

A Race to the End

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It might be the last DropShip on Gan Singh.

Their final chance.

Wrenching at the controls of her *JagerMech*, Leftenant Kelly Van Lou struggled forward against the tangled jungle that covered most of the continent of Pandora. Shrill alarms wailed in her ears. Broken fronds streaked her ferroglass shield with green smears as sporadic laserfire burned through the leafy canopy around her.

Ruby-bright energy splashed armor from her BattleMech's shoulders, its arms, its chest.

She tasted the warm, dank air, poorly filtered by her cockpit's life support system.

Missiles corkscrewed in from her right, slamming into a palisade of majestic cypress and thick-boled banyon strung with creeping vines. A few warheads dropped low against her legs, shredding the angular guards that protected her knee joints and lower actuators.

Her stride hitched, stumbled, and then caught up as she shouldered her way into a marshy glade. Planting her spade-shaped feet into the loamy, black soil, Kelly checked her HUD and found Hauptmann Roland Mills—her company commander in the Third Donegal Guards, and her friend—still limping along half a klick behind. Well out of danger. Tightening up on her triggers, she snapped up both long-barreled arms and went looking for trouble.

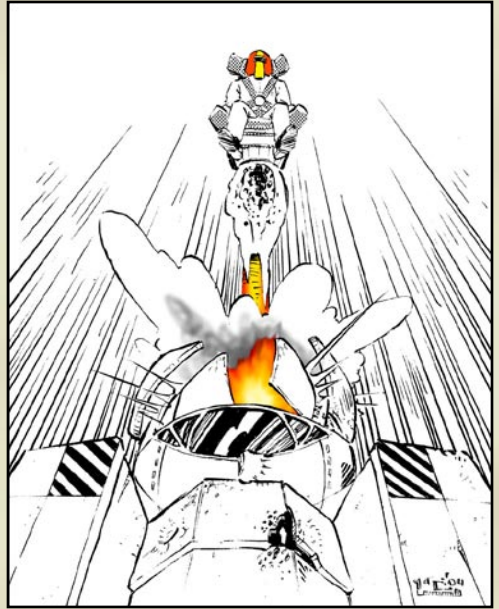
Long licks of bright yellow-flame flashed out of her *Jag's* autocannon as she spent hundreds of rounds into the greenery, implementing her own plan of deforestation. Twenty-mills riding over powerful, ultra-class Nova fifties, the hot metal chewed through thick vines, splintered tree branches into kindling, and rained pieces of shredded fronds over the ground. The powerful, cutting streams walked destructive lines in a narrow arc, reaching out, searching for either of the two 'Mechs in between her and the DropShip.

She found the missile-casting *Dervish* when a leafy screen of branches exploded under her devastating assault. Autocannon slugs hammered in against its chest, as if drawn by the gauntlet

and sword set over a Davion sunburst. The insignia was one Kelly knew well—had called an ally only a few days before, but none of that mattered now. In scant seconds the proud crest of the FedCom Corps had been chiseled away to a battered ghost of its former glory.

Too late to stop.

The *Dervish's* chest caved inward over the fusion reactor. Golden fire blossomed inside the mangled cavity. It spread quickly. The 'Mech's head split open as the warrior ejected, rocketing up and away from the dying machine.



It was the last thing Kelly saw before the fusion-bright flare consumed the BattleMech. The force of the explosion blasted apart trees and scorched a great deal of underbrush to instant cinders. It rocked her *JagerMech* back on its heels as the ground trembled violently.

"Kelly!" Roland's voice crackled to life over her comms system. "Flash and smoke near your position. Can you see it?"

"Not anymore," she said, voice-activated mic picking up her reply.

Spots swam before her eyes, and she blinked away the aftereffects of the glare. A few curly strands of her platinum-blond hair tickled along the side of her face. No reaching them through the heavy neurohelmet she wore, but a practiced head shake matted them against the sheen of sweat on her forehead.

Whatever had been sniping at her with lasers had taken off. The *Dervish* was also gone except for pieces and parts scattered around a smoking crater. A leg, severed mid-femur, leaned up against a bamboo thicket. There was a titanium strut impaled through a nearby banyon. A few determined licks of flame crawled along the scorched trunks of some ironwood, but she doubted it would go much farther. The jungle was far too wet from the recent days of rain.

Kelly throttled forward, cautiously. Suddenly, new warnings screamed for attention as a rust-painted *Vindicator* shoved its way through the bamboo, stepping out into the hole in the jungle cleared by the explosion. She brought up her autocannon, but the wailing cut off as the other 'Mech dropped its targeting lock and paused, ready but waiting. An orange and black tiger striping covered half of the BattleMech's chest, like a pelt draped over one shoulder, but no insignia that she could see.

Kelly paused, fingers caressing her triggers. The *Vindicator* took advantage of her hesitation and dove back into the jungle thicket. Northeast. Toward the DropShip.

The last one.

Roland had given her a moment to collect herself. "One of ours, or one of theirs?" he asked now.

"Ran across one of both," she said. Then sighed. "It was a Guardian," she admitted, swallowing against a sour taste. "First FedCom."

"Damn it, K." He didn't sound mad at her, but at the Fates in general. They had tried so hard not to engage the Guardians. "Well, that tears it."

It was Roland's one fault, Kelly thought. Holding onto an idea of "us" versus "them," or Federated Commonwealth versus the Marik-Liao alliance. That might have been true six months ago, or even six weeks, when the alliance offensive was chewing through the Sarna March. But Katrina-*verdammt*-Steiner tanked that idea when she called home all Lyran commands and the local defensive network fell completely apart. So bad, in fact, that a few stragglers got left behind in the confusion, including seventh company of the Third Donegal Guards.

Roland's company had been deployed to Gan Singh, to try and coordinate with the First FedCom RCT. Only the Guardians were already gone. All they found were a few forgotten warriors—cast-offs or AWOL, didn't matter—butting heads with local militia-turned-mercenary.

The Donegal Guards company either missed the recall order, or it had never been sent once General Hammerskjold decided to cut his losses and return to Lyran space.

Kelly could only wish him a prime location in the deepest circle of hell.

A new silhouette flashed across her tactical screen as Roland limped his *Penetrator* up from behind. It looked quite a mess with its right leg fused into an awkward steel crutch and several lengths of mossy vines draped over its ruined arms.

"What are we waiting for?" he asked. "Let's go, K."

She very nearly smiled at his forced esprit de corps. But six dead friends and four MIA in the last five days was enough to sour anyone's mood. From city to spaceport to remote landing zone, Seventh Company had tried to make rendezvous with any number of outbound DropShips. Always too late. Always forced back by Capellan or mercenary outfits with greater firepower or a larger expense account.

But not this time, she promised herself. Please.

Throttling forward into an easy walk, she took the lead against his best speed of thirty kilometers per hour. They struck along the trail blazed by the fleeing *Vindicator*, and crossed their fingers.

For the next ten minutes their luck held. No weapons sniped at them from the dense jungle. Roland pushed his *Penetrator* up toward forty kph as the trail made for easier travel. Kelly began to hope.

"Think we can afford passage?" she asked. Neither of them speculated the DropShip captain might call allegiance to any one faction of Gan Singh's three-sided battle. These days it seemed "every man for himself" was a predictable situation.

"We can barter against any ransom paid by the Third Donegal. We can deal away what's left of the *Penetrator*."

He'd never once threatened to put a debt against her *JagerMech*. The *Penetrator* was a newer and much more valuable machine, but hers had been in the Van Lou family for three generations. Leased into Lyran service, but still hers. Roland would rather give up a piece of Lyran state property, and suffer the reprisals, than divorce her from a piece of family heritage.

It was the kind of thing he did without thinking, and for that if nothing else Kelly would stick by her hauptmann's side no matter what.

That's what kept her anchored at his side when the sky fell in on them a moment later.

There was very little warning. A glimpse of smoke through the tree canopy from one of the Pandora jungle's many logging slash burns. A tremble in the ground that might have been artillery fire, might have been the first powerful flare of a DropShip's fusion drives lighting off. A screen of ironwood bounced back their active sensors until the last moment. Then they pushed through, and into the chaos of battle.

The DropShip was there all right, ninety meters high, its drive flare washing its underside in white-hot fire. It squatted on the blackened fields of a deforested plateau. *Seeker*-class, and painted a familiar blue-gray. Kelly Van Lou needed only the briefest glance to recognize the shamrock crest of the Donegal Guards and the scales of justice that were the personal insignia of Third regiment.

A good thing, because a brief glance was all she got before a crossfire of lasers and autocannon converged on her location. The lasers scorched the soil at her feet while hard-hitting slugs beat a damaging tattoo across her *Jag's* lower waist. The fire had come from two machines painted the blue and gold of Federated Commonwealth RCTs. A Behemoth assault tank and an *Enforcer*.

Their second salvos went after a *Panther* painted dark, cerulean blue. Nothing she recognized. Another mercenary, or a wayward Capellan perhaps.

All told there seemed to be about a dozen 'Mechs and half that number in vehicles jousting over the black-scorched ground. The DropShip laid out suppression fire from its upper weapons bays. PPCs stabbed down at the non-allied BattleMechs. They left the FedCom warriors alone. Wave after wave of long range missiles pounded machines into scrap and battered the ground into ruin. More than a few, Kelly felt certain, would spread Thunder munitions out into an ad hoc minefield.

Kelly stepped in front of Roland's *Penetrator*, protecting it while holding her fire. FedCom RCT forces had the advantage on the field. And so long as a mercenary did not target her, she would not target them. Dialing over to the protected frequencies of the Third Donegal, she waited to see what sense her captain could make of the situation, listening in as he identified himself.

"Captain Mills?" The reply washed out in static as the lightning blasts of several PPCs ionized the local atmosphere, one from a nearby *Caesar*. It made communications difficult. "We...no Mills listed...deployed to Gan Singh."

Deployed or not, Roland's name should be on the Guards TO&E. And Kelly recognized the voice, even through the communications haze. "Jollena?" First mate Jollena Marksower, from the *Lamprey*. "Jolly, it's K. Kelly! And Roland. You have two tired Guardsmen here looking for evac."

Only one of the *Lamprey's* ramps was still down. Secondary bay. Big enough to hold a couple of BattleMechs, if they could get them aboard.

"K?" There was a pause. The nearby *Caesar* turned its weapons toward the Guardsmen, and Kelly drilled out return fire with her autocannon as a way to shove it back. "Kelly Van Lou, what in the Archon's name are you doing out here?"

"Taking a sightseeing tour! What the hell does it look like?" Kelly had heard the shock in the veteran spacer's voice. How badly had wires been crossed if their own DropShip crew did not know what forces were on planet? And where was the captain? "We need a safe route to board, and good covering fire."

The same *Vindicator* from earlier dodged out of a tight situation and ran back toward Kelly's position. It hesitated as she drew her crosshairs over it, lighting it up, then deliberately turned its back on her to challenge a pursuing *Jenner*. Over an open channel, an accented voice let them know "If you want a piece of the DropShip, form up southwest and get ready to cover our drive."

"We're getting more than a piece of it," Roland said coldly. "Stay out of our way and we may find room for you."

It wasn't exactly their call to make, of course, but Kelly approved. A tentative agreement was better than nothing. The DropShip crew had already made some kind of pact with the FedCom, after all.

"Suit yourself, then." It sounded more like a threat than an allowance.

Then again, a hot battlefield was not the best place to make new friends.

"K," Jollena finally returned, "pull up northwest and come straight in at the ramp. We're out of here in five, so move it now."

"Straight at the ramp?" she double-checked.

"Move it!"

The *Caesar* and a blue-and-gold painted Rommel also shifted in that direction, but not so close to prevent the Guardsmen from moving. Roland led. Kelly stalked at his side, uneasy.

"It would be a lot easier if you brokered a truce between the FedComs and the mercs," she said over an unsecured channel. She warned off a too-close *Panther* with a quick stream of light autocannon fire digging in at its feet. "Make a second trip. Offer to send back a larger DropShip."

"Not happening, Kelly. Way too much bad blood now."

Kelly nodded. "Captain feel the same way?" she asked.

"Just get up here," Jollena ordered. "We'll deal with the mercs next."

It all hung on one word. *Next*. Not *later* or *eventually*. Also with the obvious cease-fire arranged between the *Lamprey* and the Guardians, and the way in which the mercs had tried to warn them. It all added up.

After a week of non-stop fighting and several days of only being able to trust the men and women at her side, Kelly's paranoia had grown acute. Sharp enough to recognize the trap being laid out for them as they moved into range of the DropShip's weapons. The last DropShip on Gan Singh.

Every man for himself.

"Roland. Roland, fall back now!" The dry, metallic taste of fear crept into her mouth. Slamming her throttles against their reverse stops, she backpedaled the *JagerMech*.

Almost too late. The DropShip's weapons hammered down around their position as the *Caesar* and its support tank pushed forward. A pair of PPCs slashed at the legs of Kelly's 'Mech. Aligned crystal steel melted and splattered over the already-scorched earth of Gan Singh.

Missiles hammered around the *Penetrator*, but not so bad as the Thunder-deployed minefield would have been had they walked into the *Lamprey*'s waiting embrace.

"Kelly?" Roland staggered back, getting out from under the DropShip's weapons. "What?"

"Cast-offs. AWOL." No difference now. "They've quit the Donegal Guards and they're not going to want us telling tales about them. Treeline, now!"

Her commanding officer was not one to bandy about with the order of rank when good advice was being given. Kelly let him slip behind her, and used her autocannon to push back at the charging *Caesar*, buying them seconds only.

With more BattleMechs sliding up in their direction, the two Guardsmen might have made a bad end of it if not for the mercenaries. The *Vindicator* and a *Blackjack* also painted with the Bengal pelt suddenly turned in their direction and sprinted inside the *Caesar*'s line of retreat. They savaged the Rommel, blasting one set of armored treads clean off and freezing the turret inside a ruined track. Then they turned up from the *Lamprey*, and came at the *Caesar* from behind while Kelly pushed forward to catch the RCT machine in a pincer.

The seventy-ton machine held on for a few long heartbeats, then broke for the DropShip in a circuitous path that avoided the scattered Thunders and left the slower mercenaries behind. All of the RCT machines fell back, heading for the final ramp.

The scattered mercenaries, with two of their small number out of position now, let them go. Within moments the DropShip had buttoned up and was blasting itself clear of Gan Singh.

Kelly Van Lou watched it rise into the air, soon losing itself behind a white tuft of clouds. Her breath came short and sharp, and had nothing to do with the hot, humid air in her cockpit. It had everything to do with the hollow pit deep in her gut. If the Donegal Guards could turn on each other, she wondered, what was left for the now-estranged Lyran Alliance and Federated Commonwealth?

As if in answer to her silent question, her communications board lit up on an unsecured channel. "We picked up some garbled transmissions." The accented voice from before. The *Vindicator*'s MechWarrior. With a moment to weigh it, he sounded Slavic. Maybe a native of Gan Singh. Maybe not.

"There may be a DropShip set down on the northern coast of Pandora. Near the city of Myros. The last DropShip on Gan Singh," he said tiredly as the remnant mercenaries gathered near their position.

Of course it was. That was the nature of battle and politics, after all. Always one more chance. If you were smart or lucky, or both at the same time. "Working together for this one might be in our common good," Kelly said, then waited for Roland to make the final call.

"It's a ten hour push," he said slowly. "We can do it without sleep if you can."

"Sounds like a plan." The *Vindicator* turned away to the northwest, and struck out with a determined stride.

Roland switched over to a secure frequency. One reserved for Third Donegal Guards, Seventh Company. Maybe the last time they'd use it. "Did they just become one of ours?" he asked. "Or did we become one of theirs?"

"Right now," Kelley answered, "I think we all belong to Pandora. And Gan Singh." She pushed into an easy walk, keeping pace with the limping *Penetrator* as she switched back to a common frequency. "Maybe it's time to see what's left on this world," she said.

"What we have to work with."