

A NOTE TO READERS ABOUT SECURITY

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BattleCorps Security Team

HIGHLANDER CHRONICLES

Isolation's Weight

By Randall N. Bills

Jacob's Mountain
Tortinia, Kiamba
Benjamin Military District, Draconis Combine
15 April 3067

Lieutenant Cameron Baird watched as the odious-black smoke trail dissipated on the stiff mountain winds. Burning debris rained down across several kilometers. It looked as if the sky was bleeding.

"Can you believe that?" His comm system pounced to life as James broke the silence. "Wow. Too much."



Wow? Watching a Clan *Broadsword*-class DropShip falling through a cobalt sky had been sobering, true. Like a flaming thunderbolt tossed by Zeus's own hand. But Cameron read deeper. What the hell was a Ghost Bear force doing raiding Kiamba? What could be of interest to a lone DropShip on Jacob's Mountain? Surely they could care less about elements from MacLeod's Regiment of the Northwind Highlanders.

He shivered, though he knew the cockpit didn't hold a chill and would soon be anything but cold. He hated it here. Hated the snow and the isolation from anything living beyond the small force around him. Hell, he would've preferred Hecate's Swamp to this eternal cold. But not James. Wherever the action was.

Had Cameron ever been that young? That naïve? He hoped not.

"Yes, James. Wonderful." Did the boy hear the sarcasm? Probably not. The starch of his new cooling vest (handed to him, what, six months ago upon graduation from the NMA?) probably pushed up against his ears, making it hard for him to hear anything. Beyond his own voice, of course.

Cameron couldn't help but let a quirky smile spread his slim lips, a sparkle flashing in hazel eyes. He knew a certain lieutenant colonel who shepherded a younger, stupider Cameron through *his* first year after the Academy. Who almost throttled him on at least ten different occasions. At least.

Cameron reached forward and toggled from the topographical map that displayed across the secondary screen, to radar, as the ghost of Geoff McFadden's words seemed to rise up like holog-

raphy, temporarily blotting out the forward view screen and the snowy terrain beyond.

When you're a leader, you lead And protect. One comes with the other. If you can't protect those under your command to the best of your ability, if you can't lead them to be leaders themselves—well, then you've no business wearing The Bars.

Always the capitalizations in his voice.

Geoff's words seemed to echo in the confines of the cockpit. The man had been the father he never knew; regardless of the weight, Cameron tried to carry the responsibilities he now held with the same dedication and honor his mentor did. How could he do anything less?

The radar began sweeping, pinpointing Caden's lance, Geoff's Old Guard lance and the lance on loan from the Third Proserpina Hussars. Twelve 'Mechs—several green warriors. What would they find over the hill? He checked his secondary monitor and radar screen once more, which showed a pair of *Tatsu* aerospace fighters whipping away at well over Mach two, vanishing over the mountain.

"Thanks for the fire, Hussars. Kind of cold up here." Lieutenant-colonel McFadden's voice broke over the commline.

Cameron smiled and checked the radar to see Geoff's lance the next ridgeline over, but more importantly, several hundred meters closer to the crash sight. He shook his head, feeling the comforting weight of his neurohelmet. "Going to get yourself in trouble, boss," he said, but softly enough not to activate his own mic. With that flight actually attached to the Hussars' Third battalion, and O'Riley's touchiness over having to do combat exercises—regardless of how few were involved—with *mere* mercenaries in this northern, frozen wasteland, Cameron just knew ol' Harrison would make his voice known. Later of course. Always later. And much worse than the original offense.

You'd think the Third Proserpina were a Sword of Light regiment for all their prickliness.

"No problem, Old Guard. Glad to bring a match to the barbecue. Just make sure what we tossed onto your grill is crispy black when you're done. *Hai?*" The unknown pilot's voice boomed laughter, lively and good natured. Cameron felt shock. No way could he be part of the Hussars.

"Okay Highlanders," Geoff's strong voice began, "they've downed some bad guys. Time for us to put them away. Move forward at best speed and engage at will," with the unspoken tag line *before the Hussars lance has all the fun*. A series of affirmatives echoed across the comline.

Of course Cameron would've loved to be taking command of this by himself, but with the Old Guard command lance on hand to help smooth the training issues between elements of MacLeod's Third Battalion and the Hussars' Third...well, he couldn't be happier to have the old man along for the ride.

Cameron reached over and pushed his own throttle forward a half, sending his *Wolverine* into a smart step forward—difficult through the deep snow. One of these days he really did mean to send a surprise gift to the quartermaster who'd managed to acquire several of the new WVR-8K from the DCMS. He'd been in it less than a year, but knew already he never wanted to pilot another machine. He could've probably gotten one of the Clan machines taken off of Huntress due to his credentials at the Academy, but he felt confident nothing would've felt this good. This right.

"Okay, boys," he spoke up to his own lance, "you heard the boss. Bad guys over the ridge and we get to clean up the mess. Provided the fly boys left us any scraps."

The responding laughter felt good. Although he was serious. With the way the DropShip had come down, he wouldn't be surprised if they found nothing but a black smear against pristine white.

Ten minutes passed way too slowly. Manipulating pedals and joysticks to maneuver through the thick powder and heavy woods, he kept an eye on the radar, which showed almost a dozen green darts moving forward to the guesstimated position of the downed craft. With the high iron-content of the mountain, good readings of what they would face were simply not coming in. He knew the DropShip held a capacity to carry five Clan 'Mechs. But how many of them could possibly have survived?

The Old Guard made contact first; the heavy boom of autocannon fire echoed across jagged rocks and lonely copses of trees as McFadden drew first blood with his *Hatchetman*. Cameron's own lance simply could not move quickly enough and McFadden wanted a taste of action before the Hussars. Typical.

"Okay boys. Let's show 'em young bloods can keep up with geriatrics."

He stomped down on his pedals and vented plasma lifted his fifty-five ton machine into the air, sublimated snow blasting around him in a send-off halo. He landed smoothly and launched again, just about cresting the ridge where the battle unfolded. Then remembered only Karli's *Starslayer* mounted jump jets. Ben's *Hollander* and James' *Wolfhound* didn't have the benefit and he couldn't leave them over the ridge.

Had to lead. Had to protect.

"Come on boys. I know the Academy gives you better pilot training than that. Let's get a move on, eh?" He tried to infuse as much good natured humor into his voice as he could, tried to hide his worry. Regardless of the strides to narrow the technology gap between the Clan and Inner Sphere, Clan 'Mechs still outclassed Inner Sphere pound for pound.

Geoff could pilot circles around almost anyone he knew, but depending on what lay over the ridge...Cameron's own lance could make all the difference.

Flashes of sapphire and ruby lit the sky over the ridge, along with the detonations of multiple heavy explosions. Cameron gripped joysticks in sweat slicked hands. Willed his lance to move faster.

"They've got some serious life left in them," Geoff's voice startled him with its immediate urgency. "If we don't take down that *Mad Cat*, and I mean now, we're going to be in a world of hurt. Lance, target the *Mad Cat*. I'll deal with the *Rifleman*." The comline descended into a low babble once more.

A *Mad Cat*! Damn. A *Rifleman*? His mind swirled. What the hell. Did he mean a *Rifleman IIC*? Why would the Clans be fielding an Inner Sphere design?

He had to wait. A single 'Mech might not make the difference, but a lance would. Beside, he couldn't leave them. Had to lead.

He stared at his radar, demanding it provide more information. Suddenly he realized at least one of the Hussars had been able to move around their own ridge onto the plateau and appeared to have engaged as well; the tag read *Tai-i* Matsu. His assault *BattleMaster* would lend considerable weight to their side.

His own lance finally pulled even. "Okay boys, over the ridge and give 'em everything you got," he said. Cameron prepared his weapons to follow his own advice and ignited plasma once more, sending his *Wolverine* up and over the ridge...to hell.

Spread out before him, a small, but terrifyingly urgent battle unfolded on the under-sized plateau. The downed DropShip still burned, sending up a huge bloom of smoke; a fallen *Thor* next to the massive rent in the *Broadsword's* flank told him not all the 'Mechs survived. Yet a thousand meters in front of him held a *Mad Cat* and *Rifleman*, with an *Arcas* off to the side, all weapons blazing and hammering the Highlander forces and the Proserpina *BattleMaster*.

He saw the Rasalhague logo inside a bear's head outline on the machine: First Rasalhague Bears. The *Rifleman* addition to a Clan force made sense now

As Cameron brought his own machine down to earth once more with a last gush of flame and stretch of myomer, he watched as fire lit underneath Geoff's *Hatchetman*. Time seemed to dial down until he could perceive individual autocannon shells and PPC beams hung suspended in mid-air. The *Hatchetman* flew forward, on a collision course with the *Rifleman*. The pilot simply squared its feet, lined up both rotary autocannons and let loose a barrage that practically obscured its outline. Twin, horrific streams of vomiting death slashed into the *Hatchetman*, eating and tearing away at armor like a bear savaging its meal, mortally wounding the metal giant.

"No!" Cameron managed to scream, as time swooped back to normal.

With an expertise few might have managed under such circumstances, Geoff kept the *Hatchetman* on course as limbs began to tear away under the murderous fire.

Like a metal rockslide, the *Hatchetman* crunched into the *Rifleman* with a sound that could be heard even above the din of battle. Both toppled down in a mangled heap of metal limbs.

Cameron would never be able to remember the next ten minutes. A haze—formed of tears and rage—seemed to blanket out his perception. One moment he watched his idol (his father) die and the next he stood over a fallen Ghost Bear machine, firing endless kilojoules of energy into the blasted scraps—all that remained of the *Mad Cat*.

As silence descended, shame replaced his rage. Geoff would be rolling over in his metal grave at such a loss of control. *He* had done what needed to be done. Had lead.

Had sacrificed himself to protect his command.

Though Cameron tried initially to do the same, he too easily fell off. Too easily besmirched the bars (The Bars) he wore. Too easily forgot his heritage.

He blinked away the tears and the last shreds of his incapacitating haze. His command needed him. They needed to mop up and find out what might be here that would tempt the Bears; the rest of the raiding force to deal with elsewhere.

He swallowed several times. Tried to set aside his shame for another day and opened up a general frequency commline.

Time to lead.

