

SHADOWS OF FAITH

by Loren L. Coleman

A people always ends by resembling its shadow.

~Rudyard Kipling

The truest light often casts the darkest shadows behind men.
The power of true faith is never to be taken lightly.

~Jerome Blake

TALES OF THE JIHAD

-Prolog-

***World Cathedral
Hilton Head, Terra
12 September 3067***

"Something must be done!"

Cameron St. Jamais smiled, hearing the strong voice of Alexander Kernoff rise above the din of the arguments. He hid his grin behind a hand, smoothing down his thin, dark goatee as Kernoff's powerful command swept through the dimly-lit Spire reverberating in power not wholly natural. Its sheer volume shook the five crystalline podiums growing up out of a translucent floor, but an undercurrent of angelic harpsichord and some time-delay echo gave Kernoff's voice its real strength of conviction and god-like authority.

Precentor ROM had broken the safeguards restricting use of behavior modification synthesizers within the Spire. Again. Or he'd subverted the latest True Believer tasked with maintaining those encryption algorithms.

Either way, Cameron counted it another victory for the Toyama.

Someone, after all, must bring order. Especially as this latest gathering of the Ruling Conclave had gone the way of so many before it. A tug-of-war between Word of Blake's two strongest factions. Power brokering. Agendas to promote. Plans laid against the future. And, always, a wealth of resources to divide.

Hilton Head Island was no stranger to such activity, of course, having been so long under the aegis of ComStar. And here as well was where Word of Blake chose to return their own seat of

power, constructing their World Cathedral over the ruins which had once housed the First Circuit. A grand edifice, unlike anything conceived or built by Terra's former tenants, the cathedral was a perfect wedding of state and church, historical tribute and technological advancement. Brilliant, white marble façade set over strengthened ferrocrete and coated with a laser-refracting glaze. Wide, columned portico, its thick pillars cored with electronic countermeasures. And a functional space-defense system—capital class lasers and particle cannon—hidden within several tall spires along the roof.

Inside, such devotion to "militant aestheticism" was just as complete. Walls of the nave and chancel paneled with holographic plates, able to dissolve into the illusion of a woodland setting, a star-lit spacescape, or battle-scarred plains (among many other choices) at a command from any one of the Conclave leaders. An eight-bay transept, each station fully shielded and capable of assuming full local control over Terra's hyperpulse generators and—with careful coordination—the HPGs of several neighboring star systems as well.

And atop the *Genius Loci* Tower, the *presiding spirit* of the cathedral, was the main Spire where only a member of the Ruling Conclave could be admitted.

A domed observatory with full holographic control of its environment, currently the five senior precentors manned their individual stations beneath a nighttime sky filled with bright, bright stars. Arranged equally around the circular arena, each crystalline podium was alive with a soft, golden glow radiating from deep within. And as the three men and two woman traded glances with each other following Kernoff's excited (and excitable) outburst, a backwash of light splashed up against expressions of annoyance, and concern, and not a little anger.

The bickering faded. Though more, Cameron suspected, as the others quickly readjusted their own filters to prevent Precentor ROM from wielding undue influence.

As he himself did, sliding his fingers across the holographic controls displayed above his podium's glowing, faceted surface. The dim light played little against his dark skin, and the gold striations radiating at the heart of his podium—"god stars" Precentor Willis had once called them—dimmed even further beneath a strong, blood-red tint. A not-so-subtle hint at the processing power being used by the Precentor Martial. More than any others among the Conclave.

"Something *is* being done, Alex." Precentor William Blane finally answered Kernoff's demand. "The Allied Mercenary Command is being slowly marginalized."

Precentor Blane stood to Cameron's left. Leader of the True Believers faction and a friend of Captain-General Marik, Blane was often the public face of Word of Blake. As usual, he leaned lightest on his podium's resources. His "heart" was pure and golden. The backwash of light turned his white, brocaded robes a soft, buttery gold. His eyes looked like sunken pits, however. His face drawn and haggard.

Too many days spent fasting? Or too little sleep?

Blane passed a shaky hand over his podium, activating a pre-set program. Overhead, the holographic representation of a Milky Way spacecape faded down to black, to be replaced by a much more basic map of the Inner Sphere. The five Great Houses. The minor powers, including what was left of Rasalhague. The Clan holdings. Thousands of star systems representing billions upon billions of lives, all paying homage to their petty, nationalistic governments.

Two systems in that backdrop glowed unnaturally bright. Terra. Birthplace of humanity and seat of power for Word of Blake.

And Tharkad.

"It is a time to tread cautiously," Blane said. "The third transfer of power is upon us. In just over two months, the Star League convenes its fourth triennial conference. The first order of business will be a motion to elevate Word of Blake from probationary status within the new Star League to active membership with full voting rights." He looked about. "We do not want to tip our hand ahead of time."

"Nothing is more important," said Precentor Laura Chang on Cameron's right. A tall, slender woman with military bearing, towering above her podium, and another True Believer if only by default. One of few Expatriate leaders to survive the last two years of purges, she kept a strong core of her followers under Blane's guidance to help balance out power within Word of Blake.

"Of course you would agree with Precentor Blane." Dampening fields dropped Kernoff's voice to an acceptable level, though a *slight*, off-focus timber had Cameron wondering if Word of Blake's spymaster still slipped behavior modification undercurrents into

his tone. "It took Victor Davion's ascension as ComStar's Precentor Martial to open your eyes to the light."

Chang leaned away from St. Jamais, toward Kernoff on her other side. "My eyes have remained always open, Precentor ROM."

Still, Cameron did not miss the shadow which drifted across her face. Similar to the one which darkened the "god star" shining in the heart of his podium. Again, Cameron stroked the thin goatee shading his chin.

What was Chang hiding?

Not her aversion to Alexander Kernoff, or the Toyama faction, that much was certain.

Cameron lowered his hood, laying it back across his shoulders, then returned his hands aside the podium to grip the cool, faceted edges. "Precentors," he said. "We've no time to quarrel."

He let a soft touch to his voice carry where shouting might have been ignored. As the man who commanded Word of Blake's military arm, he had no need to run roughshod over the Conclave. No one could afford him as their enemy. There were still whispers about Willima Willis. "God stars" indeed.

"If Precentor Blane has new concerns about the Star League summit," he said, "I would like to hear them. Perhaps the ComStar audit has been more successful than he let on?"

An attack, but a subtle one. And not without merit, his concern. The resurrection of the Star League in 3058 was, by one way of thinking, mankind's first enlightened step in over three centuries. Three hundred years of deprivation and depredation—as the Blessed Founder, Jerome Blake, had forewarned. Now, possibly, on the verge of recovery. At the last conference, Blane working closely with the Free Worlds League's Captain-General, Word of Blake had been admitted to the august body as a probationary member. But there had been...concerns. Mainly that the Free Worlds League enjoyed undue influence over Word of Blake due to their close political and economic ties. ComStar had been charged with the investigation.

If the light which flickered so uncertainly on Tharkad (host to this year's conference) was indeed Blake's promised beacon, it would not do to be caught unawares.

Especially by the heretics.

"No," Blane said. He waved a thin hand. "Nothing so terrible. ComStar's lack of faith makes it easier to blind them to the truth. They could never believe a pack of 'zealots and misguided faithful' could possibly hide anything from their 'all-seeing' eyes."

Which summed up the difference between Word of Blake and their false brothers quite well. Both believed in the safeguarding of technology, though for the Blakists it was a divine charge. And both organizations still oversaw portions of the vast interstellar communications network which tied together the systems and worlds of the Inner Sphere. But just as ComStar's secular changes under the Mori Heresy, led by the devil Anastasius Focht, caused an irreparable schism, they'd also wrapped the heretics in self-righteous agnosticism and logic.

They'd forgotten the strength of true faith.

They'd forgotten how to keep the real secrets.

"A copy of ComStar's audit has been forwarded to your personal attention," Blane promised. "They found no more than point-eight percent discrepancy against our original declarations."

"We could have done better."

This last was from Precentor Anuska Brezhnic, the fifth of the Ruling Conclave's five precentors. She sat on the far side of Blane in her powered chair, shattered legs bumped right up against her shortened podium. Once a part of the Counter-Reformists, smallest of the ruling factions within Word of Blake, she now led them in place of the late Willima Willis as a splinter-group of the Toyama; in the same way Cameron St. Jamais led the revolutionary 6th of June and Alexander Kernoff the growing One Voice movement. She rarely spoke unless asked a question of and even more rarely voted, preferring to abstain. It was how the Toyama and True Believers kept the peace now that they had split the Conclave between themselves.

"I say we could have done better!" When she did voice an opinion, Anuska Brezhnic would not be gainsaid, or ignored.

"We could have," Blane finally said. "But anything less would have looked suspicious in the *absence* of corruption. Even one full percent in graft, kickbacks and payoffs would be considered light by way of the Successor Houses."

She pounded a fist against the arm of her powered chair. "We are *not* a Successor House." Cameron nearly smiled again, thanking her for the continued attention leveraged at Blane, but did not.

"We are Blake's shepherds. Though we may not always know his will, we continue his work."

"We all continue the Blessed Blake's work," Kernoff said, careful not to patronize her, "in whatever way we must." A pause. His bright blue eyes found each precentor in turn. "And I *still* argue that we must not let a pack of filthy mercenaries challenge our divine cause."

Back to Wolf's Dragoons and their Allied Mercenary Command.

It put Cameron in a difficult position, with Kernoff leading the Toyama these days and the fact that he shared the other man's frustrations with the meddling mercs. In the last year, especially, the Dragoons and their allies had thwarted military operations on Hall, on Helios, and made difficult further undertakings on another half dozen worlds surrounding Terra. Undertakings aimed at the establishment of a new Terran Hegemony. It had taken Precentor Blane's chief political handler sent to Hall to rescue that situation.

But by making it an issue among the Conclave, Kernoff opened the door to an internal investigation of the Precentor Martial's methods. His effectiveness. Precentor Blane had opened too many such doors himself in the last few years; it didn't do to give him a standing invitation.

"Outreach," Cameron said, naming the Dragoons' world. Turning it into a sneer of distaste.

A few quick-keyed commands made the system glow brighter on the overhead star map as well, flashing a dangerous, glaring red. Only two jumps from Terra. The world responsible for over sixty percent of all mercenary hiring within the Inner Sphere. Seat of the Mercenary Review and Bonding Commission.

"Our on-planet agents make a convincing case for a preemptive move." Were incredibly strident on the subject, in fact. "Maybe it *is* time to...review...our failsafe position." Said in such a manner to promote action, not more administration.

And as he'd suspected, Blane wanted no motion brought forward to actually do anything. Not so close to the third transfer of power. Not when everything they'd waited for all seemed ready to land in the lap of Word of Blake.

"We can entertain that at our next meeting," Blane said. "Perhaps. Any application of hidden assets, do not forget, will set off a flag against ComStar's *completed* audit."

Stressing once more the value of fast-approaching Star League summit.

Oh yes, Blane had his own agenda to promote. Or, more to the point perhaps, he had *Captain-General* Marik's agenda to promote. The ruler of the Free Worlds League would likely be the next First Lord of the Inner Sphere. He and Precentor Blane relied much on each other, and no doubt Blane saw their alliance giving him power to break the Conclave and assert himself—finally—as Primus. Formal director over Word of Blake.

Was that blood Cameron smelled? A vulnerability?

"A wise decision." He folded arms across his chest. His dark, voluminous robes draped easily along his lean frame. "I should, naturally, undertake a personal review of all contingency plans before making any recommendation. And any course of action would be precipitous, considering our lack of strong intelligence concerning the Dragoons' movements."

He would seem to be capitulating to Blane, and scoring fresh blood against the leader of his own faction at the same time. But if the True Believers' leader saw it coming, he had the sudden steel to not let it show on his face.

"Of course, I would then submit that Precentor ROM be given access to further resources. In order to investigate any possibility of threat from a mercenary action."

Kernoff did not bother to hide his smile. Even went so far as to nod his encouragement to St. Jamais. "Did not Blake once say, 'information is ammunition?'"

Blane hesitated, then nodded. "And whose resources do you propose we gift Precentor ROM?" the precentor asked. He shrugged, as if the question hardly concerned him. No doubt girding up for a battle over shared resources between True Believers and Toyama.

Blood. Oh, yes. Salty and warm. "We still have unallocated forces and material resources stemming from last week's decision to pull our support from Sian. Sun-Tzu's decision will not to be without repercussions, after all."

There were several thin smiles. Even Chang, though likely everyone in the room knew very well Blane had already marked those "freed and unallocated" resources for his continuing efforts within the Free Worlds League. Not that he could admit to it.

"It is a simple shift to task those resources to support our efforts in the Chaos March and against Outreach," Kernoff said, assuming there would be no objections.

There would not be. Precentor Blane was cagey enough to poll the room on his own, see that there were three obvious votes in favor, and even Chang would have trouble arguing against the allocation. Cameron watched the argument play out over Blane's face. Saw him nod. "Very well. Shall we meet again to discuss what these resources have purchased us? In...one week?"

"I shall need at least three to begin new operations."

"We seem to have settled on two."

Two weeks. The outside limit before Cameron and Blane had to leave for Tharkad. For the summit. As it was, they would rely on a partial command circuit of JumpShips, relaying from one star system to the next, before splitting up to join their WarShip escorts already en route.

Which meant any oversight of Kernoff's actions would be slight, at best.

It worked nicely.

"Blessed be those who walk along Blake's shining path," Blane said, offering a quick prayer for the end of the council, and their continuing efforts to prepare. "May they avoid the shadows of desolation, and be ever ready for the darkness ahead."

"Blessed be," the others said. Including Cameron.

And then he was rudely disconnected from the Spire's interface.

To others in the room, *physically* there, he knew his body had slowly faded away before their eyes. But for him the Spire suddenly blinked out of existence, to be replaced by a swimming feeling of vertigo as the neurofeedback loop which had kept him connected between Mars and Terra suffered complete degenerative failure.

Darkness.

Falling.

A cold, metallic taste at the back of his throat.

And then the world came crashing down on him from all sides in a riot of color and sound and labored breathing. A world turned one hundred eighty degrees from what he had believed only seconds before.

In theory, it was an elegant solution for when Cameron or Kernoff visited the Mars Research Station. Point the MRS hyperpulse generator at one of the Terran stations and create a real-time link. No appreciable time delay. Devote high bandwidth to carry a full-sensory virtual reality signal, and link his podium within the Spire to the replica built here within the simulation chamber.

In fact, the local technology was so very similar to what Cameron had once used in MechWarrior training, though advanced far beyond a simple combat simulation.

The ultimate in telecommuting.

But while his consciousness had never been truly transferred earth-side, the illusion had built up *momentum*. Similar to the way a man on a treadmill, running in place for any length of time, can step off the track and then suddenly reel back as his mind was torn between the idea of running without moving, and then not moving without running.

Here, his reality had been stretched for so long within the illusion, it truly felt like a rubber band, snapping back into form, or nearly so.

Cameron St. Jamais sagged to his knees. Pounded a fist against the side of his leg, using the pain to help focus his thoughts.

With care he stripped the sim-gear away: a cloth cap wired with electrodes which had fit snugly over his head, and the wired gloves. Then he laughed, dry and brittle, and slowly hauled himself back up the podium.

Gone was the darkened arena of the Spire. The simulation chamber had reverted back to simply displaying the MRS lab, relying on the same image-transference technology used in the mimetic armor of a Purifier battlesuit. Not quite perfect. A watery distortion blurred his surroundings.

He ignored this and checked the logs still displayed on the podium's holographic screen, confirming his suspicions.

Then he cracked the seal on his chamber, and stepped out into the real lab with its stainless steel fixtures and white porcelain

countertops. A static charge in the air made the short hairs on his arms and the back of his neck immediately stand up, bristling. The ozone scent of warm electronics left an acrid taste in his mouth. Reels of fiber optic micro-cable lay strewn about the room, along the walls and spooling over the floors, connecting the large computer core resting within one workstation bay to various stations filled with diagnostic equipment.

CSDI-2103 was stenciled on the block-shaped core.

Two doors led from this room. A double-wide sliding door of brushed steel. And a much smaller personnel access hatch recessed in the back wall of the lab. Not secret, the smaller hatch, but definitely not for just anyone's use. Cameron paused near the hatch, and thumbed his DNA onto the small control panel. The hatch irised open and he activated the communications circuit as well.

"Lab A-14, cleared for use," he said. The technicians could return now, and complete their latest analysis.

Then he stepped through the hatch, which whispered shut behind him.

Cameron stood in a long corridor hewn through solid rock, fused and polished until the walls gave back a dark reflection. Glowing runners along the floor and ceiling provided enough light to see by, just.

He turned to his left and pushed off in a gliding walk, perfectly at ease in Mars's point-three-eight gravity. His boots scuffed the floor between long, casual strides. His formal robes would have been impractical, and so had also been a construct within the virtual reality illusion. Instead he wore a uniform jumpsuit of light gray, with a high, dark collar, and a simple cloak weighted at the hem to flow more naturally in the light gravity environment.

"There was a problem?"

The voice whispered through the corridor, pushed through hidden speakers. It had a scratchy sound to it, as if it had been poorly scrubbed by filters to prevent identification. Though Cameron knew such was not the case here.

"Nothing but a small demonstration of ability," he said.

He directed his comment in no particular direction. The corridor—the entire research station—was wired with thousands of omnidirectional mics for sound pickup. He knew this as well.

"Precentor Blane has broken our safeguard locks on the Cathedral's priority override system." He anticipated the next question. "It would be a waste of resources to try and rebuild them. If he's willing to let us know his progress, it is because he's sure of himself."

"Circles within circles," the bodiless voice said.

More like boxes within boxes. Blane had yet to figure out that he was hardly tunneling through security walls. No doubt the True Believer thought himself digging deeper into the mysteries of Word of Blake. Certainly he still believed himself in a position of true power.

The truth would be made clear to him, to them all, very soon now.

A four-way junction. Cameron caught himself at a handhold, looked left and right, out of habit. He saw one of the trusted adepts hauling a large sled of components down the right-hand corridor. Ahead, he knew, the corridor bent around toward an underground hangar bay. He turned left again.

"And Kernoff?" asked the voice.

"Is frustrated by the Dragoons' efforts to camouflage their next move. The mercenaries are shuffling around their regiments and independent battalions. Two of them, he is certain, are registered incorrectly with the Mercenary Review and Bonding Commission. They will claim it was an oversight, and pay a small fine. But now that the Northwind Highlanders have activated escape clauses in their current contracts to head home...it is suggestive."

"Or it may be nothing but shadows," the whispers said, chasing him along the corridor. "To err is not merely human, Cameron. It is often an imperative of the species. In the absence of knowledge, or faith, ignorance rears a dark and terrible head. But who errs? Is it Kernoff? Or do the mercenaries truly tempt our wrath so close to the third transfer of power? The agents of chaos and subversion, challenging Blake's light?"

Cameron recognized the rhetorical questions. Knew the way his master often thought out loud, even in the abstract. He came to another hatch. One of several along the corridors, and no different than any of the others. Not at a glance.

But it was different. Oh yes.

Beyond *this* hatch the mysteries of the universe were often challenged, wrestled with, and thrown down. It was where Blake's shining path truly began.

He placed his thumb against the control panel, and waited while a DNA sample was checked against the security clearances, the time, and the whims of the man who was the true strength behind Word of Blake.

It irised open, and Cameron slipped into the large underground workshop. Dropped immediately to one knee. His cloak billowed behind him as if stirred in a breeze.

He kept his head bowed, though his gaze was up and searching the shadows. There was the computer center rotunda at which he'd already logged thousands of hours, combing through rosters and force strength estimates and countless communication logs. And the holographic imaging table, capable of working with new technology simulations or battlefield displays or anything in between and of a combination.

The sensory deprivation tank, now wheeled back against the nearby wall, lid standing open as if waiting for its next victim. Perhaps an Inner Sphere leader next time. Perhaps St. Jamais. Again.

There were the sounds of motion far back in the dimly-lit space. Cameron had no way of knowing if the sounds came from Him, His automatons, or His protégé.

No way to detect his master's presence at all, until the shadows parted and a man shuffled forward. Not a giant of a man. Not even a great deal of physical strength in the way he moved, or stood, or occasionally shifted from side to side as if he might change his mind at any moment to return to his all-encompassing work.

But power—true power—was rarely measured in such small-minded details. *This* had been the greatest lesson to learn of them all. Strength of will. Strength of thought. Strength of *faith*. These were what mattered. These were the blades capable of slicing clean through those knots tied into the fabric of the universe by the actions of unenlightened men.

Someone, after all, must bring order.

"We have many plans to set in motion," that same voice whispered.

And raising his head, Cameron St. Jamais smiled.

BATTLECORPS



***Harlech
Outreach
18 October 3067***

"Gray One to all Dragoons. Wolf Actual...down! Wolf Actual is down!" A crackle of static. Then, "Set Condition Feral."

Wide swaths of Harlech still burned. Entire city blocks lay in flame and ruin, and dark, roiling smoke scorched the sky, blotting out the sun for the third straight day. Fires baked the air so dry it stole the moisture from a man's body the moment he cracked his cockpit hatch. As if Hell itself had come visiting.

Yet Captain Jason Williamson of the Dragoons' Home Guard felt ice spike into his gut at the transmission. A thick, frozen blade digging around inside him, then ripping its way up his spine. For an instant—one incredibly long and painful heartbeat which thundered in his ears—he was back on the high, frozen plateau of Jolo Island, on the world of Elgin, listening to his comms sergeant relay another damning message. Another defeat.

Another commander lost.

A single heartbeat was all the time he had. The rogues weren't above striking while his guard was down. Caught in a cross-fire between an ancient -3U *Clint* and a fresh-from-the-factory Earthwerks *Thunderbolt*, his own *Gallowglas* shook desperately as the *Clint*'s particle cannon carved into one side and the *T-Bolt*'s light Gauss hammered a hard-edged blow on the right. Ruby lances and emerald darts slashed in behind, the lasers scarring and scoring deep, deep into his BattleMech's armor.

The *Gallowglas* stumbled backward, out of the intersection Jason had been holding. Thin-poured concrete on the street's sidewalks cracked and caved in beneath his feet.

It took him out from under the *T-Bolt's* crosshairs—not a small favor—and all that prevented the seventy-ton machine from going down was the five-level parking garage he fell against. He caught at one of the metal guardrails with his BattleMech's left hand, tearing the steel rail half out of its concrete foundation, twisting it into a ruin.

Leaning forward, putting his own balance to the test, Jason dug in with throttle and foot pedals to lever his '*Glas* back into the fight. Large hands wrenched at the BattleMech's control sticks. Already his finger tightened down on the main trigger.

Dragging his targeting crosshairs up and over, he found the *Clint* advancing at a run, coming right at him down the double-wide street, and centered the target right dead-center across the other BattleMech's square-bodied torso. In a crackling, violent discharge, the PPC on the *Gallowglas's* right arm struck at the *Clint* with a twist of hellish, blue-white energies. It cored through all that was left of already too-thin armor. Burning. Gouging. Then Jason thumbed the firing stud mounted on the upper ridge of his control stick and added both lasers from his right-side chest to the injury.

One sliced deep into and through the *Clint's* right arm, dropping a severed hand to the ground.

His second laser punched a bright-red lance into the gaping wound already burned through the '*Mech's* chest. Through the *Clint's* gyroscopic stabilizer. And right out the back.

Forty tons of upright, walking war machine relied on many critical systems, not the least of which was a highly skilled, highly trained pilot. But a MechWarrior was more than a simple throttle jockey. Through the heavy neurohelmet all MechWarriors wore, his sense of balance—his "inner ear"—was translated into a regenerative feedback signal which worked with the gyros, fed it information, and strained against gravity.

Jason had just cut that particular cord.

The *Clint* staggered and sprawled out across the street, grinding sparks beneath it as it slid across the intersection. It ground to a halt not ten meters in front of Jason's *Gallowglas*. Struggled to right itself.

Sweat burned in Jason's blue eyes and his breathing came in careful, shallow gasps as the waste heat from the 'Mech's fusion reactor bled up through the cockpit deck. His temperature gauges, never good to begin with as he fought his way through the burning city, spiked hard through the yellow and edged into the red.

Condition Feral.

Elgin.

Jason chopped back on his throttle, and sidestepped his machine toward the *Clint's* head. He brought one large foot up, and then crashed it down once...twice against the side of the angular "face."

After the second stomp, there wasn't much left but a tangle of metal and ferroglass and (somewhere inside) mangled flesh.

"On your right, Captain!"

The warning very nearly came too late. As it was, it barely gave Jason a second to think before the warning screams of a missile lock pierced through the cockpit's tight confines. But a lot could be done in a second.

Enough time for a glance at his heads up display, to see the golden icon of friendly forces moving up behind and that bright, burning red of an enemy target as the *Thunderbolt* cleared the corner and took the intersection.

More than enough to shove down hard against his foot pedals, cutting in his jump jets.

The thrusters lifted his *Gallowglas* on fiery jets of plasma, rocketing up, up over the street as the *T-Bolt's* missiles slammed into the ferrocrete street and blew a few extra holes in the corpse of the hapless *Clint*. The light Gauss slammed out with another of its nickel-ferrous slugs, taking down a street lamp and bowling over a parked car stranded curbside.

Committed, there wasn't much the *Thunderbolt* could do except throttle back and try to make Jason's jump a hard reach. But too late. City fighting favored close-in scraps and brawling tactics, and the rogue mercenary had been too eager for the kill.

Leaning to one side, working his own sense of balance against the already-overtaxed gyros, Jason turned the 'Glas though an almost-graceful jumping spin. Timing the short "flight," he feath-

ered back on his thrusters to dip low as if ready to crush the *T-Bolt* beneath two shovel-bladed feet in much the same treatment he'd spent on the *Clint*. One last goose on the jets, though, and he cleared the wide-shouldered BattleMech with a half dozen meters to spare and then cut the burn completely to drop in a bone-jarring crouch just behind the sixty-five ton enemy machine.

Speared his targeting reticle dead-on over the *T-Bolt's* wide back.

Wolf Actual is down!

Saw the crosshairs burn with a deep golden tone.

Set Condition Feral.

Tied every weapon into his master circuit with a quick toggle and a yell of blinding rage. Yanked back on the trigger. Again. And again.

Elgin.

And again.

His particle cannon worked the most devastating damage against the stricken *Thunderbolt*, flailing at the other 'Mech with a scourge of manmade lightning. Deep, raw-edged rents carved down the back of the machine's powerful outline. Shards and splatters of molten composite rained down over the street's black ferrocrete.

He had little but a guess that his first PPC blast might have cut into some of the struts which helped support the *Thunderbolt's* massive gyro. He knew that his first combination of scarlet lances and flurry of emerald darts cooked away at least a ton...ton and a half of armor spread all across the back and legs of the *T-Bolt*.

The impact. The armor loss. Before Jason's second furious salvo the machine already staggered forward, dropping to its knees then sprawling full length to pile up against the already dead *Clint*.

His second blistering assault carved away more armor, and chewed in behind a knee to ruin the joint. Power spikes put a strain on the reactor, and his temperature gauge pushed heavy into the red. Jason slapped at the shutdown override.

His third salvo (maybe) was the one that put a laser beam into the back of the *T-Bolt's* head. His fourth certainly found the ammunition bin caved in the struggling 'Mech's right side. It erupted in a tall gout of fire and smoke and debris, blowing out through

special blast-directed chambers to preserve the BattleMech and the MechWarrior's life. Whatever was left of either.

Not a great deal. From further down the street, an assault-class *Annihilator* stalked forward leading a short column of armored vehicles and tanks, including a pair of Badger tracked transport vehicles.

As Jason beat against his overrides, preventing a heat-induced shutdown, the *Annihilator* raised one double-barreled arm and blasted all that was left of the *Thunderbolt's* head clean away.

An abrupt lull after several frantic moments. Jason stared down at the two dead machines, at mostly his own handiwork, and found he did not have a great deal of pity left to spend on these rogue mercenaries. Not after three days of slaughter and setbacks and non-stop battle. He barely remembered the three hours of sleep he'd been forced to take before he was back in the cockpit again. Nor would he accept another forced rest period. He might be a battlefield orphan, adopted by Wolf's Dragoons after his abandonment in the Chaos March, but Outreach was his home as much as he had one. And that home was in danger.

It no longer mattered to him who the attackers were, even. He knew the Fifty-first Dark Panzers were in on it. Some said Smithson's Chinese Bandits as well. *Everyone* talked about Colonel Waco: his *BattleMaster* had been caught on battle rom footage leading the charge from TempTown. And many suspected Word of Blake. Especially after one of their Bloody Hand *creations* had been hauled out of the rubble at the power generator station.

But these two? The *Clint* and the *Thunderbolt*? They were simply his enemies. Same as the ones who had detonated fuel-air explosives in the Home Guard barracks three days before. Same as those who led the first assault, or the second, or the third. Just the same.

Jason was past putting a name to the machines. No member of Wolf's Dragoons had that luxury today. Not now.

Not anymore.

He stepped back from the wreckage, panting heavily as he sucked at the scorched air in his cockpit. Every breath pulled white-hot coals down into his lungs. Sweat burned with a salty taste on his upper lip. Stung at his eyes.

Blinking to clear his vision, he surveyed the approaching forces. The information on his HUD tagged them as Home Guard, as did

the insignia on the *Annihilator* and both Badgers. But the way the 'Mech had moved, and continued to move, said something else entirely. As did the casual skill with which the other MechWarrior had decapitated the *T-Bolt*.

Targeting systems could line up such a shot. But it took a natural touch to handle a one-hundred ton monster that way.

Then one of the Badgers rolled up ahead of the *Annihilator*, and Jason saw that some soldier had slashed red paint across the nose in a blood-red "Z." And Jason knew.

Zeta Battalion! In whatever machines they could salvage or scrounge, nothing kept them from the battle.

"We're stuck near Gateway Bridge and the spaceport is still a loss," said a female voice. The same one which had warned him earlier. "But we've got a thin line held against the rogues boiling up out of TempTown. Go, Captain! We have your back."

No matter the hand on the stick, an *Annihilator* was never going to set records at a top speed of thirty-odd kilometers per hour. Jason's *Gallowglas* might double that, though not at the moment as gray smoke seeped from every joint and the heat-stricken 'Mech could barely turn in place without its actuators locking up.

The lead Badger rolled to a stop and deployed a light star of Elemental infantry. The *Annihilator* never slowed. And the MechWarrior inside, whatever her rank, was not one to let a heart-beat be wasted.

"It might be a mistake!" she warned. Jason heard the plea in her voice, even over the static of transmission and however much she might prefer to hide it. Or not. Her *please great father let this be a mistake*. "Get to Wolf! Go, go, go!"

His first step was shaky, with the *Gallowglas's* heat-addled control circuitry having trouble. He swallowed dryly. Painful. And for a moment his vision swam again. If not for his cooling vest working to keep his body's core temperature down, he would likely have passed out somewhere between his third and fourth salvo, no doubt.

But he hadn't, and his commander might need him. The Dragoons certainly needed him somewhere. Citizens in Harlech—those who were left alive—needed them all.

His second step was stronger, and came with greater speed. He slammed his throttle against the forward stop, watching his indica-

tors climb past twenty kilometers per hour. Then thirty, and forty.

Breathing became easier as he pushed up again near his maximum speed of sixty-five kph. By the end of the next block he had blinked his vision clear. Another block, he saw that the sweat was already starting to dry into a white scale on his forearms.

Another block. Then another. Always heading toward the city's center.

Heading there, and not wanting to look.

At least Jason had company. A lance of Kestrel attack VTOL's which had taken up station above and to his left. Then a pair of struggling Partisans. A lone *War Dog* limped along with Beta Regiment's insignia still visible on the left shoulder.

The wolf's head crest of the Dragoons had been burned away. Along with most of its armor.

A Vulture. A Highlander IIC.

Only two rogues made the mistake of crossing paths with the scattered Dragoons. A *Phoenix Hawk* and a *Caesar*, bursting out of concealment from within a large commercial office building. They shouldered their way through a wall of steel girders and concrete to challenge the *Vulture*. It was the last mistake of their lives as six Dragoon BattleMechs, as many tanks and the four attack VTOLs suddenly fell on them like a starving pack. Lasers slashed and stabbed, and cannon fire thundered across the cityscape in a new storm of destruction.

There was no call for mercy.

No thought of giving quarter.

Condition Feral was a code all Dragoons knew, though no one had ever thought to hear. Certainly not at the heart of the Dragoon home. Even Jason, an adopted orphan, was well drilled in its execution.

To meet all resistance with overwhelming and deadly force.

To treat as the enemy any military force *not* showing Dragoon codes or colors. Even "friendly" units from within the Allied Mercenary Command were to be given one warning, and one only, to stand down. Or they would be put down with extreme prejudice. Hard lessons learned on New Delos, on Hephaestus.

Simply: if it moved, and could even remotely be a threat, it died.

The *'Hawk* and the *Caesar* died. The Dragoons rolled over them as if they were little more than an annoyance as all able machines streamed in toward city center. Converging on the great hole in the skyline where six (six!) twenty-story buildings had once stood. A wound nothing could heal, and a battle that simply could not be won no matter how fast the Dragoons moved, how accurately they shot, or how bravely they stood their ground.

Hiring Hall. Jason did not even need to close his eyes to picture it as it had been. The well-kept grounds. A ten-story dome surrounded by the tallest buildings of Harlech. It was the entire reason for Outreach. Pride of Wolf's Dragoons, in a way. The center for most mercenary hiring throughout the entire Inner Sphere and once the brilliant jewel in Harlech's crown.

It was gone.

And as Jason worked his *Gallowglas* around a corner, breaking into the open, he saw as well that there was nothing more to be done here.

The Wolf Spider battalion—what was left of them—had cordoned off the area with lances stationed at the four cardinal points and patrols of two 'Mechs each walking a wide perimeter. They allowed no one to approach. Not even other Dragoon 'Mechs.

All they had left to watch over, however, was a graveyard.

Huge piles of rubble several stories high loomed over a terrible battlefield. The debris continued to smolder. Ash and dust lay in a thick cover over everything, including the killing fields where BattleMechs lay strewn about like fallen soldiers at a massacre, the accumulation of three days fighting.

Pieces and parts. Some near whole. Others blasted into scrap by an artillery strike, or even a fusion reactor letting loose in a small but powerful explosion. Those areas were more obvious, as the ground would be blacked and cleared for several dozen meters to any side, where a blast had swept everything clear.

Jason saw the *BattleMaster*, as well.

Collapsed over two other 'Mechs. Forward-most among many--so many!--recent kills which still burned or smoked or smoldered on the corpse-riddled grounds. The dun color. Rust red accents. The red and blue star painted on the outside shoulder, still visible,

with the white “W” emblazoned over it. Waco’s Rangers. Seeing Colonel Waco’s BattleMech there, among the fallen honored, was hard. Even for Jason who knew the stories second and even third-hand.

But the worse was still not over. Not for the Dragoons.

That came with the ‘Mech which waited alone on the battlefield; the last machine left standing. An old design and a true veteran of many wars. Blocky shoulders which housed its twin LRM launchers. The forward-thrust cockpit—now smashed and breached in a half dozen places at least.

The classic *Archer* profile.

Still painted with the blue and gold scheme *he* had made famous—or infamous—throughout the Inner Sphere.

For just that moment, Jason hoped. The *Archer* still stood, after all. The only machine left on its feet. *He* could be wounded. Unconscious. Many things, in fact. Then he saw it. The only body the Wolf Spiders had bothered to remove from *any* of the destroyed machines. Resting between the *Archer’s* feet, covered in a flag bearing the Dragoons’ crest. *His* crest.

And there was now a wound torn through Harlech, and Outreach, worse than the loss of the Hiring Hall. Knowingly or not someone, somewhere, had made a very, very terrible error.

Because it was true. And no mistake.

Jaime Wolf was dead.