do as you please, Farn Jorgensson.” Jocelyn’s voice seemed almost scornful, yet he knew better than to respond to it, and, again, let the words of others slip by. Behind them, in the control room, Star Colonel Chou Vong was finishing his answer to the Hell’s Horses *batchall*.

“You will face my forces at the forest area, to the North of Valladolid Base. I thereby declare my conditions! Bargained well and done!”

X

Special Agent Beatrix Shizami decided to lose no time after the *Leopard*-class transport finally touched the makeshift landing pad in the Ghost Bear camp. She rapidly assembled the contact team, and led them to the airlock. Knowing very well how direct and no-nonsense the Clanner mindset was, Arthur Cassini could easily understand her hurry. He was nervous, though.

They lost no time leaving Tanh Linh once everyone was briefed and all assets were aboard the DMI’s dropship. Apparently, Shirazi had a jumpship charted only for that mission. Rare as the interstellar ships were, such a fact only served to further remember him about how pressing that mission was.

For his surprise, once they arrived into the Krenice system, the Ghost Bears informed that they were still chasing the pirates across the planet. Truly surprising, if

the Clanner fighting capabilities were taken into account, and something that only thickened the mystery around the whole incident.

Now, they were already on the planet's surface, and its current owners were still fighting the unknown pirates. Interesting, indeed.

The airlock hatch opened with a metallic sound, rising as if it wanted to touch the sky beyond the gigantic dropsip's hull. Fresh air purged in as the intensity of the sunlight flooded the chamber, forcing Arthur to squeeze his eyes momentarily.

Once he got used to the clarity, he was able to spot the welcome party, waiting in the bottom of the access stairs. A single figure stood in front of the boarding stairs, flanked by five elemental warriors in full body armour on each side. In the distance, near the warehouses on the edge of the landing pad, were two pairs of flat *Huitzilopochtli* assault tanks. Those Clanners seemed nervous...

"Colonel?" Shirazi asked Arthur. The spook seemed somewhat wary, and he could easily understand her. The Davion officer took a deep breath and walked down the stairs, followed by the DMI agent, and the remainder pilots from Anvil Lance.

The Clanner officer waiting for them was also an elemental, a big and powerful man, with strong chin and piercing eyes. Also, he was no simple officer, Arthur suddenly realized, but the commander of an entire Galaxy spread around a couple worlds on that sector.

"Colonel Arthur Cassini from the Federated Commonwealth?" The man asked.

"Galaxy Commander Aleksandr, I suppose." Arthur said, while saluting. The Clanner returned the gesture, in a very relaxed fashion.

"True." The man looked at each of Arthur's companions, and then added: "You took a great risk in coming here like this, Freeborn."

Freeborn... Arthur needed a moment to evaluate that word. So proud were the Clan warriors of their eugenics program, that they used any references to the remaining of humanity and their "natural" ways of breeding, as an insult, calculated or just plain offensive. He came to the conclusion that the way Aleksandr said it was more of a statement of a fact, thus stressing the differences between them both. He went on to add:

"As you were informed, the surrounding mountains are, at the moment, an active battlezone. Emissaries like *you* are not safe in such a place."

"I am fully aware of such, Galaxy commander. But landing here was our intention. To honour the good terms on which the Federated Commonwealth and Clan

Ghost Bear base their relationship, I'm here to put my unit on your service. I bring with me this dropship, along with a full lance of OmniMechs and two aerospace fighters.”

“That is interesting. What makes you think that your Freeborn warriors are good enough to join my troops in the sundering of those pirates?”

Arthur allowed himself a slight prideful smile.

“Our OmniMechs are all Clan machines, captured in combat against the Smoke Jaguars.”

“If you say so...” Aleksandr took a deep breath, and then gestured to the Davion officers. “I would now ask you to follow me, if you do not mind.”

“Of course.”

The group followed the Galaxy commander to a warehouse, behind one of the *Huitzilopochtli*s. Behind it, they could start to see the squat buildings that formed the small town the Ghost Bears were using as their temporary headquarters. Like Redstone, it was also empty, the Clanners having moved all civilians to a safe zone until all the fighting was finished. How very thoughtful of them.

They walked in silence, and Arthur couldn't really think of anything to ask the big man leading the way. He felt something was amiss. Behind him, Pavlos whispered to Antonios, giving voice the colonel's concerns.

“I don't like this...”

“Keep quiet.” Was Antonios quick answer, although the gabble gave Arthur the cue to rake some answers from his host:

“Galaxy commander, might I ask where we are heading?”

The other man kept walking, without ever turning to him.

“Do not worry, Colonel Arthur Cassini. All your questions will be answered very soon, and even some you still do not know you have.”

Not a satisfactory answer, to say the least...

The warehouse entrance was guarded by a pair of heavily armoured elementals, and a few more waited inside, although those skipped the battlearmour for tight jumpsuits, which only made their powerfully built bodies evident, products of a superb program of genetic engineering. Things were looking quite hostile.

“Star commander, please bring me the prisoner.” Aleksandr ordered to one of the unarmoured warriors. Then he turned to the Davion emissaries. “At this time I

should tell you that the captain of the warship patrolling your jump point had orders to burn you out of the sky if you even shivered in the wrong direction.”

“And why you would do such a thing, Galaxy commander?” So, those Clanners saw Arthur’s party as a menace. He had to have in mind the wariness they should be feeling due to the war, but going from that to openly consider an ordinary emissary as a target...

“You will see.” Aleksandr shrugged. “Of course that, given the situation, I thought how strange it was for you to come in with a single ship. Nothing of what has been happening for the last days makes any sense whatsoever. And I have my people to protect.”

“Understandable.”

By that time, the Ghost Bear warriors were back, dragging a man that was imprisoned in one of the abandoned offices on the other side of the warehouse. They threw him to the ground, right in front of the Davion officers. The man was a mess, all beaten, with his uniform torn and stained with mud and blood. He looked up, to Arthur, and his blue eyes widened with the shock.

“You’re... You’re... from the Federated Commonwealth...” He seemed confused.

Arthur looked back at Aleksandr, with his mind filled with a whole lot of new doubts, just like the Clanner had said.

“Who is this man, Galaxy commander?”

The other man stared at Arthur for a few seconds, without blinking, totally immersed in his analysis of the situation. He shrugged again, before saying:

“This man, colonel, is Lojtnant Martin Strömngren, of the 42th Combined Arms Battalion, 2nd Drakons. He told us, after some encouragement, that he and his men are here to open the way to an all-out invasion of Ghost Bear space. What do you have to say about this, colonel?”

Arthur tried to keep his poker face, but what Aleksandr said didn’t make any sense. He turned to Shirazi.

“What he’s saying... Holds any truth?”

The woman closed her mouth, used less than a second to think, and answered:

“None.” She gave a step forward and talked directly to the Clanner leader. “Galaxy Commander Aleksandr, whatever this man has told you and your people does not hold any truth. The Star League offensive concerns only Clan Smoke Jaguar. We

do want to keep the terms between the Star League and Clan Ghost Bear as good as possible.”

“I endorse those words.” Arthur said, glancing again at the elemental. “Something is going on, and I believe it to be in the best interest of our peoples to work together and get to the bottom of this problem.”

The man kneeled near him then squealed something. As the other looked at him he muttered:

“What are you saying, colonel? You should be here to kill those Clanner bastards... Why are you negotiating with them?”

It was a pitiful sight. The guy seemed to firmly believe that he was part of some grand invasion plan. As Arthur knew and didn't dare to tell Aleksandr, the destruction of the Smoke Jaguars was going within the plan, but with the Star league forces suffering staggering losses. Attacking any other Clan would be impossible, and if any of them joined the war to defend the Jaguars, the Spheroid forces would be hard pressed to defend what they gained. Simply put, any further offensive was plainly impossible.

“Can I talk to this man?” He asked Aleksandr. The elemental simply nodded, and with that gestured, Arthur descended over one his knees in front of the man. “Lojtnant, I'm Colonel Arthur Cassini, of the First Davion Guards. I need to know what you are doing here.”

“How can you ask that? It was you who ordered us here.”

“That doesn't make any sense. Who gave the orders?”

The man looked down, as if weeping.

“It was one of those spooks... He said he was DMI. He had orders about a second phase of operations aimed at the destruction of the Bears...It all seemed official, colonel. And...”

He went silent, but Arthur understood what he was trying to say.

“You hoped it would give you your home back...”

“We were held in reserve...” He shivered. “We are fighting to take back the Draconis Combine, but not the Republic? How fair is that?” He then started to grind his teeth. “You... you betrayed us!” And jumped, trying to grab Arthur's neck. “YOU DAMN FEDRATS!”

The colonel was faster than the tired and wounded prisoner, grabbing his wrists, forcing him to stay kneeled while he rose up.

“Hold yourself together, lojtnant! I’m not your enemy! Nor the Ghost Bears.” Two elementals grabbed the prisoner, dragging him away, allowing Arthur to relax, and talk to Aleksandr. “Those men were wronged, Galaxy commander. Something’s going on while we are losing our time with them.”

“Maybe so, but no one is going anywhere until we have finished dealing with the rest of the marauders.”

“Then I’ll like to ask for your permission to join your warriors in the hunt.”

XI

Surely those pirates were a slippery bunch.

They used one of the infamous pirate points to jump in-system without being noticed, and then dropped over Krenice, too fast for the Ghost Bear defenders to react and stop them. For the following days they evaded the scouting parties, and even managed to shoot down a pair of *Donar* attack ‘copters. Then, they appeared in force, attacking an industrial complex in the outskirts of Hasnorvan, the biggest city on the planet. The fact that those pirates demonstrated such incredible skill and organization automatically made them highly prized targets, and, as such, the Command Trinary from the 7th Bear Regulars was immediately dispatched to seek and destroy the invaders.

Eventually, the persecution dragged for more than two weeks, and two more trinaries were sent to support the Command. Those pirates, whoever they were, had an incredibly detailed knowledge about the geography of that world, and were using it to keep their opponents occupied while they moved back and forth.

And that didn’t make that much sense, in the end, Mechwarrior Talitha thought, as she moved her squat *Adder* OmniMech over an agglomerate of broken rocks, two full points of heavily armoured infantry following on her trail. The rest of the Trinary was spread all over the mountains, on both sides of the valley, covering the largest area possible, in an effort to finally find and destroy the remaining pirates, once and for all.

Unfortunately, they seemed quite determinate in keeping hidden among the trees and the broken mountains. Almost as if they were gaining time for something...

“Contact.” The voice of Star Colonel Yasmine sounded over the comm, calm and professional. “Northern ridge, heavy and assault inbound.”

The leader of every Star acknowledged the information, and then Yasmine proceeded with the battle plan. The Command Trinary would move in for the kill, with the remaining units flanking the pirates to thwart any attempt of an escape.

“Let no one get away!” The Star Colonel ordered. From her vantage point, near the top of the one of the hills on the Southern ridge, Talitha could see Yasmine’s boxy *Dire Wolf* in the bottom of the valley, charging between the trees, with the remaining ‘Mechs of her Star moving beside her.

The valley made a tight turn up ahead, hiding the pirates. They seemed to have abandoned any hope in escaping at that point, because instead of keeping out of sight, and prepare an ambush, like they had done countless times in the last couple weeks, the heavier units just came out of their hole, throwing themselves right into the attacking Ghost Bear warriors.

The leading pirate unit was a tall and menacing *Atlas*, considered by many the sturdiest of all BattleMechs, which started trading shots with Yasmine right away. It would be an epic duel, certainly. Both machines were 100-ton giants, heavily armed and armoured, vortexes of devastation on any battlefield. The forest around was shaken by explosions, catching fire while the shooting became increasingly more intense.

“Enough sightseeing!” Star Captain Gunter Kabrinski barked. “We have places to go.”

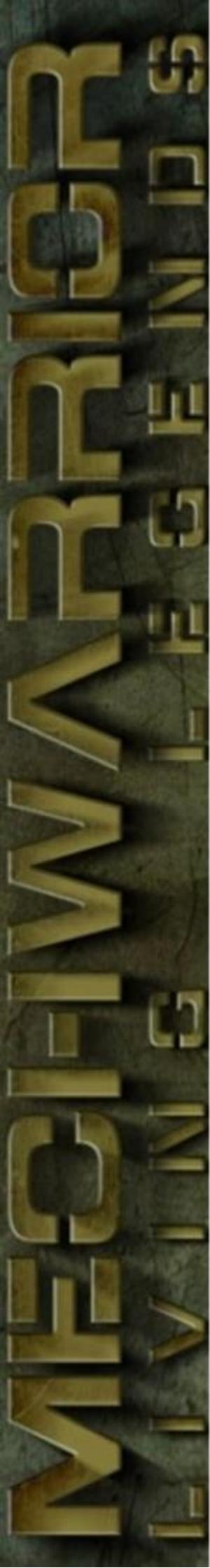
Talitha turned her eyes away from the scorched battlefield, and moved her *Adder* into a crevice on the opposite side of the hill. From there she could see the plains, covered with sparse trees and fern-like bushes, flowing into a small river, two thousand meters away.

“Star captain!” A voice shouted over the comm. Talitha recognized it as being Aisha’s, an elemental from Beta Star. “We intercepted a group of enemy units, but a lance-sized force is escaping, moving in your direction. ‘Mechs and skimmers.”

“Understood. We will deal with them.” Gunter Kabrinski answered. “Talitha. Take point. We will be right behind you.”

“Yes, sir.”

Without even thinking, the Mechwarrior moved downhill, scanning the surroundings for any hostile presence. It ought to be there. A wave of excitement filled her body and mind, as she noticed that would be her first real engagement against



Inner Sphere forces. After all of those frustrating weeks searching for the pirates, she would finally have the chance to shed some blood, and make a name for herself.

A klaxon echoed on her headphones. Someone was nearby. Already carving men-sized footprints on the gentle plain nearby the old rocky hills, Talitha turned northward, zigzagging among the trees. And then she found them.

The *Catapult* came first into sight, from behind a rocky slope. It was an old Spheroid design, a BattleMech shaped like some headless bird with boxy long range missile launchers mounted where the wings should be. The hovercraft came right after with a tail of dust rising on their trail.

Talitha moved slightly to her left and aimed at the enemy ‘Mech, which probably hadn’t noticed her yet, its sensors jammed by the *Adder*’s ECM suite. An electric-blue ionized particle beam erupted from each of the Clanner Mech’s arms, shrieking all their way into the 65-ton hull. Both PPC shots hit their target, making metal explode, and electrified splinters fly in all directions.

“Star Captain Kabrinski! Mechwarrior Talitha reporting! I have made contact with the fleeing lance, two clicks from Delta Star position. One *Catapult* and four *Harassers* on spot!”

“Understood.”

There was no need for more words. Talitha knew the elementals were coming. She just needed to keep the Spheroids occupied while they moved in.

The incredibly fast *Harasser* hovercrafts were now sliding around the injured BattleMech, aiming the missile launchers mounted over their flat roofs. From that distance, Talitha could not tell if they had short or long range warheads, although the erring radar warning reminded her to keep moving at full speed, arcing around the enemy units. Weighting 35-tons, her *Adder* was small and fast, and very nimble too. That should help her avoid most shots, but if the enemy managed to score some hits, the thin armour would provide only a meagre protection, at best.

Both PPCs fired again, one beam vaporizing a tree that got in the way, the other making metal boil on the side of one of the hovercrafts. The fragile machine caught fire immediately, moving a few more meters before coming to a halt, already enveloped in flames. Talitha gave it no more attention. Missiles started flying around her ‘Mech, as a couple of *Harasser* managed to get close enough to fire a badly aimed volley of SRMs. The damage was minimal, but the Clanner warrior had her main weapons in the middle of their recharging cycle. She fired the flamer mounted under

the *Adder*'s chin, to force the hovercrafts into defensive positions, and then turned her back to the fray, as she tried to gain some distance.

It was a calculated risk. While her 'Mech had an almost non-existent back armour, she did need to get closer to the river. That would negate the *Harassers* the use of their missiles, that she now knew to be short ranged, and would also gave her access to that stream of fresh water, to refresh her *Adder* as the temperature started to get uncomfortable inside her cockpit.

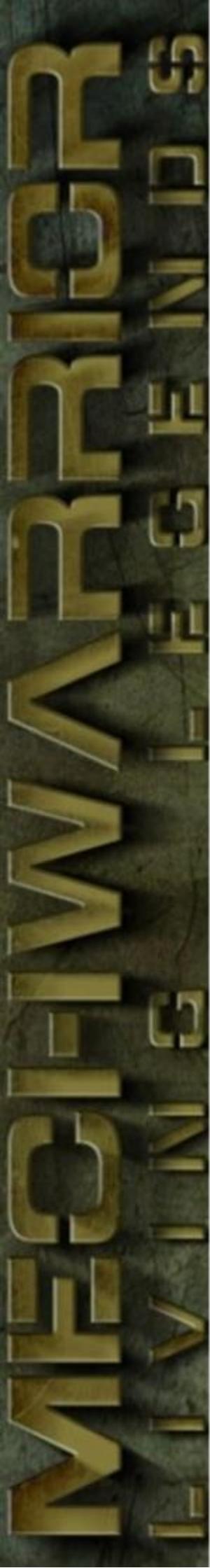
She got close enough, and turned again into the fight. The *Catapult* seemed to have recovered from the crushing hit it received. The armour over its right flank, over and behind the wide cockpit, had disappeared almost entirely, exposing internal components.

“Great!” Talitha nearly screamed as she charged against it head-on at full speed.

The attacking *Catapult* swung its strange torso to shatter a tree that was in its way, and then fired a volley of thirty long-range missiles. Leaving a trail of white smoke behind them, the missiles arced over the battlefield, and then flew straight down, their sensors aiming at the charging OmniMech. Talitha saw them homing in, let her heart beat once, and then slid to her right, most missiles slamming at the empty ground where she stood a split-second before. A few missiles managed to hit her, causing only moderate damage. Only then Talitha returned fire

Again, both beams struck home, melting away the armour over the left knee joint of the heavy 'Mech. The machine jerked, and moved out of the line of fire. Still running at full speed, Talitha made a wide arc across the field, crushing some trees under the massive weight and raw inertia of her *Adder*. She crossed paths with one of the *Harassers*, and pressed the trigger again. The hovercraft exploded, the giant orange mushroom cloud raising and turning into black smoke. Without time to move away, Talitha just jumped over the smouldering hull, leaving a swirling column of smoke behind her.

The on-board temperature was already reaching severe levels. Even with her cooling vest working hard to keep her fresh, thick drops of sweat rolled over her forehead and cheeks, into her mouth, tasting salty and acid. She didn't even hesitate, walked right into the river, erecting short-lived columns of water with each footstep. Temperature started to descend as heat dumped through the armour and into the river. And then the *Adder* shook as something hit it hard.



Talitha slowed down, and made a hard turn to her right, searching for the enemy. Red lights on her control panel warned about the cracked armour on her right torso. Something there packed a powerful punch. And then she saw the hovertank. In an ironic twist of fate, those pirates had managed to grab for themselves an *Epona* hovertank somewhere during the prolonged fighting, a machine that the 7th Bear Regulars, had, on their turn, captured during a fight against Clan Hell's Horses.

“*Surats...*”

She fired her right PPC, but that machine was quite well crewed, and slid sideways, evading the shrieking beam. The second shot connected with the target, though, and breached the fragile armour of the hovercraft, opening a wide gash on the left side of the hull, which promptly started to spill black smoke into the sky. Undeterred, the *Epona* fire back its own PPC, this time slicing across the top armour of the OmniMech. More red lights flashed across the control panel, as systems agonized and died. Talitha grunted in fury, and stepped on the speed pedal, hurling the *Adder* into full speed, straight into the captured hovertank. Its crew hesitated for a moment, and only then did they realized what the Mechwarrior was up to, and started to roll backwards, trying to get out of the way. But it was already too late.

The *Adder* came close to the *Epona*, and slammed a foot right into the crew compartment, placed in the front of the squat hull. The whole vehicle jerked forward, crushing the cushion of air underneath it, promptly shattering the front section completely under the massive impact. The hovercraft spun around its axis, before the ultimate death of its engine, and then fell over its belly. Unsatisfied, Talitha fired the flamer, setting the ruined hull ablaze.

The Mechwarrior used the following moment to catch her breath, and then looked around, searching for the remaining opponents.

Surprisingly, the *Catapult* was already down, its damaged leg had been torn in two by the 'Mechs own weight, and the cockpit cracked open by the ejection of the pilot. The *Harassers* were also out of commission. She blinked in surprise, and only then she saw the *Elemental* armoured suits walking around the destroyed war machines, searching for survivors. There should be none. Star Colonel Yasmine was very clear on that point. Since their ambushes started to kill more and more warriors, she decided that there would be no more prisoners. That would teach any future raiders not to ignore the more honourable ways of fighting.

Slowly, Talitha approached the Clanner infantry. They had descended over the pirate units while they were occupied with Talitha, and brought them down quickly and efficiently. It wasn't the most honourable way to fight, but then again, the Star colonel gave strict orders to disregard *zellbrigen*, and just crush the enemy like the pests they were. It didn't felt right to her, but those pirates had lost any semblance of honour when they decided to strike civilian targets first and then kept avoiding any possibilities of engaging in a fair fight.

In the end, it didn't really matter. It was just pest control anyway...

"Three hovercrafts, *quiaff?*" Star Captain Gunter Kabrinski's voice scattered through her headphones. Looking down, she saw his battlearmour standing still near her left foot, the V-shaped faceplate looking up to her cockpit.

She admired that man. A proud elemental, he had already gained impressive victories against both the Hell's Horses and the Spheroid pirates, and had recently gained his Bloodright in a Trial, thus deserving the privilege of being called Kabrinski. It was an honour to fight under his command.

"Aff, sir. If I might ask, how is the battle on the valley developing?"

"Well. Star Colonel Yasmine already killed three enemy 'Mechs. The surviving pirates are now cornered in a gash between two mountains. The cliff is too steep on the inside for them to climb out, and the command trinary is controlling the only way out."

"That is good, Star captain. When will we finish them, then?"

"A good question. Maybe after a little repair and refit. It is not like they can go anywhere."

At that moment, a third voice erupted onto their comm. It was Yasmine herself.

"Star Captain Gunter Kabrinski, you are listening, *quiaff?*"

Down there, the battlearmour turned its back to the *Adder*, as the elemental focused on the conversation.

"Aff, ma'am. What are your orders?"

"It seems that we are going to receive a few guests. They are coming from Sandleford and were instructed to join your Trinary. I hope you do not mind a little babysitting."

"I am at the service of the Clan."

"Good. Have in mind that the Galaxy commander gave them permission to do whatever they feel necessary while we refit and repair. But if the they, somehow, seem

to even try anything against our forces, you shall destroy them on the spot. Understood, Star captain?”

“Understood, ma’am.”

“Excellent. Yasmine out.”

With the chatter over, Gunter Kabrinsky turned towards the BattleMech.

“Babysitting... And those Freebirth emissaries, no less. Not the best way to finish this operation, *quiaff?*”

“Aff...” No it wasn’t. Still, Talitha was somehow curious about those Davion warriors. She suspected they should be veterans from the war against the Smoke Jaguars, so they ought to have some qualities. But which, she couldn’t guess.

XII

While the lights began flashing across the control panel, Arthur had the sudden realization that he haven’t been inside a BattleMech’s cockpit for weeks, since his *Thanatos* was torn apart by the same machine he was now bringing to life.

Contrary to what he thought, entering the cockpit of the *Blood Asp* was not that hard. His fears were almost forgotten while he moved around, dealing with Galaxy Commander Aleksandr, the Rasalhague prisoner, and the pre-mission specs. Now that he was safe inside the cockpit, far from the sight of others, he could allow himself a moment of uneasiness. That machine he was using was a powerful beast of war, a monster capable of bringing a man to his knees with the simple sight of it. There, his fears came back to him, like a dark shadow creeping through the back of his skull, into his consciousness, crushing him underneath its immeasurable mass.

Again, he was going into action, contrary to all of his instincts, ignoring that small voice that implored him to leave everything and just go back to his family. But he was already compromised. He had accepted that mission, anyhow, and there was no going back.

Arthur took a deep breath as he tried to relax and become one with the humming of the fusion engines pleasantly calming buzz, a sound that always had made him feel secure. At that moment he realized how much he missed being at the command of a powerful engine of war.

The all-clear order came through the comm., and Arthur made the 90-ton monster move forward, following the tiny tech that was on the ground below, guiding

him to the exterior of the dropship. Once he was free, Arthur raised the right arm of the ‘Asp to thank the tech, and moved to the Northeast end of the starport. The rest of his lance came right after. All of them used captured Clanner ‘Mechs, as their original machines had been destroyed back in Port Arthur.

Antonios still rode his *Nova Cat*, now pristine after being repaired in Tanh Linh. Behind him came Jazebel, riding a captured *Vulture*. She kept her word about being ready for her mission, despite of the injuries she sustained and how she longed to go back to her own family. Arthur noticed how uneasy she appeared when climbing into her cockpit. As for Pavlos, he seemed as full of himself as always, and actually eager to give some use to his new *Cougar* light ‘Mech. All in all, that was what remained of the 12 pilots and BattleMechs that landed with him in Port Arthur. He had no doubts about their ability to carry the mission through, but, still, the guilt weighted on his shoulders to have them pass through all of that yet again.

Silently, Arthur promised himself that would be their last mission, and, when everything was resolved, he would arrange to send them back to their families and friends.

“So, are we going to do this or what?” Pavlos grunted while, his ‘Mech wondered into the wilderness beyond the landing pad.

“Yes.” Arthur answered, moving to the head of the column to cut off the small *Cougar*. “Just try to behave, Anvil Lance. Our hosts seem quite nervous.”

“Affirmative.” Jezebel said. “And what’s the plan, boss?”

“I’ll tell you while we get there.”

Roughly half an hour later they arrived to the valley where the surviving pirates remained hidden. The small group was stuck in a dead end, completely surrounded by the superior Ghost Bear troops. Its exact composition was impossible to know. An *Uller* light ‘Mech tried to give a look, but was promptly destroyed, and the rest of the Trinary stood its ground, impatiently waiting for the arrival of the Davion “guests”.

All of that, Arthur got to know when briefed through the com by Star Colonel Yasmine herself. They didn’t meet directly on that instance, although Arthur got a glimpse of her *Daishi*, parked in front of a repair truck, when he and his unit moved to the position they were assigned. Waiting for them was a group of elementals, in full

body armour, supported by a *Puma* OmniMech, known by the Clanner as the *Adder*. The bird-like machine was severely damaged, although still functional.

“Welcome, Colonel Arthur Cassini.” Star Captain Gunter Kabrinski said over them com. Arthur could see the elemental standing in front of a nearby tree, gesturing in his direction. He turned the *Blood Asp* to face him. The tiny figure was misleading. Measuring almost three meters tall, the round *Elemental* battlearmour could be mistaken as a marginal danger to any BattleMech. The facts learned from several battles, though, had shown how deadly that technology could be. Furthermore, the Davion lance was surrounded by 24 more of those things, plus the *Puma*. Fortunately, they were on his side. At least he hoped so.

“Thank you for your patience, Star captain. Has anyone tried to talk to those men?”

“The pirates? Were you not informed? We are trying to kill them all.”

The man said that with such a voice as if it was the most natural thing in the universe. It was the reality of the Clanner way of life, but not something Arthur could really get used to, no matter how many battles he saw, and how many times he interacted with the warriors of Kerensky.

“I was briefed on that. I will try a different approach, if you don’t mind.”

“Do as you please, colonel. Just do not needlessly endanger me or my warriors, or I will deal with you personally.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Arthur then moved his *Blood Asp* to the nearest slope. It was time to press forward with his plan. “Star Colonel Yasmine, do you have your troops in place?”

“Aff, Colonel Arthur Cassini. We will be descending on that valley as soon as your plan fails.”

“That was encouraging...” Pavlos mumbled, using Anvil Lance’s private comm. channel.

“We must be comprehensive in this, Pavlos. The way of the Clans is one of war, not of peace.” Arthur replied. “But if we keep fighting, we might be too late to discover what those Lyrans are doing in this sector.”

Jezebel took the word as he stopped speaking.

“Still... Your plan is incredibly risky, sir.”

“They’ll have to see me to trust me... Now go silent.”

It was a moment of tense uneasiness, as Arthur moved the *Blood Asp* until half-way up the slope. He then stopped, and turned off his ECM suite, while he searched for the radio channel used by the sidetracked Rasalhaguean soldiers. When he found it, the poignant sting of doubt hit him like a crack in the skull. The shadow was still there, very vivid. But, yet, he had to go forward, pushing his own fear back.

“Men and women of the 2nd Drakons of the Free Rasalhague Republic, this is Colonel Arthur Cassini of the 1st Davion Guards speaking! I ask to talk with the person in charge.”

There a moment of silence, before a man’s voice came from the other side.

“Are you truly from the FedSuns or is this a trick?”

“This is not a trick, I guarantee you.”

“One cannot be too confident when dealing with the Clans, supposed Colonel Cassini of the Davion Guards.”

“Then allow me to show you a proof of my good intents. I will expose myself to you, coming from the Southern ridge. Take your conclusions then.”

“Please say again?”

Ignoring the surprised calls from the Rasalhagueans, Arthur turned to the *Nova Cat*.

“Antonios, you’ll assume command until I return.”

“Roger that sir. I’ll be waiting.”

“All right...” As the *Blood Asp* climbed the back of the ridge, making rocks rolling down, the three-finger feet slipping slightly here and there, Arthur felt his heart beating faster, the blood heating his face and his hands. He was uncomfortable. Maybe the Clanners were right. They should storm down that valley and kill everything that moved. It would be easier, and perhaps less risky. But those men have been manipulated into making that suicide run by some unseen entity, with dark purposes. He couldn’t just let them die without giving them a chance to surrender, although the risk he needed to undergo to convince them was probably too high.

And then, in just a minute, he was almost at the top. There, the slope was almost too steep even for a ‘Mech, and he had to rise the legs the most they could, in order to surpass the obstacles. The pressure put on the myomer musculature rose the internal temperature, and made him start to sweat. One more step, and the claw-like fingers of the right foot gripped the edge of the ridge. The *Blood Asp* forced the knee and then it stood up in open ground, with the entire valley in front of it.

As expected, a small army remained hidden among the rocks below. A few vehicles and two BattleMechs: a *Catapult* and a *Raven*, surrounded by infantrymen, who instinctively flinched as they saw the savage-looking machine. None of them fired.

“We-we see you, Colonel Cassini.” The leader stuttered. “What is that you wish to tell us?”

“I’m here to ask for your surrender. You have been fooled by some unknown party. Please don’t waste your lives.”

“You’re telling us that all of what we did... was in vain?”

Arthur noticed he was holding his breath. He sighed, as he became certain that those men had already surrendered in their minds.

“I’m sorry.”

XIII

The biggest building in the small town that the Ghost Bears were using as staging area, called Sandleford by the locals, was an old manor, surrounded by gardens and filled with lavish furniture. Arthur thought the place to be somewhat misplaced, as that kind of ostentation had no place in the Clanner way of life. But maybe it was the house of some merchants, who were somehow allowed to keep their business and lifestyle under Ghost Bear rule. There was no sign of such people at the moment, although they probably had been relocated to a safer place when the combat operations transpired to that area, along with the rest of the town’s population.

Such thoughts crossed the mind of the Davion colonel once he got into the building, but, as soon as everyone was comfortable, sitting or just leaning against the walls, his thoughts came back to the problem at hand.

“I would like to keep those prisoners as my bondsman, Galaxy commander.” He said, turning away from the window, filling the room with his stare.

“Oh, you must be kidding me, *stravag!*” Star Colonel Yasmine promptly replied. “First you put up that trick of yours, avoiding what could have become a glorious battle, and now you want to keep the prisoners?”

Arthur shook his head.

“With all due respect, Star colonel, I ask for your understanding. On one hand, I had the permission of Galaxy Commander Aleksandr to do what I did, and, on the

other hand, you have no use for those men. They hate the guts out of you, and would only bring instability to the Clan. Also, I'm only requesting the rights to keep the men, including those you captured in the previous days. All the equipment I captured would be given to you and your people in return."

The female Star colonel kept sit on the small couch she had chosen, but crossed her arms as to assume an aggressive pose, though more looking like she wanted to jump over him and tear him to pieces. She said:

"If I recall well, Colonel Arthur Cassini, those men you are so keen to keep to yourself as bondsman also hate the guts out of you, as you would say. They firmly believe you should have come to help them defeat us, and not the other way around."

It was the Galaxy commander himself who replied to her words. He was leaning against the wall to Arthur's left, with Star Captain Gunter Kabrinski at his side.

"Well... What Colonel Arthur Cassini is saying remains true. We have no need for those men, so he can keep them and deal with them as he wants to. Furthermore his offer of all the equipment he captured with his own actions can be considered a generous act, as he had full rights to keep them for himself. It is within the rules for *isorla*. I'm actually more interested in this urgent matter that requires our attention." He turned to Arthur. "You have clues about what brought this aggression against us, *quiaff?*"

"*Aff.*" The Davion Mechwarrior nodded in acquiescence. "We do believe that these so-called pirate raids were actually a diversion to turn Clan Ghost Bear's attention away from something else. Agent Shirazi knows more details about it."

All the warriors in the room turned their attention to the DMI agent, who sat in a large sofa, sided by Pavlos and Antonios. She noticeably took a deep breath, as her mind worked to put her thoughts in order.

"So, Agent Shirazi..." Aleksandr's words were as plain as it would be expected from any high-ranking Clan officer, although Arthur could believe to have felt a slight trace of scorn. If Inner Sphere warriors had little regard for spooks, then their Clanner counterparts had them in even lower consideration. It didn't help that the Clan secret services, the Watch, as they called it, was widely considered ineffective by most standards. "What is that you want to tell us?"

Shirazi stood up and looked directly to Aleksandr. It was like staring at a wild beast, Arthur thought, likely to enrage him and highly inadvisable. Still, the elemental kept his calm, and simply waited for whatever she had to say.

“Galaxy commander, I will be direct to the point: we in the DMI believe that we are facing a party that is searching for something in this region. And it might be a crafty and dangerous enemy.”

The elemental changed weight from one leg to the other.

“Why would you say that, Agent Beatrix Shirazy?”

“I’m glad you ask. The troops you’ve faced here are actually part of the force assembled for the invasion of the Smoke Jaguar Occupation Zone. They were being held in reserve exactly for being used in any spec ops operation that could need their expertise. A few weeks ago we noticed that some of these units had disappeared from the staging areas they should be in, and were also out of reach.”

She crossed one arm over the chest and rubbed the chin with the free hand, deeply thoughtful.

“We were actually a little too slow to notice this. These troops were mercenaries and remains of now-extinct line units, and as they were assigned to dark operations, it was somewhat expected that they would just vanish without warning once they were given missions. When you reported these attacks to your worlds and moved troops to reinforce the frontier, my bureau started to make questions, and only then we noticed that no-one knew what were these men doing. Of course, we did the math, and came here, to investigate what was actually going on.”

Still sitting on her sofa, Yasmine leaned forward and let out a short laugh.

“So... You are telling us that your proud intelligence services were outsmarted?”

“It seems so. But there is more.” She turned to Jezebel, who was standing near the table in front of the big sofa. “Major.”

The MechWarrior placed a thin device over the table, and moved away. A small remote appeared on Shirazi’s hand, and the device started to project life-like 3D images, that wavered slightly above it. The first was the blurry representation of the Steiner ‘Mechs.

“These are ‘Mechs that we believe to be part of a mercenary unit working for the Lyran secret services. They are probably heading to this region, to dispute whatever the mysterious party is searching for. Taking all of these elements into account, we at the DMI decided that it would benefit everyone if the Federated Commonwealth and Clan Ghost Bear worked together for mutual benefit.”

“Bah!” Yasmine snorted. “There is too much ‘what ifs’ in your argument, Agent Beatrix Shirazi. Do you have any certain about anything?”

As if in response, Gunter Kabrinski shook his head, and said:

“You might have a point about these men being in our Occupation Zone, or why would these raids be staged anyway. Still, we cannot just wonder around, without having a clear target. Star Colonel Yasmine is right when she asks about any proofs to support your argument.”

“This is what we have.” Shirazi answered, looking directly at the big man. “And it’s never too much to remember you that while we talk, our really enemies, whomever they may be, are getting closer to their objective.”

“Still, it is too little for us to organize any plan.” Aleksandr looked to the ceiling, thoughtful, as everyone turned their eyes to him. “I understand that we need to discover who our real enemies are and, more importantly, what they are looking for. This is important both for you as it is for the Clan. But we simply cannot act without any clear heading.”

An awkward silence followed the Galaxy commander’s words, as everyone sunk into their own thoughts. Pavlos looked around, a puzzled expression on his face.

“Well... if I might say something.” He shrugged as everyone gazed back at him. “We are assuming that these guys are already here. Don’t you Bear guys know of some planet being attacked that doesn’t fit the current pattern or something?”

“Humm...” Aleksandr started to scratch his throat, looking even more thoughtful than ever to the eyes of the still newly-arrived Davion warriors. Arthur felt something was coming together in his mind.

“Galaxy commander?” Kabrinski looked confused.

The other men still took a few moments to answer, but when he did his words fell as a bomb over the Davion colonel’s mind.

“That is actually a very good point, Sergeant Pavlos de Cyrrius. We do have some reports about a Hell’s Horses raid in Ardoz, although no update had transpired since the last courier ship arrived in system.”

The click in Arthur’s mind was so sudden that almost made him shiver with the realization. A seven-year old rumor surfaced as everything started to make sense.

“There’s where they are.” He declared. “Our enemies are in Ardoz.” He turned to Shirazi. “Can you show us a map of the region?”

The image floating over the table disappeared instantly, replaced by a set of lines and spheres, with names shimmering over them. Arthur pointed to the sphere labeled “Ardoz” and said:

“See? The raids were made to move your attention away from that area of your Occupation Zone. They will attack you in the back, exactly where you can’t see it coming.”

Aleksandr approached the hologram, thoughtful.

“Still, that does not explain why our ghostly enemy would have any interest for such an enterprise. The only thing that could interest them burned to the ground in 3015.”

“Maybe...” Arthur shrugged. “Still, you don’t allow any ComStar envoys in the system, isn’t that so?”

“True, but even I ignore what is being done there. The installation is being dug by the Scientist caste, under supervision of the Watch and the directors of the project respond only to the Khan himself.” He scratched his chin. “But it is an intriguing idea...”

“We can get there in a week, Galaxy commander. Our jumpship is recharged and ready to depart. It could get us into the Ardoz System in time to see what is going on and hopefully, it won’t be too late.”

A thick silence fell over the room, as Alexander kept looking at the hologram, measuring his options. Yasmine couldn’t stand any more of that and she stood up with a single movement, fast as a lightning, looking incredulous to her superior.

“Galaxy commander, sir... are you really listening to this Freeborn?”

In a slow, but poignant fashion, the elemental turned to her, his eyes piercing the smaller and leaner figure of the MechWarrior with an ice-cold gaze.

“The idea has its merits, Star colonel.”

“The installation is destroyed! There is nothing to discuss! We should be getting ready to the next attack! Or take offensive action ourselves.”

Aleksandr turned to her and crossed to his arms, the huge muscles tensing, like if he was ready to start a fight.

“You are right, Star colonel. There is nothing else to discuss.” He glanced at Arthur. “You are allowed to go to Ardoz, Colonel Arthur Cassini. Take the Trinary under the command of Star Captain Gunter Kabrinski with you. He will be your liaison to the local command, understood?”

“Understood, Galaxy commander.” Arthur replied. “Thank you.”

Facing that decision, Yasmnine became tense as a bar of steel, clenching her teeth.

“What is it, Star colonel?” Aleksandr asked, in a menacing tone. “Do you have something to declare?” The Mechwarrior narrowed her eyes, and he kept his taunting. “Do you think you could make a better Galaxy commander? Do you wish to face me in a Trial?”

“That... That will not be necessary, sir.” She straightened and saluted. “If my presence is no longer required, I would like to return to my post, sir.”

The elemental relaxed, but only so slightly, his eyes still fixated on the defiant Mechwarrior.

“Request accepted. Do as you please.”

Without a word, Yasmine turned over her heels and left the room. Allowing himself to relax a little further, Aleksandr glanced back at Arthur.

“You should depart as soon as possible, Colonel. I would like to ask you and your men to go on ahead and get everything set, while I give a further word to Star Captain Gunter Kabrinski.”

Although the aggressive Mechwarrior was already out of the room, the fact remained that Arthur didn't feel the situation to be any less tense. There was a hint of distrust in Aleksandr's eyes. He knew, like Arthur and his men, that something was bound to happen in Ardoz. It was the only real option given the situation. But he also knew that these men were part of the army that was taking the Smoke Jaguar apart. He would never truly trust them. And the Davion colonel knew that he had to learn how to deal with it.

“All right, Galaxy commander. And thank you.” He saluted, and walked out of the room, followed by his men.

Finding themselves alone, the two elementals turned to each other.

“You really are going to let these Freeborns take the point on this one?” Kabrinski asked.

“They seem to have great knowledge about whatever is going on. I believe they still know some things they decided not to share with us. Especially that Intelligence agent. Anyway, if you find them to be less than reliable... You have permission to deal with them as you find fit.”

Gunter Kabrinski allowed his lips to dip slightly in face of that order.

“Understood, sir.”

XIV

Jump!

The symptoms were the same to most space travellers, and never became less unpleasant with time. A nauseating vertigo seemingly turned the insides upside down, as space itself expanded and folded around the jumpship. It all lasted for only a single, agonizing moment, and then it was over, the stars beyond the viewports changed, the navigational computers working at full power to discern if they had arrived at the right place, or failed the jump and arrived in the unknown infinity.

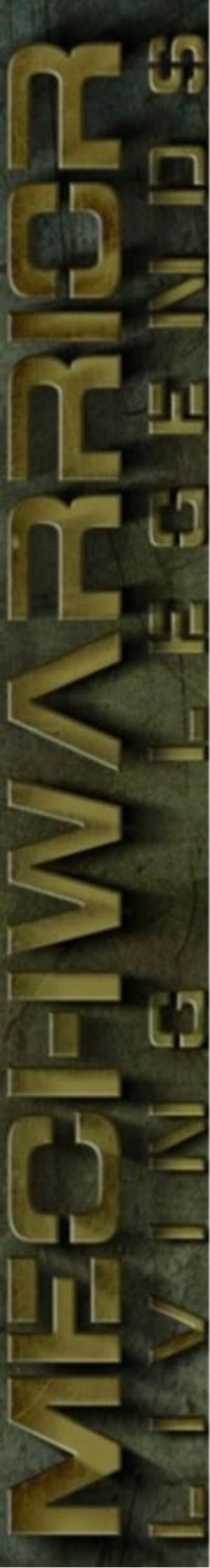
Floating in the middle of the observation room of the *Sly Fox*, the commanding vessel of Van Biesbroek's trio of dropships, William Thorn used a moment to inhale deeply, and only then he looked into the dark emptiness beyond the viewport. An unimaginable mass of tiny white dots filled the blackness, so deep that even after staring at it for so long as he did, William could never get used to it. The sensation was strange and overwhelming, a clear notion that something was wrong, the distances too vast for the small human mind to grasp.

And, still, Humanity had found a way to cross the void of interstellar space. He didn't really understand the physics, but they had something to do with folding the structure of space itself. It required mind-blowing amounts of energy, which could only be harnessed from the stars themselves. It usually took a full week to charge the hyperspace core to perform the jump, but ways of circumvent that method were known. And that was exactly why that specific jumpship had materialized that far from the star at the centre of the Ardoz System. The dark pirate charging station was nearby, almost impossible to see against the black void if not for the stars it occluded.

William was no stranger to that method.

"Ah, here you are." The voice brought the mercenary commander back to reality. He turned slowly, carefully controlling his movements in that absence of gravity, or he could end spinning uncontrolled into the nearest wall. Major Heinrich Vogel was standing in the open access hatch, looking into the room. "I suspected you would be here."

"You did?" William asked, while Vogel hurled himself into the room, reaching for a handle sticking out of the ceiling to stop near him.



“Of course. You’re one of those people who like to have a certain sense of control. Being here, seeing the universe while technology bends reality as we perceive it is something men like you do quite often.”

“You’re quite thoughtful today.”

“Well...” Vogel shrugged. “You’ll be departing in a few minutes. Van Biesbroek is performing the final adjustments for the burn to Ardoz. I sincerely hope the best for you and your men.”

Keeping his gaze fixed on the other man, William put on a faint smile.

“Don’t you want to reconsider your desire in staying here?”

The spook answered in the same way, his smirk as fake as ever.

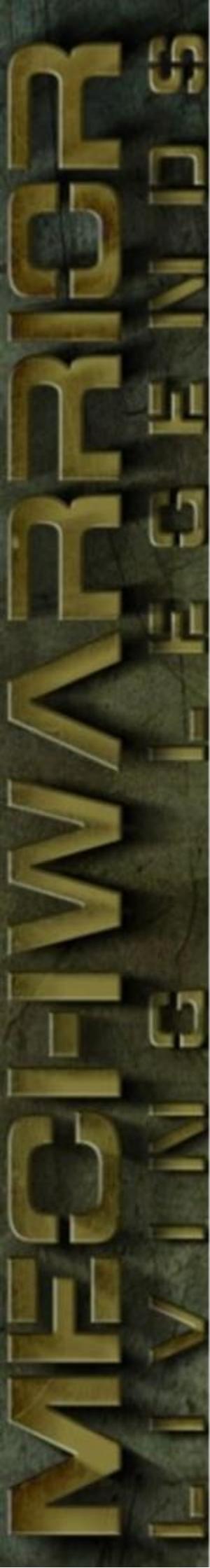
“Oh, colonel... I believe I would be more of a hindrance than an asset once the laser beams started to fly over our heads. But I do believe your Thorn’s Shadow Legion will perform admirably. I don’t need to explain the importance of this operation any further, I believe.”

“No you don’t.”

Although William could in fact use some further explaining about some sensible details, something he would never get due to the urgency with which they were set to depart. His Shadow Legion had to land on a Clan-controlled planet and then find the force attacking it to retrieve some artefact whose nature Vogel never cared to explain. There was something weird going on, and those Loki guys seem desperate to have whatever they were after in their hands.

He looked over his shoulder, to the recharging station, now much closer and much more noticeable, a huge chunk of stars hidden by its bulk. Of course, mapping that kind of route wasn’t easy and very prone to something going wrong. A very talented navigator would be necessary, and that was a reason why the normal jumps aimed to the stars, as their gravity wells presented perfect targets. But regardless of the risks, doing things that way created the possibility of the enemy never noticing a jumpship arrived in-system. And even if they noticed it, they would probably take their sweet time to come close enough to pose any credible threat, thus creating the window of opportunity needed to perform the mission.

“All right then, colonel. We’ll jump back once you’re free, and come back in a week. That’s the time you have to get into that planet, do what you have to do, and come back here. Don’t fail.”



“I won’t.” William looked back to the infinite void. Two nimble *Sparrowhawk* aerofighters were making a slow pass near the station, probably in some routine recon flight. Almost at that same time, Van Biesbroek’s voice came over the com, announcing the final minutes before the release of the dropships, and their descent into that hostile world, so far away it looked only a harmless dot from that vantage point.

“You better go.” He said to the spook.

“Yeah...” Vogel started to turn away, but then he stopped, min-movement, almost getting himself turning into the opposite direction. “Oh...”

“Something you’ll like to ad?” The mercenary asked, suspicious.

“Indeed. The jumpship’s sensors detected a pair of heavy dropships descending though the atmosphere of Ardoz.”

Interesting news indeed. Unwittingly, William let his lips turn into a satisfied smirk.

“So our mysterious friends are already here.”

“Indeed they are.”

“Good. Then this party is due to get really interesting, really fast.”

Vogel nodded in response.

“Good luck down there, colonel.”

And then he finally got out of the room, again leaving William alone with the universe, thinking in which kind of adversaries waited for him in that planet.

XV

The image transmitted by the small UAV was fuzzy with static, although the main details were still easy to discern. On the ground down there, the dry and broken hills of the area around Valladolid Base started to give way to the stumpy trees of the swampy plains to the East. Why would the Hells’ Horses land their dropships there was still a mystery to Farn Jorgenson. Anyway, Star Colonel Chou Vong still led his command Trinary to that barren wasteland, eager to face the enemy. Surely meeting and defeating an elite Horse unit on the field would imbue him with incredible honour, maybe open his ascendancy to the higher rankings, especially when the mistakes he made back in Tukayyid still stained his combat record.

“I am not satisfied with this, Star captain.” Fighter pilot Elijah said through Delta Binary’s private com channel. Looking beyond the transparent canopy of his

Xerxes, Farn Jorgenson could see his elegant *Visigoth* standing nearby, engines reverberating, ready to take off at any moment.

He could understand the young pilot's hesitation. The Star captain was going against his standing orders, but he the whole situation didn't seem right to him. Something was off. So he arranged to have the ten fighters of his command Star waiting in the access lanes to the main runway, engines buzzing in low gear, burning fuel while waiting orders to perform an emergency take-off. Chou Vong wouldn't like to know about that.

"Just stay put, warrior." Jorgenson ordered, the tone of his voice giving no possibility for a reply.

Suddenly the UAV camera started to show something new. The vegetation in the edge of the swamp stirred as at least a trinary-sized conglomeration of magnetic contacts moved out of cover. Leading the enemy column was a Star League-era BattleMech, an *Atlas*. Odd. Clanners seldom used Spheroid designs in combat, especially in elite front-line units. More 'Mechs followed, first two *Awesomes*, followed by smaller machines, *Hollanders IIs* and *Owens*, and then the usual paraphernalia of support units. As the armed hovercrafts and APCs poured out of the swamp, Farn's eyes widened. That felt wrong. Terribly wrong!

He commanded the UAV to turn back, focusing his camera on the Star colonel's column, only to glimpse the dust lifted by a series of high-intensity explosions. The enraged communications of the warriors which survived that artillery barrage filled the com channels right after. *Damn stravag tactics! Those are no Clan warriors!*

"Delta Flight, prepare for emergency take-off!" His orders came swift and naturally. He knew something was off right from the start, and only had himself to admonish for not having removed Vong from his post while he could.

Up in front of him, a series of blasts shook the other edge of Valladolid Base, lightening the dawn. Farn couldn't know who was attacking that planet, but whoever they were, they were intrepid and well-coordinated. It would be a rough day.

It was during the dropship's descent through the atmosphere, hours before, that the battlearmour squads were dropped, hidden from radar by the plasma trail of the entry, and from sight by the darkness of the night. Seemingly outdated parachutes

granted a stealthy land, and then the men and women inside the think shells of metal searched for cover among the broken rocks in the outskirts around Valladolid Base. There, they remained hidden, while the dropships landed and released the heavier troops, to bring the Clanners out of the base.

With the dawn, came the short and almost imperceptible radio signal that started the assault to the base proper. There was no way to make it quietly, so the battlearmour just run from cover to cover, their metal boots crunching the dirt and stones underneath. The first two men reached a pyramid-shaped hill, towering above most of its neighbours, and peeked from behind its southern flank. The first buildings of the Base were right in sight, just in a few minutes distance of a battlearmour at full throttle. Patrolling its perimeter was a flat *Oro* tank, accompanied by two Elementals in full body armour, all of them seemingly ignorant of the attacking units.

One of the observing battlearmours pointed a laser designator at the patrol, while the other gestured to the comrades hidden among the nearby hills. Two seconds later a volley of long-range missiles erupted from their positions arcing over the landscape, and finally raining into the Clanners. The ground boiled around the tank, which was too cumbersome to avoid the onslaught. The Elementals, on the other hand, just had to jump out of harm's way.

They landed a hundred meters away from the burning tank, and turned to the hills in time to see the wave of attacking battlearmours charging in their direction, blasting away with their lasers and personal gauss rifles. Standing their ground, the elementals returned fire, but it was too little, too late.

A gauss slug hit the visor of one of them, coming out through the other side of the helmet, dragging out red pulp along with pieces of shredded metal. His companion descended over a knee, and fired repeatedly with the pulse laser mounted in his right arm. A well-aimed blast managed to pierce the shoulder of one of the attackers, melting away the armour, and then proceeding to rip the arm out of the shoulder. The man fell to the ground, wobbling uncontrollably. And then three depleted uranium slugs threw the Elemental into the air, the bulky armour describing a small arc before falling over its back, with a gush of dark blood pouring through the cracked chest plate.

The attacking battlearmours run past the three dead warriors and the destroyed tank without giving any thought to any of them. The battle for the secrets of Ardoz was now underway.

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