

**OF WAR AND
PEACE AND
CHERRY TREES**

Part I

By Steven Mohan, Jr.

The Castle of Unheard Screams
Newport, Richmond
Pesht Military District
Draconis Combine
14 November 3062

When the beast came for Shintaro Yamada he was kneeling on the rough stone floor of his cell, his back to the small window, head bent and eyes closed.

The unusual part of this situation was not that Yamada was meditating.

Meditation was all Yamada had left and he allowed nothing to stop him, not the brutal beatings, not the hunger that gnawed at his guts, not even the bouts of despair and self-doubt that must come to all men.

No, the unusual part was the beast, whom Yamada had not seen for many years.

Yamada was a short, powerful man dressed in shabby, gray overalls tight enough to reveal muscles of steel. He'd once worn his hair in a warrior's topknot, but not any more. Since coming to the Castle of Unheard Screams, he'd shaved his skull clean.

He wasn't a warrior any more.

Prison, especially a prison as tough as the Castle, breaks most men. But for others it's a crucible that fires and hardens the spirit. Yamada was such a man. In fact, he'd grown so calm and certain during his years in the Castle that half his guards thought he *had* been broken.

The other half thought he was crazy.

And perhaps he was.

Beyond his window, which was a square fifty centimeters on a side, was the thing that Yamada loved most in the world: a cherry tree, its gnarled brown-black limbs heavy with pink blossoms. Yamada approved of cherry trees on general principle—they were one of the few Japanese symbols appropriated by House Kurita that still spoke to him—but that wasn't why he loved this one.

Shintaro Yamada loved *this* cherry tree because an incompetent gardener had planted it too close to the prison wall.

As it grew, the beautiful tree was crowded by the lifeless wall. Early in the tree's growth its branches had pushed against the wall but, of course, the stone would not yield. Later, the tree's trunk began to grow at an angle, like some trees will do when subjected to a constant wind. And so this majestic organism, though twisted by an instrument of evil, had found a way to be a cherry tree and not a wall.

That endeared it to Yamada.

Though he loved that tree and longed to see it, he did not go to the window.

Instead, he used the tree's presence as an exercise to strengthen his soul, for when evil tries to bend a good man to its purpose it will use that which he loves most to accomplish the task.

To his great sorrow, Yamada knew this to be true.

So he was kneeling on the hard floor without even a *tatami* mat to cushion his knees when he heard the jangle of keys and the heavy stone door scrape open.

Yamada did not raise his head. Did not open his eyes.

The part of him still adept at tactical analysis noted that it was not yet time for the mid-day meal. A beating, then? For the entire term of his imprisonment he had known nothing but these two alternatives. Inwardly he shrugged.

It did not matter.

Then a deep voice spoke. "It has been many years, eh, *Sho-sa*?"

The part of Yamada's mind still capable of analysis identified the voice as that of *Tai-sa* Hikotaro Maru of the ISF.

The beast.

It would take all his strength and skill to resist this man.

This beast.

"It has been six," Yamada said as calmly as he could manage. "And I am no longer a *Sho-sa*."

"We took away your rank," said the beast. "We can give it back."

Yamada opened his eyes and looked up.

The beast looked just as Yamada remembered him. He was a timeless, changeless figure. An icon of unspeakable evil. Like Yamada himself, the beast was on the short side of average. He had a round, pleasant face, and his black hair was tamed by a salaryman's conservative haircut. He wore a dapper gray suit and a scarlet tie. The tie was the one flaw in his appearance because it bordered on the memorable. Evil does not wish to be remembered. Evil is clever and tricky, and so it fashions its servants from the mundane, the everyday.

The common.

"What do you want?" asked Yamada.

"On the 18th of October the Alshain Avengers attacked the capital of the Ghost Bear Dominion."

Yamada's tactical mind suddenly saw what the beast was after, the whole thing laid out before him like some horrible banquet of death and dishonor.

Clan Ghost Bear would retaliate, of course. And with much of the front-line DCMS deployed along the Lyran border, the Ghost Bears would easily conquer the worlds along their own border.

Unless the DCMS could raise a reserve force capable of fighting a holding action until they could be reinforced by regular units. Of necessity, the reserve force would be made up of green officers pulled from the academies.

And led by a few carefully chosen veterans.

"I will not do it," said Yamada firmly.

"I think you will," said the beast.

"I am a criminal."

The beast shrugged. "This is war."

Yamada laughed bitterly. "*Hai*, and war is the great crime before which all other crimes kneel."

"I like you Yamada-san," said the beast. "You know I've always liked you."

"Yes," said Yamada without a trace of irony, "I know. But I swore long ago to serve only the cause of peace. To fight against war in all its many guises."

"The cause of peace." The beast sighed. "See where it has brought you?" He indicated the cell with a sweep of his hand. "You, a hero of the Clan Invasion."

"You put me here," said Yamada.

"You left me no choice, Yamada-san. Surely you can see that. You had become a symbol of the peace movement. It's one thing for scruffy radicals to march for peace, but when a man of your stature speaks out, well... it undermines House Kurita's legitimacy. We couldn't have that."

"lie," said Yamada dully. "We couldn't have that."

The beast squatted down so he was eye-to-eye with Yamada. "You must tell me, Yamada-san. Why did you choose this path? Whatever else passes between us, I, I must know." Real doubt clouded the beast's features.

It was a masterful performance.

Yamada did not have an answer, at least not one that a man like the beast would understand. "The Fourth Succession War," he said wearily. "The War of 3039. The Clan Invasion. Our meddling in FedCom internal affairs. And now this war with the Ghost Bears. It never ends, *Tai-sa*. How many young warriors must die before it finally ends?"

The beast studied him for a long moment, no doubt considering which argument would sway him. "No one loves war, *Sho-sa*. I, myself, tire of the—"

"You know nothing of *war*," said Yamada savagely. "Torturing desperate prisoners in dark rooms is *not* war. *War* is the sharp odor of fused electronics, the smell of cinders and ash, the reek of blood. It's the thunder of eighty mil slugs ripping through your armor. It's seeing a young *Hojuhei* lying dead..." Yamada's voice broke. He hated himself for showing weakness before the beast. He swallowed and continued, "...lying dead on the field of battle, his body entombed in twisted and scorched metal. *That* is war, *Tai-sa*. Something *you* know nothing about."

"I see now," said the beast. "So we should not fight the Clans. We should allow them to roll through the Combine. Raise our children

in sibkos. Genetically engineer our people. Teach us to worship at the altar of war.”

“No one needs to teach House Kurita to worship at the altar of war,” Yamada shot back.

The beast smiled. “Come now, Yamada-*san*.”

“I will not fight for the Coordinator,” said Yamada firmly.

“I ask you not to fight *for* something, but *against* something.”

“*lie*.”

“I ask you to fight against *war*,” said the beast, “for surely that’s what the Clans are, war incarnate. And did you not just tell me that you have pledged to fight against war in all its guises?”

And so the beast tried to bend Yamada to his will using that which he loved most.

Then, in a flash of insight, Yamada saw how he might turn this trap against the beast, like the cherry tree suborning the wall’s will. He found the beast’s eyes with his own.

Hai.

The beast did not even grant him the dignity of speaking that single, small word before a broad smile stretched across his common face.

DCMS Command Center, Newport, Richmond
Pesht Military District
Draconis Combine
16 November 3062

The very first place Yamada went after he was released from prison was the planet's command center. The warden brought him a working uniform with the insignia of a *Sho-sa* on the collar. Yamada slipped into the hated uniform and then the beast drove him to the command center.

He left one prison and entered another.

The command center was a white-washed stucco box. Nondescript. Practical. His shiny new boots clicked on the drab, gray tile as he followed the beast to the main briefing room. The two men slipped in unannounced and took positions against the back wall.

Yamada had known what he would find at this briefing, but it still shocked him. None of the officers clustered around the holotable looked old enough to have graduated from the academy, though they all wore a *Chu-i's* rank.

Children.

The Coordinator was sending children to die.

And for what?

There was no way they would hold this world against Clan Ghost Bear. Not this world. Or the next. Or even the next.

The briefing officer entered the room and the young cadets came to attention.

"At ease," she called out. "My name is *Tai-i* Deborah Cahill of the Richmond Reserves. *Tai-sa* Schmidtt of the Second An Ting Legion has given us the honor of defending the city while his forces attack the enemy's DropShips."

She was a young woman, too young for this kind of work, not yet twenty-eight, surely. She was short, even for a woman, standing no taller than one meter sixty, with the kind of athletic build that resulted from working out in a gym. She wore her honey blond hair just off the collar. Her eyes were a clear, soft green. Her face was unmarked by scars.

So this was the woman the Coordinator sent to preside over the death of children.

"I won't lie to you," she said to the assembled officers. "We have drawn a difficult, dangerous duty. We have only the few 'Mechs left to us when our regular forces withdrew. We are to hold this world for the Combine against Clan Ghost Bear until we are reinforced by a front-line DCMS unit."

There was silence in the room as the youngsters digested that bit of news.

After a moment Cahill nodded to herself and said, "This is how we're going to do it."

The lights dimmed and a hologram appeared, a map of the capital city. Newport stood on the banks of the New James River nestled within a great evergreen forest. The New James was a wide, powerful river, 600 meters across at its widest point and deep enough to accommodate ocean-going shipping.

"The key to Richmond," said Cahill, "is Newport. The capital is home to the HPG, the principal spaceport, and a quarter of the world's population. If we can hold Newport we can hold Richmond."

Heads nodded around the table.

They so wanted to believe.

"The forest provides a natural defense, making it hard to move in 'Mechs and armor. Only three arterials cut through the forest." She pointed to a trio of gray, ferrocrete ribbons that intersected the city from the south, the east, and the northwest. "Since the Ghost Bear DropShips landed on the Derrington Plateau we expect them to move in from the south. We will guard this access with two companies of 'Mechs. We will leave another company under the command of Jensen at the northwest access and a lance under the command of Domoto at the east access."

More nods. She sounded so *certain*.

"Are there any questions?"

Of course there were none. They were too young to know they even *could* ask questions.

"Then good fortune to you and your units. May your bravery serve the Combine."

She was answered by a shouted chorus of “*Hai!*”

The lights came up and the young officers filed out of the room, leaving Cahill alone with Yamada and the beast.

She looked at Yamada and her green eyes narrowed. “So this is Shintaro Yamada. The traitor.”

“That is for the ISF to determine,” said the beast tightly, “not you.”

For a moment Cahill’s gaze flickered back to the beast and her lips pressed into a thin line. But even this rash young officer was wise enough not to speak against the ISF.

Not on a matter of loyalty.

She turned back to Yamada. “What do you think of my plan, *Sho-sa* Yamada?” She placed an exaggerated emphasis on his rank, mocking him.

And suddenly Yamada found he was furious, furious at this woman who was too stupid to see that she had just sent a roomful of children out to die. “I find your plan to be pedestrian and obvious. As will the Ghost Bear commander unless he is a fool.”

Cahill’s mouth popped open as if it were spring-loaded. “How dare you—”

“Fortunately, I will only need a lance of ‘Mechs to fix it.”

Cahill blinked. “A *lance*. I have only four companies to defend the entire—”

“Your assumption that the principal attack will come from the south is stupid and wrong.”

She glanced angrily back at the beast.

He just shrugged.

Cahill’s jaw set. “So you’re saying they will ambush us along one of the other roads.”

“Ambush us?” Yamada slowly shook his head. “*lie*. Look. They think of us as barbarians. As an army of rabble. They will not expect us to answer a *batchall*, but they will still seek to follow *zellbrigen*. That is their weakness. They must be who they are.”

Cahill shook her head; she *still* didn’t understand. No wonder the beast had demanded his help.

Yamada pointed to a bridge that crossed the river in a long, graceful arc. "The east access crosses the New James here. That's why you assigned only a single lance to this road, isn't it? Because you've set spoilsport charges on the bridge."

The beast looked from Yamada to Cahill.

"*Hai*," said Cahill. "If we take heavy pressure in the east, we'll retreat across the bridge and blow it. Without it they can't get their support trucks across. A combined arms force will become a mere gaggle of 'Mechs."

"So of course they'll focus on one of the other two routes," said Yamada.

Cahill folded her arms across her chest. "I assume the Ghost Bear Star Colonel can read a map."

"Oh, you can be sure of that, *Tai-i*," said Yamada.

"What will they do?" asked the beast, clearly fascinated.

"The principal thrust will be against the bridge. They will match *Tai-i* Cahill's 'Mechs one for one. *Zellbrigen*. But—" He held up a single finger. "Honor is not the same thing as stupidity. They will hit hard and fast. The 'Mechs will be piloted by their best warriors. And since they'll need to hold the bridge as well as capture it, they'll bring infantry, too."

"Elementals," Cahill whispered.

"They'll cut through your little cadets like a laser through flesh," said Yamada.

She swallowed. "I'll blow the bridge now."

The beast offered her an arctic smile. "Why would you do that, when you know what they're going to do?"

Cahill looked at Yamada. "How can we possibly beat them?"

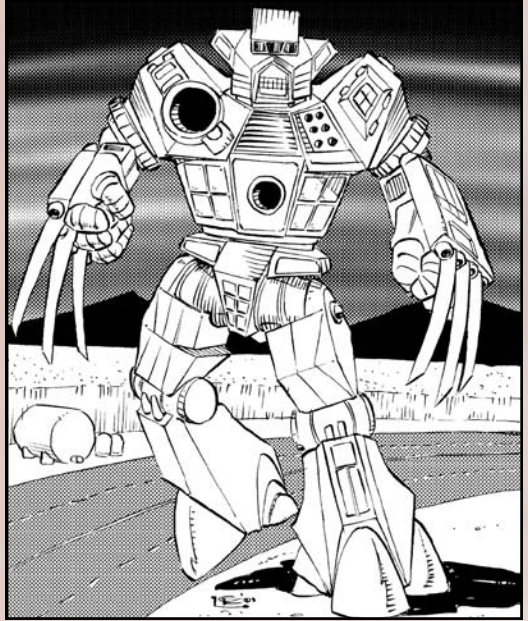
Yamada favored her with a wolf's smile. "They are expecting barbarians. So. Let's give them what they're expecting."

The beast threw his head back and laughed.

**Main Commercial Arterial
Outskirts of Newport, Richmond
Pesht Military District
Draconis Combine
17 November 3062**

Star Colonel Christer Hall, commanding officer of the Fifth Bear Regulars of Xi Galaxy, stepped his massive *Kodiak 2* out onto the highway, leading his modified Star of BattleMechs away from the field of wheat they had just trampled through.

The *Kodiak* was a garrison 'Mech that sported a squat, powerful body. Its flat head, snout, and triangular ears gave it a distinctly ursine look. And it did not just *look* mean.



It carried an immense Ultra-20 autocannon in its right shoulder and a pair of Streak SRM-6 launchers in its left. Mounted in the center of its chest just below its reactor was an extended-range large laser. And the *Kodiak's* designers had given it medium lasers mounted on each hand, just over the knuckles. The great bear even possessed a trio of titanium "claws" on each hand, the perfect last-ditch weapon for a 'Mech caught in a desperate close-quarters battle.

The *Kodiak 2* was also equipped with powerful jump jets that gave it more mobility than its cousin.

Hall's 'Mech was a heavy-duty monster designed to smash an enemy or stand its ground and take a pounding. Which, if Hall had been the kind of man who was inclined to introspection, was exactly how he would have described himself.

If he were very lucky and very good he might take Newport today and with it Richmond. And then he would take the Howling Bears on to the next Combine world.

Hall had sent one of his assault trinarys and a supernova to give the DCMS the overwhelming attack it undoubtedly expected along the southern route into the city. He had split his other trinary, leaving Alpha and Bravo Assault Stars behind to defend his DropShips and sending Charlie to attack the northwest road. But all of these moves were feints.

The real action would be along the lightly-defended eastern route.

He had pulled together a strike package out of his Supernova Trinary Command. They would hit the forces defending the bridge hard and fast. A grim smile touched Hall's lips. The DCMS would never know what had happened.

Hall walked forward a quarter of a klick until the plains gave way to an evergreen forest. He brought his garrison 'Mech to a halt and the three other war machines in his Star stopped with him. The tremor of the 'Mechs' footfalls slowly died away, swallowed by the silence of the dark forest.

On Hall's maps this route into the city was marked as the "Main Commercial Arterial": four lanes of reinforced ferrocrete designed to accommodate heavy trucks carrying grain from the east and AgMechs going the other way. Hall did not worry about the highway's ability to support his 100-ton *Kodiak*.

He did worry about an ambush.

No traffic moved on the highway. It was deserted.

There was nothing to see but the road itself and the trees. Giant pines, cedars, and firs crowded together like soldiers eager for battle. Sentinels ten, twelve, even fifteen meters tall.

Tall enough to hide a 'Mech.

He glanced down at his radar repeater. Waves of static washed across the screen, making it hard to read. The world's defenders had hidden small ECM emitters in the woods, making it hard to discern the tactical picture whenever they passed one by.

Hall knew he would meet the city's defenders on this road, but he did not for a second believe they would step forward and challenge him like true warriors. There would be surprises and trickery and deceit. Any doubt he had about *that* had disappeared when he heard of the cowardly attack on Alshain.

"They are expecting us," said MechWarrior Ivan over the common frequency. Ivan piloted the *Viper* that stood in front of Hall's

Kodiak. Behind Hall was MechWarrior Dag in a *Nova* and Star Commander Birgit in her *Mad Dog*. All stood perfectly still, more like monuments than war machines.

"Of course they are expecting us, MechWarrior," snapped Hall. "Try to keep the comms channel clear for important observations."

"Aff, Star Colonel," said Ivan meekly.

Hall switched his comms suite to HF for long-range comms. "Epsilon, this is Alpha. You are in position, *quiaff?*"

"Alpha, Epsilon." Hall recognized Star Commander Annika's confident voice even over the imperfect synch of the encrypted link. "Aff, Star Colonel."

"Excellent, Star Commander. We will join you shortly. Out."

A grim smile twisted Hall's lips. Perhaps the soldiers of the Inner Sphere believed the concept of *zellbrigen* limited his Clan's ability to fight. Well, they would soon find they were not the only ones who could be clever.

Hall keyed the 'Mech-only channel. "Elementals are in position. Move out."

He pushed his *Kodiak* into a lope. The highway shook and the trees trembled with each stride. Hall hoped the road would hold together under the pounding of his 'Mech's run. It would do little good to capture the bridge if his assault force tore apart the highway.

The three other 'Mechs which, paced by the swift *Viper* soon passed by the *Kodiak*. If an enemy 'Mech waited in ambush, the *Viper* would make a tempting target. But its speed would give Ivan a better than even chance of surviving a surprise attack. Once Hall caught up to the sniper the battle would be over.

Hall deeply disliked using such tactics. *Concentrating fire*. He gritted his teeth. But he liked losing even less. And if the DCMS 'Mechs showed themselves, he promised himself he would engage them in honorable battle in accordance with the dictates of *zellbrigen*.

"I have sighted the enemy, Star Colonel," Ivan called out. Hall could hear his excitement even over the link. "I turned the corner and there they—"

"Delta, this is Beta," cut in Star Commander Birgit. "What is your position?"

"Grid Square One Four," answered Ivan. "At the opening."

Hall knew instantly where he was. For most of its run the highway paralleled the river, but a decade before an engineering project had straightened an oxbow, leaving an opening in the forest nearly 800 meters in diameter.

"Are they hiding in the woods, *quiaff?*" asked Dag, the *Nova* pilot.

"Neg," answered Ivan. "They are lined up as if waiting for us, a *Sunder*, a *Black Hawk*, and a *Bishamon*."

Hall frowned. Inner Sphere lances normally fielded *four* 'Mechs. Where was the fourth? "Delta, Alpha. You have sighted *three* enemy 'Mechs, *quineg?*"

"Aff, Star Colonel," answered Ivan. "Three enemy 'Mechs."

Hall chewed on that for a moment as his 'Mech plodded toward the *Viper*'s position.

He liked the potential match-ups. The *Sunder* was a worthy opponent for his *Kodiak*, the *Black Hawk* a heavier version of the *Nova*, and the *Mad Dog* could be paired against the spider-like *Bishamon*. But if there were a fourth DCMS 'Mech out there somewhere an ambush was still a possibility.

Unless the local commander had deemed the bridge not worth defending with more than three 'Mechs.

In either case, there was nothing he could do about it now.

"Hold, MechWarrior Ivan," ordered Hall. "Unless they break the rules of *zellbrigen* we will engage them singly. I will take the *Sunder*. Star Commander, you will engage the *Bishamon*. MechWarrior Dag, you will take the *Black Hawk*. All units fall back and follow my lead. Epsilon, your status?"

"My special detail is holding for your order, Star Colonel," was Star Commander Annika's crisp reply.

"Very good. It will come soon, Star Commander. Stand ready."

The timing was delicate. He wanted the DCMS forces focused on his 'Mechs when Annika's Elementals slipped in *beneath* the suspension bridge to cut the spoilsport charges that had to be there. That meant she could not go until his 'Mechs were fully engaged.

His *Kodiak* lumbered past the rest of the Star. Dag and Birgit brought their 'Mechs up to speed to follow.

"Star Colonel?" Ivan said.

"Hold here," said Hall. He spared a glance at the dark forest surrounding them. "And see if you can flush out that fourth 'Mech."

Hall came to a bend in the road that traveled to the right. A thick growth of trees obscured his view into the opening beyond. The forest was thinner to the left and the ground worse. Out of the corner of his eye Hall could see the shallow depression that had once been the river's course and beyond that the deep blue of the river itself.

He selected an open comm channel and said, "I am Star Colonel Christer Hall, a bloodnamed warrior of Clan Ghost Bear and commanding officer of Xi Galaxy's Fifth Bear Regulars. I hereby invoke the ritual of *zellbrigen* and challenge the pilot of the *Sunder* to a duel of warriors. In this solemn matter, let none interfere!"

His radio crackled and a voice said, "This is *Chu-i* Domoto. Bring it on, Clan scum."

Hall allowed himself a smile. "You have much to learn about insults, my friend. As well as war. Fortunately you are about to gain instruction from an expert in both."

He peeked around a stand of Douglass firs and found the Combine 'Mechs right where Ivan reported they would be. The ninety-ton *Sunder* was a blocky beast. Its cockpit was located under a missile rack, making it look a little like a metal box with limbs. It was not particularly fast, but Hall had no illusions about its ability to fight. The *Sunder* was heavily armed and armored and this one sported a rearing Kurita dragon the color of blood on its left shoulder.

All this he saw in a fraction of a second.

Hall jerked his left arm up and fired two emerald beams of light at the Combine OmniMech. He just had time to see his lasers miss low, scoring armor on the *Sunder's* right thigh, before he ducked back behind his makeshift cover.

A second later a bolt of lightning from the particle projector cannon in the *Sunder's* right arm incinerated Hall's cover and set the brush ablaze. The trees had deflected most of the force of the blast, but a quick glance at his wireframe schematic showed a few patches of yellow mixed among the green.

Hall loosed a flight of Streak missiles and stepped his *Kodiak* back behind another stand of trees.

The *Sunder* answered with another bolt of PPC energy that set fire to more trees. Hall backed his 'Mech up one more time.

As he moved, he saw the *Bishamon* skittering towards the river. It was a logical move. The design would give it an advantage on the uneven ground. Not that that small advantage would save him when he faced a warrior of Clan Ghost Bear.

"Birgit, the *Bishamon* is moving off to the left. You can cut him off if you move through the forest."

"Aff, Star Colonel," answered Birgit. She sprayed the forest on their left with fire from her arm-mounted lasers, felling trees and burning away brush. Clearing a path.

It was a dangerous maneuver. If Birgit lost her footing she would go down hard. And if the *Bishamon* closed with her, its natural stability advantage would be even greater in the woods. But if she made it to the treeline unopposed, the forest would give her some cover as she attacked. He did not dare order her to run through the opening for an attack the *Bishamon's* flank.

That would expose her to all the punishment the *Sunder* could dish out.

Hall ducked left and let loose another volley of laser-fire, then he ducked back. The lasers and SRM's had not done much to slow down the *Sunder*, but he could not bring his large laser or auto-cannon to bear without exposing himself to return fire.

The huge Combine 'Mech answered with more PPC fire.

A sheet of orange flame consumed the trees before him. They had quite a cheerful little blaze going. Hall could hear the dull roar of rushing air and the crackle and pop of wood split by sudden angry heat. Sweat stung his eyes. Maybe that was the *Sunder's* plan.

Burn him out.

Hall swallowed hard. It would take more than a little heat to scare away the commander of the Howling Bears.

The growing forest fire was playing hell with his thermal sensors, but it would impact the enemy the same way. He was happy

to let the woods burn. It meant there was no DCMS 'Mech hidden in the forest to his right.

He dodged around the burning forest and traded ineffectual fire with the *Sunder*.

He and his partner were performing an intricate waltz. Time to shake things loose a little.

"Time to get you in the fight, Dag. I am going to step forward and engage the *Sunder*. You dart in and take the *Black Hawk*, *quiaff?*"

"Aff, Star Colonel," said Dag enthusiastically.

Hall switched to another channel. "Annika, go thirty seconds from now. Mark."

"Aff, Star Colonel."

Hall drew a deep breath and stepped past the growing blaze. He let loose with the Ultra-20 Autocannon mounted just below his right shoulder, another flight of Streak missiles from his left, and a sizzling ruby beam from the torso-mounted laser.

His cockpit temp inched up another couple degrees, but the *Sunder* staggered back under Hall's sudden assault.

Out of the corner of his eye, Hall saw Dag's *Nova* charge the *Black Hawk*. That split second was precisely as much time as he had to think about his subordinates, because the *Sunder's* pilot regained his balance and stepped forward. The blocky 'Mech raised its arms and let loose with a twin-PPC blast from its right arm and the autocannon in its left.

Just as Hall tapped his jump jets.

His *Kodiak* hopped to the right. The bolt of PPC energy just missed, but he felt the autocannon find its mark, slashing across his torso.

Hall loosed another volley of Streaks. They flashed in and impacted the *Sunder's* chest. For a second a wreath of smoke obscured the other 'Mech's view. Hall used that time to turn and hit his jump jets. A volley of laser fire just missed him low.

His comms unit crackled in mid-jump. "Star Colonel, this is Star Commander Annika. We have cut the wires and secured the bridge."

"Already?" answered Hall.

"Aff, Star Colonel. We met no opposition."

No opposition. Could the defenders of this world be *that* incompetent? What was going on?

Hall tapped his jump jets again to slow his fall and took the landing in a crouch. He still felt the shock in his body and heard the crunch of shattered ferrocrete.

He half-turned and stumbled forward as a volley of Streak missiles caught him in the back. On his wireframe schematic his right shoulder armor flashed from green to yellow.

Hall managed to maintain his balance and turn. He could not get a lock—both thermal and electronic sensors were out—so he took his aim with the Ultra-20 in his right shoulder and walked it toward his opponent.

The *Sunder* pilot managed to avoid the barrage of shells by quickly stepping his 'Mech to the right, but it gave Hall time to dodge around a stand of burning trees. Ordinarily a copse of pine, burning or otherwise, would be poor cover but with sensors down the *Sunder* could not get a lock. Since he did not know where Hall was, the Combine pilot dared not close and risk the *Kodiak* getting off a kill shot. So the *Sunder* was reduced to taking random shots at the burning forest.

Hall used the momentary respite to assess the tactical situation. His Elementals held the bridge, so once he dispatched the Inner Sphere 'Mechs he would control a route into Newport.

Dag had chased the *Black Hawk* part way down the highway, getting them out of the clearing and shielding both 'Mechs from the firepower of the two giants. Hidden behind the right spur of the forest, Hall could not see how that battle was going.

To his left, Birgit was fencing with the *Bishamon* on the uneven ground near the river. She seemed to be using her forest cover to good advantage, but she was moving with a noticeable limp in her left leg. Must have damaged a knee joint.

Hall dodged around burning forest and fired his left hand lasers. He was playing a lethal game of hide-and-go-seek with the *Sunder*.

Time to finish him off.

He hit his jump jets and leapt over the burning patch of forest.

He cut out his left jet a moment sooner, allowing the right jet to turn him in mid-air. For an instant he was outlined against the blue sky, vulnerable to attack. The *Sunder* raised his right arm and lightning sizzled the air.

But missed Hall.

And then he came down. Hard.

Less than fifty meters from the *Sunder's* left side.

Hall covered the distance in five or six quick strides. He grabbed the *Sunder's* left arm and pushed it up and out.

The *Sunder* pilot triggered his massive autocannon. The arm shook and vibrated with the discharge of hundreds of rounds. The stream of autocannon fire passed harmlessly to the left of the *Kodiak's* bear-like head. Hall held on for his life.

He leaned forward to slash the *Sunder's* back. The titanium claws on his right hand ripped through armor, shredding it to tatters.

The *Sunder* pilot pivoted around his trapped arm, bringing the other arm to bear.

Hall let go and stepped in back of the turning *Sunder*.

Only a second—

Hall raised both hands and poured eight beams of emerald fire into the *Sunder's* back, quickly melting through what was left of the armor and the reactor shielding below.

Then he jumped.

A half-second before the *Sunder* pilot ejected.

Hall brought his *Kodiak* down in time to see the *Sunder* go up in his rear monitor. One second he was looking at a proud 'Mech of the Draconis Combine Mustered Soldiery and the next the war machine was consumed by the golden fire of an angry sun. Hall pushed his 'Mech into a run, knowing he was still too close.

Armor telltales on his back blinked from green to red as he caught shrapnel raining down from the shattered *Sunder*. He stumbled but managed to keep his feet.

He glanced at his wireframe schematic. His back armor was gone and the armor shielding his own reactor in the front was seriously depleted. In addition, he felt a stiffness in his left arm, no doubt damage from the death grip he had held on the *Sunder's* arm.

But he was still standing.

Which meant the bridge, the city, and ultimately, the planet, would soon be his.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Birgit's *Mad Dog* go down.

Ruby light flashed and the *Mad Dog's* left leg crumpled. Birgit's 'Mech toppled over, crashing against the ground with an impact that Hall felt in his bones.

"Star Commander."

Nothing.

"Star Commander."

No answer.

How had Birgit, a Star Commander of Clan Ghost Bear, been defeated so quickly? The *Bishamon* pilot must indeed be a great warrior. If he survived the next encounter Hall would take him as *isorla*. Hall's *Kodiak* was banged up, but even with his battle damage he ought to be able to dispatch the spider-like 'Mech easily enough.

He turned to face the *Bishamon* and selected an open channel. "I am Star Colonel Christer Hall of Clan Ghost Bear. I hereby invoke the ritual of *zellbrigen* and challenge the pilot of the *Bishamon* to a duel of warriors—"

His radio crackled with static and then a voice said, "Don't you think you'd better ask me first?"

Hall saw something moving in his peripheral vision and glanced to his left.

Rising out of the river was an *Atlas*, water cascading off its boxy form, its grinning death's head painted flat white, its gleaming silver body picking up the orange glow of the inferno raging all around them. This was not a 'Mech.

It was an angel from Hell.

With a flash of insight Hall suddenly understood: who had truly felled Birgit's *Mad Dog*, the real reason for the jamming, and how the forest fire had masked the thermal signature of the *Atlas* hiding in the river.

Hall just had time to credit the evil vision, when the monster let loose with its hip-mounted Gauss rifle. The 125-kilo projectile slammed into his left side and he staggered backwards...

And almost went over.

"Ambush!" Hall shouted over the 'Mech circuit. "*It is an ambush!*"

He had barely regained his balance when the *Atlas* stepped forward and blasted him with its two large lasers, vaporizing great slabs of chest armor. The temperature in the cockpit spiked and alarm klaxons blared. The *Atlas* had gotten part of his reactor shielding.

He would not survive another hit like that.

He let loose with his shoulder autocannon, but the *Atlas* charged right through the hail of gunfire as if it was not there. Suddenly Hall knew this was it, the end to all his magnificent ambitions, the end to everything.

The *Atlas* raised its arms for the kill shot...

Then jerked its head to the left as a flight of short range missiles impacted its chest.

The *Atlas* turned to face Ivan's *Viper*, which had raced into the clearing.

"You took my opponent, Star Colonel," said MechWarrior Ivan cheerfully over the 'Mech channel, peppering the *Atlas* with emerald needles of light from his pulse lasers.

No wonder the *stravags* had left the bridge undefended. Why worry about infantry when you can crush your opponent's BattleMechs? Hall had been lured into the perfect trap. He keyed the strike force comms circuit. "This is Star Colonel Hall. All forces, withdraw. I say again, *all forces, withdraw.*"

As Hall watched, the *Atlas* turned and aimed its Gauss rifle at Ivan's *Viper*.

"Hit your jump jets, Ivan!" Hall shouted.

But Ivan did not flee.

And the Gauss slug smashed into his cockpit.

For a fraction of a second, before Hall hit his own jump jets and pushed his *Kodiak* into a series of great, bounding leaps, he saw the *Atlas* standing there like an avatar of death, limned by the yellow-orange light of the fire. Instead of the Kurita dragon Hall expected, the 'Mech sported a different insignia on its left shoulder.

A twisted tree, its dark limbs heavy with pink blossoms.

To Be Concluded...