

Art of the Deal

by Loren L. Coleman

Only after General Motors contacted Ceres Metals on [Vicore Industries'] behalf was the Capellan company willing to listen to Giovanni's proposal.

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Overseer pro-tem Nikolai Kwiatkowski shivered as he charged between buildings, slipping along the icy, unprotected walk. Frigid gusts whistled through frost-rimed metal framing, the support structure meant for enclosing ferroglass which was still waiting on delivery three years later. A strong blast of wind blew back his parka's fur-lined hood and ran cold hands down the back of his neck. Dry snow, as gritty as sand, stung at his eyes.



Ducking forward, the large man weathered Warlock's arctic grip until he finally bulldozed into the rotunda door. The revolving entryway created a thermal lock for the proving grounds' Operations Center. Shrill alarms rang inside this building as well. Nikolai's thick glasses fogged over and he swiped at them with one hand. Ignoring the elevator, which only seemed to work on alternate weeks anyway, he took the stairs three at a time and arrived gasping for breath with his throat on fire at the second-floor observatory only two minutes after the first perimeter alarm had sounded.

"What in the Chancellor's great-and-worthy name is going on here?"

Not that anyone paid attention.

Sirens continued to blare in three discordant tones as technicians pulled out procedural manuals and argued over their instrumentation. One man switched his tracking station from direct feed video over to broadband satellite. His female counterpart switched it back. On their shared monitor, the image jumped from the blocky silhouette for a *Blackjack* OmniMech, rust-red and looking lost against drifted snowbanks and frosted conifers, to a tactical overview of the local taiga. A large, flashing red icon eclipsed one entire corner of the display. Then back to the *Blackjack*.

Hùn dàn niǔ-kòu tóu-bù! Bastard button heads! Nikolai reached over to the alarm panel and cleared the annoying sirens. Everyone stopped dead as if he had thrown the master disconnect breaker for their brains. The overseer pro-tem switched the nearby station back to satellite and pointed at the red icon.

"What is that?" he asked through clenched teeth.

Jīng-lǐ Fen Xou, the operations manager, bowed perfunctorily. "DropShip," he said in his usual abrupt manner.

"One of ours?" Meaning one belonging to Ceres Metals or the planet's military garrison.

Xou shook his head. "Ours would not set off alarms."

They could, actually. The southern continent proving grounds were off limits on a live-fire day, such as this day with the BJ2-O undergoing its yearly retrials. But if the approaching vessel was a Capellan flight, it was not even trying to broadcast proper IFF clearances. With Warlock sitting so close to the Capellan-Federated Suns border, that likely meant a Davion DropShip.

Didn't the FedScum have their hands full enough with their civil war? They had to make Nikolai's life on this ball of ice more difficult?

Nikolai swallowed dryly. Help, he knew, was at least three hours away at the garrison post of Yumen. Where soldiers of the Confederation were treated to such luxuries as cafeterias, nightclubs, and the Canopian pleasure circus currently on-world. Ceres Metals' usual overseer, Nikolai's boss, was there as well. No doubt enjoying himself. Which meant that responsibility for this breach would land squarely on Nikolai's shoulders.

"We have a visual," one of the techs called out.

Out of reflex, Nikolai looked out the large ferroglass window fronting the room. Snow flurries occasionally pelted the glass, driven horizontally by the sharp, arctic winds. Some of the larger flakes stuck, melting into long runnels that trickled toward the bottom edge. Visibility was intermittent, up to five hundred meters. Any DropShip visible by the naked eye would be landing right on top of them!

He moved to an auxiliary station where the technician had selected for penetrating radar. The computer painted an amber silhouette over the green-black scope.

Spheroid vessel. Military design.

Nikolai scrubbed his palms against the side of his trousers, drying away nervous sweat. Running the *Blackjack's* retrials by himself should have been another small stepping stone toward advancement. This was shaping into an administrator's nightmare.

Then the computer tagged the vessel as an *Intruder*—at 3000 metric tons one of the smallest spheroid-class assault DropShips one could find.

“They assault Warlock with *that*?” he asked aloud. A determined band of Capellan space-scouts could hold off any military force arriving in an *Intruder*. It could not even transport a single BattleMech.

Correction: it might hold *one* Mech if the cargo bay was refitted and you didn’t load too much tonnage in the way of spare parts. Which was apparently the case, Nikolai saw, as a large shadow detached itself from the hovering DropShip and landed under its own jump jet power. The computer was having trouble placing it. Identification jumped back and forth between an old PXH *Phoenix Hawk* and one of the Confederation’s newer 3L *Vindicators*.

“Where did that monster set down?” Nikolai asked sharply. “Is the DropShip landing anything more with it? Where is our garrison support?”

These people were not military-trained, and had not responded with good Capellan discipline to the emergency. But they knew how to get data when an oversight manager asked for it.

“Two hours for Yumen garrison,” Fen Xou reported, answering Nikolai’s last question first.

“DropShip is standing by. No other forces deployed,” a technician at another workstation reported. “Enemy Mech is within two kilometers of our live fire range.”

Within two kilometers of *Sao-wei* Cho Tah Men’s *Blackjack*, then! “Have Cho move to intercept,” he ordered. Perhaps all was not as dark as he’d feared.

“We are receiving a transmission from the *Intruder*.” A communications tech held up her hand for attention. “Vessel identifies itself as General Motors Flight One-one-three-eight-special. With... with the compliments of Governor Giovanni Estrella De la Sangre.” She frowned. Then, “Message repeats.”

General Motors? Nikolai sneered. Worse than the enemy, then. It was their competition.

“Whatever game this Estrella De la...whoever...is playing, I want that BattleMech destroyed. ”

The BJ2-O was on the grounds for its live fire retrieval after all. And bringing the venerable *Blackjack* design back to the attention of the Confederation Armed Forces, with the military's recent infatuation with new technology, could not hurt the reputation of Ceres Metals.

Or his own reputation, for that matter. Nikolai suddenly envisioned this as his ticket off Warlock, the frostbitten *zhì-chuāng* of the St. Ives Commonality. Away from the snow and the icy winds and the long hours spent proving (or finding flaws in) someone else's designs. A post on beautiful, warm Capella would not be too much to expect. Even the world of St. Ives itself would be acceptable. With a nice promotion. Surely he could bargain that in as well.

Dreams which lasted until the *Blackjack* OmniMech finally made contact with the foreign machine.

"A *Phoenix Hawk*," *Sao-wei* Cho reported. "The computer cannot fix on the variant, but I recognize its profile. Something different... *Tā mā dè!* It has reach!"

Reach? Over the Omni? "What variant is Cho running?" Nikolai asked, moving to the corner of the room where technicians monitored tactical screens, tapping directly into the *Blackjack's* systems.

"Alternate configuration 'C', with double long-barreled autocannon."

A 3D, then? But only a single large laser? "Give me guncam feeds on monitors two and three."

New screens winked to life, showing fields of white interrupted by frosted conifers and tall, gangly winter hemlock. The image swung drunkenly as the *Blackjack* stalked forward, swinging its arms around to the right...in time to catch a blur of highly-polished metal erupting through a waist-deep snowbank.

A laser mounted on the back of the enemy 'Mech's right arm slashed angrily below the camera's eye. On the *Blackjack's* wireframe schematic, the leg darkened by several shades of gray as armor puddled to the ground. The BattleMech retreated before Cho angled in with his autocannon.

"Freeze that image and clean it up," Nikolai ordered.

One of the techs did so. It was a *Phoenix Hawk*, all right. No mistaking the lines. But not a 3D; the armor looked reinforced, and more angular than the traditional design. Wide intake ports on the jump jets. Better weapons, obviously.

"Upgrades," he spat the word out with a bad taste. General Motors had been busy, it seemed. It would make the OmniMech's job harder, but would not make the difference.

Except that *Sao-wei* Cho kept reporting a difficulty in acquiring solid target lock. "It keeps ghosting my sensors," he complained, suffering long-range strikes against his chest, his arms, and then a shoulder-to-shoulder slash that burned deep enough to melt through part of his engine shielding.

His return fire was sporadic, and mostly ineffectual. Flechette munitions sanded some armor from the *Hawk's* left side, a bit more from each leg, but more often than not Cho ended up carving local conifers into kindling. Usually right behind where the *Phoenix Hawk* had been standing a moment before.

Nikolai stabbed angrily at the communications board, opening a direct channel to his test pilot. The officer was lower-grade, it was true, but his performance bordered on the embarrassing. "Quit sniping with that *hùn dân* pilot and stand up to him!" It was rare for an administrator to intrude on any live-fire situation, but there was more riding on this than Cho's reputation alone. "Force him to stand and fight."

It was a gamble, playing with a *Hawk* that way. Fifty percent faster and sixty meters of greater reach with its jump jets, Nikolai risked letting the redesigned *Mech* slip behind Cho where it could do a lot more damage.

Then again, as the Omni lost more armor from his left leg and lower waist, its rear-facing armor might just be stronger than whatever it had left up front.

The *Phoenix Hawk* let him come. It raced onto a dry expanse of hard-packed dirt and loose rock, swept clean of snow by the hard winds, and waited for the Capellan pilot. If Cho expected a great advantage in closing—or any advantage, for that matter—he did not see it. His autocannon continued to miss as often as not, while the *Phoenix Hawk* struck at him again, and again. One ruby lance cut deep enough to silence one of Cho's autocannon, halving his effective weaponry.

The *Hawk* had to be heating up by now, not that General Motors' MechWarrior ever let on as he continued to fire the *Mech's* large laser with regular accuracy. It sparked a thought that worried at the back of Nikolai's mind. "Give me a thermal profile of that machine," he requested, feeling a dead weight settle deep into his gut.

"It will switch Cho over as well," Xou started to explain, but the overseer pro-tem cut his manager off with a raised hand.

"Just do it!" he yelled as the *Blackjack* charged forward.

No, the *Hawk* did not appear to be running hot. In fact, its entire heat-dissipation system appeared to be banked toward minimal output. It was a thermal image that Nikolai recognized. So did the computer. Which was why it kept bouncing over to the *Vindicator* 3L variant.

Stealth armor!

"Cho! Cho! Break off from that *Hawk*."

His order went out a few seconds too late. Medium lasers and machine guns tore at the *Blackjack* with savage strength. The ruby fury of its large laser slashed hip to shoulder, finishing off the OmniMech's armor.

Then another laser lance skewered the *Blackjack* just to the right of centerline. This time the enemy pilot found Cho's ammunition bin for the *Blackjack's* autocannon. Lacking cellular ammunition storage equipment, which could have channeled the destructive force out specially-prepared blast panels, the resulting fireball tore through the OmniMech's entire chest cavity. Golden fire erupted in a catastrophic failure of the fusion reactor system, and the guncam screens washed to static.



For a moment Nikolai thought he had lost his man as well as his machine.

Then the camera's eye switched to the safety network built into Cho's ejection seat. Nikolai watched as the crash couch rocketed

up and away from the exploding `Mech, leaving behind a mushrooming cloud which was all that was left of several million C-bills of Capellan state property.

Likely all that was left of Nikolai's corporate career as well. He might be leaving Warlock, all right, but as something other than a civilian. Sending Cho in unprepared. Interfering with a live fire-fight. The Capellan state did not look kindly on failures of this magnitude. And the military would look for any reason not to blame their own man.

"Overseer," the communications technician said quietly, as if worried about disrupting the moment. She tapped the side of her headset. "We have a new transmission from the *Intruder*. They...they congratulate us on a well-coordinated exercise. And ask if we would like them to pick up our MechWarrior before he freezes to death."

Nikolai gripped the sides of the workstation as if his life depended on it, propping himself up, unsteady on his own legs. He had been staring at the death of his career. Now he shook himself out of it, his corporate survival instincts kicking in and recognizing that—for whatever reason—a possible lifeline was being thrown to him.

By the enemy. The competition.

What was General Motors up to?

This was the most unlikely raid in the history of Warlock, if not the entire Confederation. Was there something larger in play here? He perked up. There just might be a chance to salvage something from the ruins.

"Yes," he said, slowly, thinking it out. "Tell them we are happy to have them return our test pilot. And if..." What was the name? "If Gioavanni Estrella De la Sangre has further need of Ceres Metals, then Overseer pro-tem Nikolai Kwiatkowski stands by to receive word."

"Governor De la Sangre's representatives are standing by at your convenience," the tech said after relaying the overseer's response. Putting one hand over her wire-mic, she looked askance in his direction. "Sir, what is this about?"

"I think," Nikolai said cautiously, "the most bizarre inter-corporate memo ever placed."

Which put Ceres Metals, and Nikolai, in one hell of a bargaining position. Warm offices on Capella might not be in the offing any longer, but neither, he hoped, was a cold cell on Sian. He could get used to life on Warlock. Either way, he decided, after this the job would be one hell of a lot more interesting.

He just needed to keep his head above water, and one hand in the deal.