

THE HEART OF DIXIE

By Blaine Lee Pardoe

Author's Notes:

I've always had a soft spot for the Third Succession War. That was where I (and some of the other writers in the series) cut our teeth. That was the good old days. You could defend a planet with a company of 'Mechs and support. Salvage was important because the technology had been lost to mass produce 'Mechs. I even have my old battered copy of BattleDroids that said that water was rare and the Ryan Cartel used to haul ice between worlds for a profit. New 'Mechs, let alone units the size of regiments were the things of the past. The Star League was a legend, ComStar was a mysterious techno-cult, the Clans were unheard of, and you lived for the day that Hanse Davion was going to stick it to Max Liao soon—if he ever married into House Steiner.

God those were the days!

This story is one I toyed with about 18 years ago or so as a scenario set or something like that. I found the original notes and liked it because it: 1. dealt with militia troops and, 2. dealt with how an invasion began in the first place. Something neat, fun and dangerous. I wanted to capture the concept of militia and their role and function. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did writing it.

Fifty-Six Kilometers North of New Wichita
The Northern Continent
Dixie
Lyrn Commonwealth
1 May 3025

It looked like a grass covered hill, not trimmed in generations, just tall light green and dead-brown field grass, thigh-high waving with each gust of breeze. Against the stark blue sky they could see the insects flittering in the air above the grass, seemingly immune to the wind. The hot summer sun made the sunburns on their bare arms sting.

"You sure this is the place?" Randolph asked, checking his GPS system for the hundredth time that afternoon.

Fletcher smiled. "Yeah. This is it."

"Kinda obvious isn't it?" Randolph frowned. "I mean it's the biggest honking hill in the middle of the plains. I thought that these things were concealed a little better than this." The sarcasm rang with each word.

Fletcher only smiled more broadly. "You'd think that by now you'd have more faith than this. It is a good hiding place—nobody else ever found it did they? Besides, from the geological survey that I ran, the hill is natural and has always been there. It's not a construct. The locals would have always thought that it belonged there."

Randolph crossed his arms. "You were always the dork. So how do we get inside?"

Fletcher did a check of the paper that he carried, validating position. "Each Castle was built individually, customized to the world they were on. Entrances were hidden intentionally, you know that. Finding the way in is going to take some time." Tossing down his backpack into the grass, he pulled out the metal detector and attached the field coil onto the collapsible rod, wrapping the wire carefully around the pole. "We need to run some ground penetration scans with the detector. If we're lucky, we can find the metal support structure. Follow that signal and we should be able to reach some sort of opening."

Randolph ran his fingers across his balding scalp, tossing his comb-over to the side. "Sounds like work."

"Always looking for a quick buck eh?"

"Don't you know it. You find this mother lode and we are set for life."

Money. Fletcher shook his head and started a sweep as he walked through the grass along the base of the hill. The headphones were almost over-sized on his narrow head. Swinging the detector's head in the grass was difficult, the grass seemed to resist each pass of the head over the ground. Each swing stirred the insects into the air. It was hot work but exciting.

Three years of research had gone into this day. Three years of digging through the records from the Star League Defense Force's engineering corps. Three years of long nights after work; puzzling the data together from buried bits of information. Countless hours of checking old shipping requisitions from centuries ago, learning where thousands of tons of construction supplies could have been hauled to. It had been time well invested. The hill in front of them represented the ultimate prize—a Castle Brian.

Castles Brian had been built during the peak of the Star League centuries before. Hidden complexes filled with BattleMechs and supplies, they were fortified and hardened against even the force of a nuclear blast. They were a deterrent against attack. An enemy would have to deal with defenders who could harass and harangue them from a hidden base. With the fall of the First Star League many of these bases had been sought out and raided for their priceless military hardware. Such caches were filled with such contemporary treasures that they spawned armed invasions.

That wouldn't happen on Dixie. Fletcher and Randolph had often talked about what they would do if they ever found the Castle Brian. They would secretly take the contents out and sell them in small batches, make their money over time. Strictly cash, tax-free, right under the noses of the authorities. Besides, the property that they were on was owned by someone else. Moving a company of BattleMechs out was bound to attract attention. Best to do it covertly.

"Listen," he said after a half-an-hour of walking through the thick grass, "Randolph, you go ahead and pitch the tent."

"Tent?" his associate queried. "Why? We've found it right?"

"We think we've found it. And even if we have it might take days to find a way in."

"Fletcher," he chuckled. "You have to have hope."

Fletcher was not so optimistic. "If I do find the opening, you may have to make a run back to New Wichita and rent some earth-moving equipment. This complex has been buried for centuries and may take forever to get out."



It took two days of searching and digging by both of them to locate the tunnel entrance. The doorway, or the top of it when they located it, was a good 150 meters from the hill itself. It was a hatch of sorts, obviously not large enough for a vehicle or a 'Mech, but quite large. It was metallic and resembled more of a bank vault door, mounted low and in the ground so deep that it had taken more time to dig it out than to locate it. Randolph was sure that they would need explosives to blast the door open, but Fletcher found that it was unlocked. It was a discovery that bothered him. Was it possible that someone had already looted this Castle Brian?

They wrenched the door open and the air inside came out reeking of stale water, must and mildew. The molding air had a dead smell like a dead animal. From their packs, Fletcher and Randolph took out their flashlights and aimed the beams inside.

The antechamber was small with another door and a decontamination unit on the far wall. The paint had mostly peeled away, but the faint after-image of a Cameron Star, the seal of the Star League, was still somewhat visible on the one wall. The electronic control unit for the door had corroded heavily, leaving thin rusting streaks running down the reinforced ferrocrete wall. The floor was dust, dirt, water that had seeped in.

Forcing the inner door took a prybar and three hours of hard, intense, sweaty work. The tunnel beyond was a personnel access tunnel that stabbed deep into the hillside. It was a dank tunnel. Many parts of it had pooled water several inches deep. The water had a thick layer of slime over it, a mold of some sort, one that loved the darkness. They walked on a raised side portion of the tunnel that housed ductwork. In some places the reinforced tunnel had collapsed, chunks of the wall fallen into the pools on the floor.

There was some evidence of people. Storage crates, long abandoned, had rotted away to nothing and their contents, from what

Fletcher could tell some sort of decontamination suits, had also dissolved over the centuries. The air was heavy with moisture and the deeper that the tunnel ran, the more it angled downward into the hill. Each dozen or so meters the pooled water got deeper until both of the men were up to their knees in the ooze.

At the end of the hallway they found a larger door, cracked open, that seemed to lead to larger chamber beyond. "This is it," Randolph said. There was a dim light coming from the other side of the doorway, tinted yellowish-orange.

Fletcher was not as optimistic. "All of this water...there must have been some sort of leak."

"That doesn't matter, we are talking BattleMechs here."

"Mechs are tough, but not tough enough to sit in water for centuries."

Randolph didn't care. Wading through the water he wedged himself through the hatch. Fletcher moved in behind him, water sloshing as he tried to keep up. The chamber on the other side opened up to the beams of their lights.

The chamber was some sort of central core. Several other tunnels led off in different directions from the room. In the center of the room, rising out of a deep pool of stagnant water, was a pair of BattleMechs. Crates, half collapsed and semi-submerged, were tossed everywhere. The walls had thick growths of mold or slime of some sort. Emergency lights, probably powered from a small fusion reactor somewhere, were still on somewhere up near the ceiling. Their orange-ish color altered the color of things in the room.

The 'Mechs—the treasure—stood there and Fletcher found his eyes following them from the pool of water upward. They were lightweights, a *Hussar* nearest to him and what looked to be a *Mongoose* behind it. The *Mongoose* had slipped from her support harness ages ago and had bent at the waist, as if bowing to the peeling paint walls of the chamber.

He aimed his beams at the 'Mech gantry and was stunned by what he saw. The *Hussar* was a mess. Not only had one of its legs apparently given way a long time ago, it was held in place by a series of thick stalactites stabbing down from the ceiling. Like stone icicles, these reached downward and literally enveloped the shoulder of the *Hussar*, encasing it in a concrete-like form. The

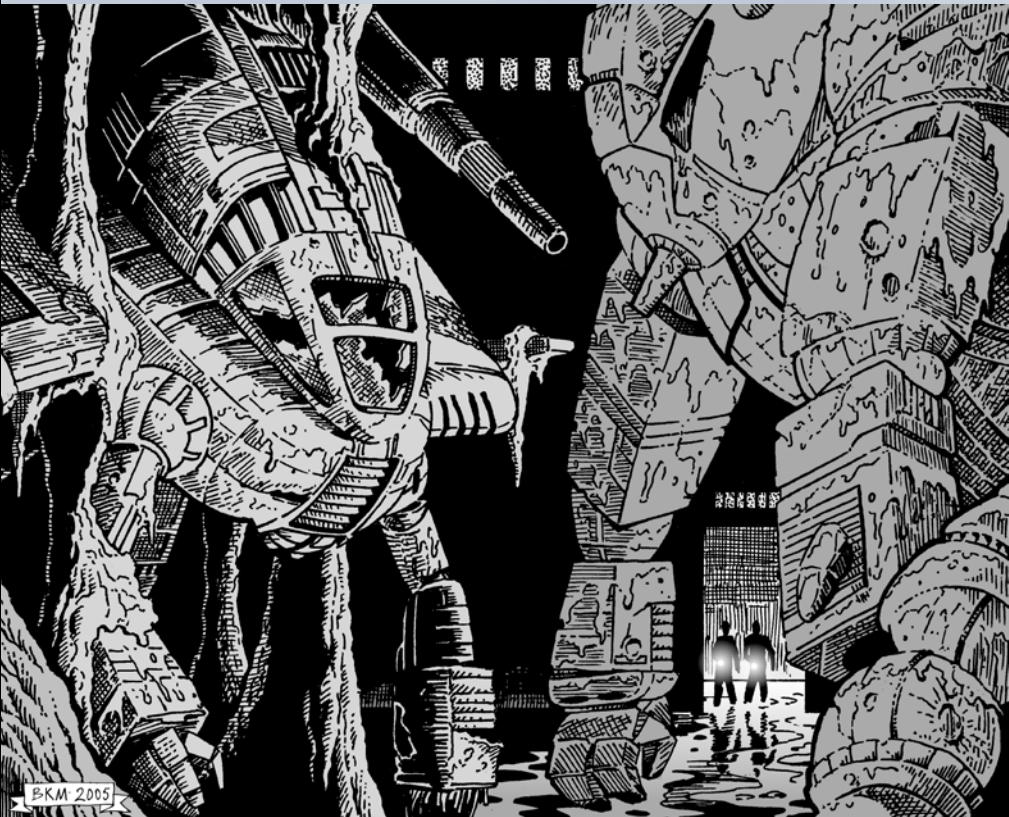
leg that had given away was contorted and fallen from the knee actuator, held up by a handful of rotting myomer strands.

The light showed him even more depressing details of both 'Mechs. The *Mongoose's* cockpit looked as if it was filled with water. Eerie colors of black and green mixed in a pool in the cockpit glass. Coolant leaks from long rotted hoses had seeped out of the armor plates and drizzled down the sides of the 'Mech. On the *Hussar*, Randolph's searchlight beam showed that the left arm was encrusted with a stalactite which had seemingly split open the armor plating there. The fist of the *Hussar* was gone, the fingers had literally dropped off over time, their actuators and myomer wrenched open and rotted. The armor was gone, under the sickening pool of water.

The Castle Brian on Dixie had never fallen to siege or even nuclear attack. It had been abandoned by the SLDF, abandoned and long forgotten. While designed to withstand the fury of war, it had fallen to the forces of nature and time.

"What a waste," Fletcher said sadly.

"Damn!" spat back Randolph. "Nothing here we could salvage. Those 'Mechs are shot. They couldn't be salvaged even for museum pieces."



Fletcher made his way over a half-toppled mountain of fiber-plastic crates. Some were open and their contents were spilled out into the slime-filled ooze. Others, the heavier ones, were still sealed. "Don't jump the gun Randolph. We haven't explored all of these tunnels and these crates. There's bound to be something we can recover and sell."

"You think so?"

Fletcher flipped the latch on one of the crates and peered inside. "Yes...definitely."

West Buford
Dixie
Lyrn Commonwealth
15 May 3025

"So, where did you get this?" the man asked, staring at the pistol as Randolph slammed the rest of his beer.

"Let's just say I found a source for these and other assorted arms," he replied as his cheeks took on a reddened glow from the dark ale. He pulled the laser pistol back across the bar, his fingers fondling it almost obscenely.

"That little blaster is a classic," the one man in a suit said. "I must admit, Mister Falconi, your source is a good one. A Star League Defense Force issue Mark II laser pistol. This one still has the bluing on it and has obviously never been fired. A mint condition antique. Needless to say, I'm suspicious."

"Suspicious?" Randolph was caught off guard.

"We are on Dixie. How would such an obviously well-preserved classic firearm end up here—and not in a museum or some wealthy private owner's collection? No," the man said waving his hand in the air between them. "This is so good that it's got to be a fake. A reproduction."

Randolph's mouth hung open for two seconds in disbelief. "You're kidding, right?"

"It's a remarkably high quality reproduction, but it's simply too good to be true. My compliments to your forger."

Randolph chuckled once and his face got redder. "Shows what you know. This is the real McCoy. I know, I pulled it out the crate I got it from myself. It's not fake. In fact, if you were to run the serial number off of this you would find that it was probably never issued. You wanna know why?"

The man in the suit signaled the waitress with two fingers, a beer for each of them. "I must admit, Mister Falconi, I am a little curious. If you could shed some light on where you got it, it could alter my purchasing decision."

The beers arrived and Randolph took another fresh cold sip, licking his lips as he finished. He glanced around nervously as if to

make sure that no one in the busy bar could hear his voice. "This is authentic SLDF hardware because it came out of a Castle Brian right here on Dixie. I pulled it out of there a few weeks ago, along with my friend."

The would-be buyer leaned back and took a sip of his own beer, far less than Randolph had. "Intriguing, but there is no Castle Brian on this planet. Everyone knows that. There've been treasure hunters seeking one for years. If there was one, someone would have found it long before you."

"Ha!" Randolph laughed. "Shows what you know. We looked for it, mostly in researching the archives and libraries. It took forever but we found it."

The man paused and leaned forward on his elbows on the coffee table, reaching out and holding the laser pistol with a whole new respect. "You found a Castle Brian here?"

"You bet I did."

"And this pistol came from it?"

Randolph seemed almost proud. "It sure did. I pulled it from the crate and peeled off the sealing compound myself just a few days ago. There are crates of them there."

The man turned the weapon in his hands. "Interesting. Tell me, Mister Falconi, what else was in this alleged Castle Brian?"

For a moment Randolph hesitated. "There was a lot of stuff there, mostly ruined."

"BattleMechs?"

He took another long drag on the sweating beer. "There were a few but I wouldn't say that they were in the best condition." Randolph chuckled as an acknowledgement that he knew something that the other man didn't.

"I assume you're going to let the Lyran government know of your find, especially if there are 'Mechs involved?"

"Shaa...right," he said sarcastically. "We don't even have permission to be on the property where this Castle is. I bring in the government and suddenly I'm cut out of any and all profit."

The man put down the pistol between them. "I'm prepared to make an offer for your entire collection Mister Falconi."

"It's not all for sale right now. My associate and I have an understanding about the disposition of these goods." He slurred the word, *disposition*, slightly as he spoke. "Sorry, but I have to honor that."

The man reached into his suit pocket and took out a small pad of paper. He jotted down a note on the paper. "Mister Falconi, this is the amount of C-Bills that I'm willing to pay for a crate of these weapons in similar condition. Please look it over before you make any rash decisions." He slid the pad in front of Randolph.

Randolph's face got even redder and his jaw hung limp and open for a moment. "You're serious."

"Very serious."

"I'll have to check with my associate before I commit to this."

The man pulled the pad back. "I'm afraid that this offer is contingent on a decision right now. If you were not empowered to negotiate, you shouldn't have contacted me in the first place."

He hesitated for a moment, but only a moment. "Fine, I accept."

"Excellent Mister Falconi. I will arrange for the account transfer. I will need to inspect the goods as well."

"Of course," he said, gulping down the rest of the beer.

"You've made a good decision...an excellent bargain."



"You did what?" Fletcher squealed. His tiny apartment seemed to suddenly get a lot smaller with the words that his friend had uttered.

"You heard me. Don't be so reactionary," Randolph said, grabbing onto his friend's arm and guiding him back to a seat in the chair he had leapt out of. "Don't worry, I have your piece of the profits."

"You don't even know this guy. Randolph, we have to play this low key, quiet."

"He came highly recommended from a good friend of mine," Randolph countered. "You're just nervous."

"I'm leaving," he muttered, rising from his chair. He moved to the closet and pulled out a suitcase. "If you've got half a brain in your head you'd do the same."

Randolph frowned, then got mad. He took the thick wad of C-Bills and cut it in half with his stubby fingers. He tossed them onto the now-empty chair. "Look, if you want to panic like some schoolgirl at a fraternity party, you can. We did this for the money, you've got your share."

Fletcher stopped. "You just don't get it, do you?"

"Get what?"



The man in the suit sat at the terminal that logged onto the Dixie HPG. He glanced again at the Mark II laser pistol and ran his finger across the handle. It was perfect and its perfection was going to help his people. Dixie was a border world between the Free World League and the Lyrans Commonwealth. He had been on the world for nearly twenty years, a deeply-planted agent. Posing as an antique buyer granted him the right to ask many questions and to travel freely on buying trips. Over the years he had learned a lot of things, but now he had learned the biggest secret Dixie had to offer.

A hidden Castle Brian. A storage warehouse that held God-only-knows-what.

The message packet was data only and priority. Code phrases were used in case ComStar "inadvertently" let the wrong people see the message, but he doubted that would happen. His contact was another antique buyer in the League, one that was also another agent/controller. With any luck, in a few days, matters would be set in motion to change the fate of Dixie once and for all.

TRANSMISSION CODE: 392847KT –DATA STREAM
COMPRESSION HIGH, ENCRYPTION DELTA EPSILON
BRAVO ONE

From: Francis Hollander

To: Marcus Dale, Marcus Antiques and Collectables,
Colfax, Free Worlds League

Text:

Marcus,

Have recently purchased a collection of rare SLDF issued pistols. It came from a warehouse that only recently has been opened here on Dixie. I believe that I will, with your assistance, be able to secure other items in this warehouse for possible resale. I was deeply impressed with the size and quantity of the goods available.

I am working with a seller named Randolph Falconi. Upon your confirmation, I will secure from him the address of this new warehouse. Speed is of the essence in that no other local buyers have been included on the bidding.

I look forward to seeing you soon.

Your Most Sincere Friend,

Francis

The code words were chosen carefully so as to not attract attention. "Warehouse" was a key word—a phrase that SAFE had long ago set up to indicate a Castle Brian. "Local Buyers" indicated that Lyran intelligence had not picked up on the possibility of the Castle Brian. The closing phrase, "Your Most Sincere Friend," was the key. It was one indicating that a military operation was required for the operation. He reviewed it one more time and stabbed his finger on the send button. Now the die had been cast. Everything else was in the hands of his handlers, superiors, and the Captain-General.

***Task Force Extractor
Dropship Hawk's Shadow
Approach Assault Vector
Dixie
Lyran Commonwealth
17 June 3025***

Colonel Eve Hansi moved across the bridge of the *Hawk's Shadow* smoothly, almost coolly. Some of it was the low gravity, some was her calm demeanor. Every eye on the bridge followed each of her floating steps. She had inherited the Fourth Brigade of the Fusiliers of Oriente a while ago when many of its officers had been embroiled in a conspiracy against the League. When she assumed command it was because of her SAFE background and her ruthless character. The conspirators, either in action or thought, had been dealt with brutally. If rumors were believed, tortured to death at her own hand. She commanded both fear and respect at the same time.

"Message coming in from the Lyran governor, a man named Herr Vonderholf, demanding to know our intentions," the communications officer said cutting through the silent tension.

She smiled. "I show up with a reinforced battalion and he wants to know why I'm here? Leave it to the purse-pinching merchants of the Commonwealth to try and bargain their way out of this. Patch it through to my station," she said, running her hand back through her jet black hair. "Governor Vonderholf, this is Colonel Hansi of the Free Worlds League. I demand your immediate surrender of Dixie to my Fusiliers."

"Who are you to make demands of me?" came back a barking voice from a man that had to be much older than her, older and more egotistical.

"I am the person that is going to take this planet from you. My way, you live. Your way, and countless people will suffer and die."

"The Dixie Militia will defy you. We will bathe your landing zones in blood for bringing war here."

Colonel Hansi laughed. "Excellent. I've always enjoyed a challenge." She stabbed her finger at the control button and cut off communication. "Make preparations for a combat drop. Deploy Combat Air Patrol in five hours when we enter range of the planet. Assemble my senior staff. If our precious Governor wants to put up a fight, I will not deny it to him."

City of Vanceburg
The Northern Continent
Dixie
Lyrans Commonwealth

Fletcher listened to the earpiece carefully as the comm unit rang again. Fletcher had left town weeks ago but had kept up contact with Randolph, despite his stupidity. With the news of the approaching House Marik forces, he and he alone knew the reason that they had come. The Castle Brian. It was the stupidity of Randolph that had brought them here, it had to be. Now his friend had disappeared. Would the same happen to him? He slammed down the personal comm unit and wiped the sweat from his brow.

This had changed. It had originally been a quest for treasure. He had always felt that. It wasn't even the money but the search for it that had been important. He loved the hunt and the quest to find the Castle Brian had proven to be a fantastic challenge. Now that didn't matter. His discovery, his intelligence, had brought war to his home world. Damn. Damn it all to hell.

What now? Perhaps if he passed the information on to the authorities on Dixie they could negotiate with the House Marik forces, tell them that there was nothing on the world worth risking their forces for. No. That wouldn't work. This invasion commander would never believe the word of her enemy. Even if they inspected the facility they would claim that the Lyrans had moved away all of the military hardware.

Perhaps he could parley with the invaders directly, tell them right where to go to seize the Castle Brian. He assumed that Randolph had been taken prisoner by spies on world already and would most likely tell them the location even if he didn't. Would they believe him or think he was luring them into a trap? And if they did take the Castle Brian, would they still think that the Lyrans commander had already stripped the facility of the hardware? Of course they would...he wouldn't believe them.

Oh God, what have I started?



The tight and congested tactical operations room for the militia was not comfortable—in fact it was getting hotter. Colonel Fritz Volger of the Dixie Militia stared at hard copy report with a gray-eyed stare that would have melted glacial ice. Other commanders liked using the holographic displays, he liked paper...it was tangible, real. And when you were pissed off, you could wad it up and toss it at someone or across the room to make a point. He wanted to do just that but knew that it would do no good. The other men and women in the room with him were his subordinates. The last thing they needed was for him to shatter their morale.

Besides, the House Marik forces were already doing that.

"What do you think, sir?" his aide de camp, Hauptmann Angela Dickerson asked.

"I think," he said, rising to his feet and staring into her heart. "We're going to earn our pay in the next month or so." He ran his fingers through his cropped salt-and-pepper hair

"Sir, they're dropping with a battalion, if not more," a junior officer piped in. "We've barely got two companies of militia against everything they can toss at us—front line troops and all. Our troops are mostly infantry and vehicles. They will be coming with 'Mechs."

"Don't wet yourself Leutnant Oak," he replied sarcastically. "I've sent a message for reinforcements. The Archon will provide. God Bless Katrina Steiner."

There was a pause. "Sir, what is your plan?"

"Simple," he said. "Win."

"Sir?"

He laughed, just slightly, to let them know he wasn't afraid. He had been through military operations his entire career. The truth of the matter was something he knew, he wasn't the best officer. If he was, he wouldn't have been assigned command of militia on some obscure border world. He had seen combat before but had been wounded two times, both times at the outset of operations. Colonel Volger knew he hadn't kissed enough ass over the years for another chance to prove himself. No, House Marik was serving that up to him. I just have to make sure I don't get downed in the first five minutes of battle this time around...

"They're here for a reason," he said calmly. "We need to figure out what their objective is and keep them from it. The name of the game here is to stall, to wear them down, let them get frustrated and hopefully sloppy."

"Stall sir? I assumed we'd dig in for a defensive fight at one of the fortifications."

He shook his head. "I have a healthy respect for the Free Worlds League. This is the Fusiliers of Oriente...tough sons of bitches. They'll want us to dig in because they have the firepower to take us out. I have no intention of obliging them."

"Why have they hit us?" Hauptmann Dickerson queried.

"For them to strike at Dixie, not part of a general campaign, tells me that they believe that there is something here important enough to raid us. They've come in battalion strength. That's more than enough to take the world but to hold it, this far across the border, is going to take more troops. It doesn't make sense because the Commonwealth can toss in troops to retake the world pretty easily. They're looking for something, I can feel it in my bones. We simply need to deny them whatever it is."

An officer stepped up to the table and handed him a note. He looked at it and smiled. "And it looks like I win the prize for being right." He nodded to the messenger who saluted, executed a perfect about face, and left.

"Sir?" Oak asked.

"We know why they're here. It appears that some locals discovered a Star League-era Castle Brian here on Dixie. Word must have leaked to the Free Worlds League."

"A Castle Brian? Geez, we're saved. All of that hardware..." Leutnant Oak started grinning. "We've got it made. All we have to do is refit with that gear."

"Don't get your undies in a bunch Oak," the Colonel countered. "One of the guys that found it has told us that there is nothing there. It's an empty ruin."

"Crap."

Colonel Volger rubbed his chin in thought. "No, not crap. In fact—" he glanced at the flight trajectory reports for the approaching DropShips and smiled. "We might just be able to turn this to our advantage."

“How’s that sir?” his aide asked.

Volger smiled broadly. “Now, we just need to figure out how to turn what they don’t know against them.”

Dixie
Fast Burn Approach Vector
Lyrn Commonwealth
22 June 3025

"Damn needle in a haystack!" she spat, staring at the sensor display on the bridge of the *Hawk's Shadow*. Colonel Eve Hansi wanted to smash the display screen but knew that that sort of action would not be interpreted well by the bridge crew. *Things were so much easier when I wasn't in command. Flunkies can throw tantrums. I have to be a leader.* Her Combat Air Patrols had been running search patterns but had not found any sign of the elusive Castle.

"Sir, a planet is a large place," the sensor tech responded.

"Really?" she sarcastically snapped back. "I should write that down for future reference."

"Without knowing exactly where this Castle Brian is located it makes our landing zone choice difficult at best. Castle Brian's were designed to be undetectable and hidden even from ground forces. It takes time, Colonel."

"We don't have time," she said through gritted teeth. "You need to look for construction equipment concentrations, signs of digging or attempts to conceal large-scale digging efforts. We have to know where to drop so we can seize that facility quickly."

She scanned the eyes of everyone on the bridge. They feared her, she could feel their fear. It all had to do with when she assumed command. She was a SAFE operative and her first job in the unit had been to remove those individuals not loyal to the Free Worlds League. Most of the key officers found themselves stripped of command, some sent off for further, "interrogation."

"Let me make this clear. We are operating behind enemy lines. Yes, it is local militia down there and we can take them. We're the fightin' Fourth of the Oriente Fusiliers. The Commonwealth does not take kindly to these types of raids. They will send some front line regiments after us. Each day we are there brings reinforcements closer, reinforcements that are not militia but troops who would like nothing more than taking us out." With each sentence she gained more composure, more control over her temper. "We

need to move and move fast. Landing is in two days. Sensor Tech; I need a LZ. You need to make that happen."

The sensor tech had beads of sweat forming on his brow as she spoke. "Yes sir. I will give you my best."

"That is the minimum that I ask," she said. Pushing away from his console, she floated across the bridge to her seat. With a graceful motion she turned and pulled her lean frame into the seat, putting on the restraining strap.



"Look at those flight patterns," Colonel Volger said, more to himself than to anyone else in the tactical operations center.

"Sir?" an adjutant officer asked.

"Grid patterns. Their Combat Air Patrols are not flying to find or fight us. They're searching."

"What does it mean Colonel?"

Volger grinned. "It may mean that my hunch paid off."



Banner Andersen moved the ConstructionMech forward, plowing a huge furrow as he walked. Sod curled up as he moved forward and the stark tan clay under the topsoil stood out brightly. There were five of the heavy "working man's" 'Mechs and numerous dumptrucks working the hillside. In the distance he saw a lonely militia BattleMech standing on the ridgeline at the edge of a cluster of trees. He had seen other troops as well but they seemed to be hiding.

"Damn strange if you ask me," Andersen said into his comm unit to his boss from Fogerty Construction. "What exactly are we building?"

"Andersen, cut the chatter. The government asked us to plow up this hillside according to that Militia engineer. They are paying us

triple the going rate to do what they ask as long as we get started now." In the distance tents were being erected along the hillside and tarps were being spread, apparently with no reason.

"Damn weird. We're not building anything."

"For the bonus you're being paid, who cares?"

Dixie
Lyrn Commonwealth
24 June 3025

"Sir," the tech called out. "I think I've got it."

She drifted across the bridge like a hawk ready to drop on her prey. When she arrived at the workstation she looked at the ground imagery. Enhanced with the sensors and systems, it was a remarkably clear picture. Construction equipment, recent work, tents equipped with electronic filtering gear to obscure sensor penetration. "It was the tents that got me too. Why would you obscure a routine construction project?" The sensor tech added, noting where her eyes were focused.

"Location?"

"Southern continent. It's miles from any city. In fact it's out in the middle of nowhere. I almost missed it."

"You catch that in the trees?" she said poking her finger at the display.

"I couldn't make it out, even with enhanced imaging."

Colonel Hansi grinned a predatory smile. "You might not see it but I do. That is the arm of a *Centurion* sticking out. That is the spot alright." She patted the sensor tech on the back hard. "You earned your pay this month," she said and he let out a low but audible sigh of relief. "Feed the coordinates to the helm. Captain, alter your trajectory for a landing near that site. I will review the terrain and let you know the exact coordinates in the next two hours."

Almost gloating, she broadened her smile. "We've got them."



"Rainbow Company Actual this is Iron Crown," came the voice of Colonel Fritz Volger over Leutnant Hollister Raven's neurohelmet earpiece. She stopped the slow walk of her *Centurion* to a complete stop and surveyed the terrain from her hilltop cover under the massive oaks. The centuries-old 'Mech actually creaked as it

stopped. It had been in her family for generations and was all between her and being Dispossessed.

"You're a go Iron Crown," she replied.

"They've taken the bait," Volger said.

Great...or is it, 'aw crap?' "Understood," she settled for.

"You will be executing orders marked Tango, One-One, Bravo," he stated.

"Confirm," she said keying T, 1, 1, B, into her battlecomputer. "Tango, One, One, Bravo."

"Enemy ETA is 40 hours. Landing Zone is projected in your sector."

"It worked sir."

There was no gloating in his voice. "Yes, apparently it did. Good luck and keep your head down," Colonel Volger replied.

"Yes sir," she replied. *Like I have a friggin' choice.* She keyed in the command frequency for her company. "Alright Rainbow Company. Here's the latest. Our shell game worked. Get those civvy 'Mechs out of here before they get toasted. We have inbound DropShips from the Fourth Brigade of the Oriente Fusiliers coming to pay us as visit. They probably know we're here but not what we're up to. Our mission is simple: buy time."



Colonel Hansi pushed herself back hard into the command console seat and let the automatic five-point safety harness's auto-tightening system do its job. If it got any tighter it would be considered kinky, she thought to herself. The DropShip *Hawk's Shadow* was quaking slightly as it began its drop through the atmosphere. Even in her *Atlas* she could feel the rocking and buffeting. She adjusted the latching and locking mechanism to hold her neurohelmet in place and surveyed her own display.

Thirty seconds to drop. She tied in to the scrambler channel for her entire command. "This is Colonel Hansi," she said firmly as the *Hawk's Shadow* rocked heavily. "Our target is below, just as

planned. We are going to do this by the numbers. Command and the Second Company will move to the hill, secure the Castle Brian and the high ground. Third company, you will split your Lances out and form a perimeter two kilometers out. Primary objective is securing this facility. Rest assured it is defended.”

As she spoke there was a massive buffeting as the DropShip door opened. A red warning light came on in her cockpit, warning her that it was too early to drop. It began to blink every second on and off—letting her know that they were on drop approach. “I will see you on the ground. Hansi out!”

The light turned green and she sprung out from the restraining harnesses that held her *Atlas* in place. Hansi allowed herself a moment of satisfaction—this ‘Mech had been a Lyran build. She had taken it out with her family *Archer* eight years ago. The *Archer* had been trashed, but this *Atlas* was hers, a prize of war. The 100-ton behemoth lumbered down slowly, its feet sinking into the sod over half a foot with each stride. Dust and loose debris billowed out in every direction as the *Hawk’s Shadow’s* massive fusion drive landed the DropShip safely at the foot of the hill where she had seen the construction and excavation taking place.

The signs of plowing were everywhere, dirt piled, tents rippling in the wind. She saw hardware there as well. Okay you Lyran buggers, where in the hell is the entrance to this place? “Third Company, you know the drill, get out there and secure the perimeter.”

The explosion cut her off. Her command company’s most recent replacement, Sergeant Sharpe, was piloting a *Vindicator* heading for the mangled forms of the wind-whipped tents. There was a solitary explosion nearby, rocking her *Atlas* as if it was the first rumble of a thunderstorm. She missed where it came from but saw the smoldering crater and the fallen form of the ‘Mech. The lower right leg of the BattleMech was peeled up like some sort of Capellan slipper, curled up at the toes. Combined with the crater, Colonel Hansi knew what she was facing. Mines.

“All units, hold up. We have mines in the area. I want the sappers out here and out here now.” In the distance she saw clods of turf rising into the air and felt the rumble of another blast. Stinking bastards, of course they mined it.

She moved slowly forward as the sappers deployed, mine detectors in hand. Hansi heard another rumble, this one very different, crisper. A flicker of light off to her right forced her to turn.

She saw the now standing *Vindicator* of Sergeant Sharpe and just past that Olsen's *Quickdraw*. The *Quickdraw* shook violently and a wisp of gray smoke rose from its back and from the ground near it. Another cracking blast rose, causing a crater just between them. These were not mines. No, this was the enemy. This was an artillery barrage.

She had few choices. One was to order her units back to their DropShips and depart, find another LZ and secure it. Another was to wait, let the sappers do their job, then deploy out after the attackers. The other, the one she arrived at first, was to risk the mines and rush out to take on the attackers.

"Company commanders, we have incoming artillery. All units are to deploy per our plan. Better to ignore those mines and take out that arty. Move and move fast. I want these defenders found and destroyed!"



Leutenant Hollister Raven watched as the Long Tom fired one last barrage over the hillside. Then, unceremoniously, it tore up the sod as it beat a path out of the staging area. Raven's *Centurion* could feel the massive Long Tom rumble past and she focused on her long range sensors. They were out there all right, the House Marik troops were sweeping the hills looking for her and her force.

The artillery barrage had been aimed at damaging a number of their 'Mechs, hopefully forcing them to move into the mine fields the dotted the area. This was not going to stop them. This was the Oriente Fusiliers after all. All she could hope to do was to wear them down and run and hide.

They were securing the hillside which they assumed was the Castle Brian and setting up a perimeter. Fine. That was right out of the House Marik military operations manual. Let's see how they like something out of the ordinary.

"Sweep Lance, this is Rainbow Actual. They have a patrol moving to the east towards your position. Make one pass then take them for a stroll." She switched to her tactical display and saw Sweep Lance, hidden in some broken boulders, move out. A Pegasus, a Packrat, a Savannah Master, and a Galleon slowly crept out. By now they would be painting on the perimeter sensors of the

Fusilier's force. They should run. Doctrine said that they should. But they didn't.

The Galleon and the Packrat fanned out to the flanks. The Savannah Master and the Pegasus charged forward, straight at the approaching company of 'Mechs. Leutnant Raven allowed herself a smile as the hovercraft dodged side to side, making themselves harder to hit, punching up their speed. She knew what was happening. The Marik company commander was confused. Was this some sort of decoy? A diversion? Who would send in two small hovercraft against such a force? It was insane. No one would. It had to be a trap. He ordered his lances to fan out and hold their ground. The advance turned into a slow perilous gait.

Raven didn't pull back the hovercraft.

The Galleon and Packrat peppered away at the enemy at maximum range while the two hovercraft charged right into the walking Marik company. The Savannah Master was lightly armed and had toilet paper for armor. Its only protection was the speed with which it moved. Dodging side to side in jerky motions it dove past the advance line of 'Mechs, getting off a few small laser blasts to the rear of the 'Mechs. It was like a mosquito taking on an elephant and the Fusiliers simply ignored the tiny hovercraft.

The Pegasus was a different matter. Its short range missiles twisted and contorted in flight, their white smoke trails filling the air between them and the lead BattleMech, a lumbering *Ostsol*. All of the missiles found their marks, mangling armor plating all over the *Ostsol*'s front and legs. The Fusilier 'Mech and three others returned fire, a quad burst of medium laser fire, crimson red, stabbed out at the militia hovercraft, half of them hitting the right flank skirting. The Pegasus began a low meandering arc as it revved even faster, an arc added to by the crumbling of its hover skirt.

A wave of missiles, probably from the nearby *Archer*, Leutnant Raven couldn't tell for sure, rained down on and around it. A cloud of dirt, sod, and smoke rose up like a funeral pyre from where the Pegasus had been a moment before. Raven's heart skipped. Was it alive?

From within the cloud there was a blast of short range missiles and the burned remains of the Pegasus emerged. Streaks of smoke from the holes in her armor marked her flight path as she raced to get away. Crimson laser beams stabbed at her, hitting the ground, burning streaks of black into the grass, but nothing else

seemed to hit her. The Savannah Master, as if on cue, darted back through the front line of the 'Mechs—giving the *Archer* a parting shot to its legs that did nothing but sear the gray-purple decorative trim there. The two hovercraft raced away, swaying side to side to make themselves more difficult to hit.

The Oriente Fusiliers smelled some sort of a trap and advanced but did so cautiously, carefully. This allowed the Packrat and the Galleon to fire off a final volley and start to flee. The Packrat was hit by a long range laser burst, its rear door melted into place by the blast. A salvo of long range missiles hit the Galleon and chewed it up. The right tread of the tank was blasted by two of the missiles and after twenty meters or so, it ground to a sickening halt in the soil. There was no way to save it.

"Rainbow Actual to Rainbow Four. Punch out. Head for rendezvous coordinates Alpha." As if to accentuate the point, a large laser beam sliced up the top of the Galleon, peeling away armor plating as it went.

The crew bailed from every hatch on the tank and ran. Against the wall of approaching 'Mechs it didn't seem like much but Leutnant Raven knew it was the best that they could do.

"Rainbow Actual to Iron Crown," she said, signaling the rest of her lance to fall back. "We've found and engaged the enemy. We are in full retreat."

"Good work Rainbow Actual," came the Colonel's voice. "Stick to the plan and good luck."

The Rasgali Game Preserve
Southern Continent
Dixie
Lyrans Commonwealth
29 June 3025

The thunderstorm's massive rumble shook Colonel Hansi in her cockpit seat as sure as if she had taken a direct hit from an autocannon round. It had been five days since she had arrived on Dixie, a world that she had grown to dislike. Five long, tedious, patience-eroding days. The southern continent was apparently prone to rain showers each afternoon during this season. The effect on the ground that had been driven and walked over by her battle force as well as the exposed earth from the digging done there had turned the hillside into a sea of bright tan mud and muck.

She wouldn't have minded it if it had washed away the opening to the Castle Brian, but it hadn't. She would have been happier yet if it had flushed out the two lances of force that had been harassing her vastly superior Fusiliers. It did not. They struck once every day or so, firing off a few rounds and running. She had caught one lance with a company of her 'Mechs and had obliterated it. Her losses thus far had been one 'Mech, a light *Stinger* that had taken an autocannon burst in the cockpit from an older model *Hunchback*. Payback had been just...the *Hunchback* and a militia *Catapult* had been taken down after a long and painful pursuit.

Every 'Mech had shown signs of wear and tear, occasional damage, irritating occasional damage. Frustrating occasional damage. Like everything else about Dixie, it simply was getting on her nerves.

"Colonel, we are receiving a message on a SAFE coded frequency, scrambled for your eyes only," came the voice of the Communications Tech aboard the *Hawk's Shadow*.

"I was not anticipating a message," she muttered to herself more than to the Tech. "Fine, patch it in to my cockpit."

"Audio only sir," the Tech replied. There was a hiss, a crackle, then a voice, a calm, almost regal voice. "Colonel Hansi, this is Satin Sheet, SAFE code niner-niner-Tango Bravo. Request authorization."

She knew SAFE codes, they had been her lot in life for years. "Satin Sheet. Code authorization is Whiskey, Bravo, Charlie, five, three, zero."

"Colonel, you are a difficult person to locate. It's taken me days to find you."

She didn't know who this agent was but assumed it was one of a number of operatives that SAFE had planted on House Steiner worlds. "I was not in the mood to broadcast my location to the general public."

"You are here to capture the Castle Brian I reported I assume."

"No comment."

"If you are, Colonel, I have a bit of news you will be interested in."

"I'm listening," she said, only slightly irritated at his cocky tone of voice.

"You're looking in the wrong place."

Her eyes narrowed at the words. She didn't like being told she was wrong, ever. Her hands clenched on the armrests of her command couch. "Proceed," she said slowly through gritted teeth.

"I'm transmitting the coordinates to you now," the spy reported. She saw that her battlecomputer downloaded the coordinates and autoloading the map. "I located one of the two men that found the Castle Brian. Apparently the local militia commander lured you on a proverbial wild goose chase down on the southern continent."

"What were you able to learn about what is in this warehouse?" she asked. The legends of Castles Brian and their contents, in some cases mysterious and deadly lostech, was the stuff of childhood stories and adult nightmares.

"Nothing, I'm afraid. My subject suffered a cerebral aneurism during our, eh, 'discussions.' While he had a partner that, man has disappeared. I assume that he is in the safe custody of the local government."

Colonel Hansi's BattleMech rumbled again as thunder creaked and finally burst outside. It gave her a moment to pause, to contemplate. She pushed her anger down deep into her mind and soul. She'd been misled, plain and simple. Fine. Now she had what she needed to achieve her mission. "I appreciate your ef-

forts. Your service to the Free Worlds League is noted. I will pass word to your superiors."

"It is an honor to serve," the voice replied. "But I must forewarn you. The local militia commander who tricked you down to the south is likely to be prepared for your arrival. I wish you the best of luck." With a static-filled pop and hiss, his voice disappeared.

She switched channels. "All commands," she said in a cool, controlled tone. "Prep the DropShips for departure. All units, break camp and fall back to your ships. I want pre-flight checks run and departure plotted in the next three hours." She surveyed a tactical readout of the area where the real Castle Brian was as she heard the chorus of, "yes sirs," in her earpiece. Rolling hills, very few trees, deep knolls that would obscure line of sight. One city nearby, New Wichita—not close enough to factor in for the coming fight. There was better terrain for a battle, but not too much. This would be a place where she could prove her combat acumen.

Yes, this would be perfect.



She crawled in the soaking wet grass. The thunderheads had moved on only a few minutes before, but Lieutenant Raven didn't care if it was pouring down rain. Her scouts had told her that the House Marik forces were loading up. She had to see for herself.

Lifting up the enhanced binocs, she scanned the DropShips off near where the mock Castle Brian site was. The teams were hosing off the muck and mud from camp area. Crates were being loaded. The perimeter defense had contracted to the cover from the DropShip turrets.

Raven stared at the DropShips and the lines of men and material. "If we only had that kind of force and firepower at our disposal..." she said longingly. Militia units never got the top of the line equipment and never enough material. The cold, wet feeling on her thighs and chest stirred her back to reality, brought her to focus.

She picked up her comm unit. "Rainbow Actual to Iron Crown. It appears that our guests are packing it in. I'm willing to bet that they are heading your way."

There was a pause before Colonel Volger replied. "Iron Crown to Rainbow Actual. Compliments to you and your unit. Get down to the barge and head our way." Militia units didn't have DropShips, making sea barges the best way to travel between continents. It would take two or three days in the best case to reach where the rest of the Dixie Militia would be, most likely too late if it boiled down to a straight-up battle. Arrangements had been made a while ago for the evacuation, but there were certain laws of physics that could not be changed. Still, she had to try.

"See you soon Iron Crown," she said, shutting down the channel. "Alright boys and girls," she muttered to herself. "Time to shag it the hell out of here."

Fifty-Eight Kilometers North of New Wichita
The Northern Continent
Dixie
Lryan Commonwealth
3 July 3025

Colonel Volger looked at the tactical display of the region around the Castle Brian and wondered what he had missed. Leutnant Raven's force had done its job, it had bought them time—precious time. He had used that time to harden the battered and rotted Castle Brian into a defensible position and to transform the terrain into something that he could use to execute his strategy. Despite that time and the hard work and sweat that his men and women (and the locals) had provided, Volger knew he had overlooked something. That was how military operations worked. No matter what, you overlooked things. On occasion you could get into the head of one of your opponents and see the battlefield through their eyes.

Volger did not delude himself. He was no Napoleon, no Patton, no Rommel, no Kerensky. In reality he was a semi-washed up Regular Army officer that was given a distant outpost to defend with a handful of militia. Most of the people in his command were veterans and had fought and fired in battle before. They wouldn't run unless he told them to. At the same time they had friends, families, businesses, and lives tied up on Dixie. They were not the same as Regular Army.

That was where his strategy came in. Fritz Volger allowed himself a thin smile. Yes, he wanted to attack and destroy the Free Worlds raiders. Any Regular Army officer would. That wasn't the path he was going to follow. Volger did not lose his focus. My job is to defend Dixie. Destruction of the enemy would accomplish that but was not the only way to achieve that goal. His strategy was based on his goal, plain and simple.

His enemy would move quickly. Last time she dropped right on the fake Castle Brian and had discovered mines. What she didn't know was that he only had a handful of mines remaining in stock and her odds of hitting them were pretty limited. This Colonel Hansi was not likely to make the same mistake twice. She'd drop close, but not on top of the old Star League fortification. She'd come in from two or three directions at once with the intent of overwhelming the defenders. He hoped to blunt that kind of as-

sault. That would confuse her, buy him a day or so while she planned her attack in greater detail.

Popping open his neurohelmet, he rubbed his eyes. They stung both from lack of sleep and the pollen that he had waded through. Stopping, he looked around his *Orion's* cockpit and drank in the details. Am I setting us up for slaughter? Perhaps. Probably not. It was all simply a matter of time...

He walked the *Orion* forward, way from the hillside where the Castle Brian was located. The technicians he had inside of the bunker were securing the last of the supplies inside the tunnel complex. I hope this old girl has one more battle left in her, he pondered as he stared at the tunnel entrance that had been cleared and made more operational in the last few days.

I hope I have one more battle left in me.

***Landing Zone Charlie
Sixty-Eight Kilometers North of New Wichita
The Northern Continent
Dixie
Lyrn Commonwealth
7 July 3025***

Colonel Hansi had studied the terrain as best she could but until she saw it for the first time it was difficult to fully understand. The tall grass was something she had not counted on—something her satellites had not fully conveyed. She had seen what appeared to be trenches or roadwork around the suspected Castle Brian. In fact, satellites and her own CAP had revealed at least one 'Mech-sized tunnel entrance.

She had to admit that for a militia commander, the man who led the Dixie Militia had done pretty well. He had tricked her into wasting days on a different continent while he had reinforced his position at the real objective. The Dixie Militia was a glorified company. Yes, they could muster some additional mixed arms, but she outnumbered them three to one and some of their force was days away on the southern continent.

Hansi knew her enemy was no fool. No doubt with a Star League Castle Brian in his possession he was busy doing what he could to rearm and reactivate any recovered technology and BattleMechs that he had found there. Buying extra days could tip the scales to his advantage if she allowed that to happen.

She had no intention of doing that.

Her three DropShips were spread out coming down to the north, the south west, and the east of the hill that the SAFE operative had told her was the objective. Her plan was to deploy far enough away from the Castle facility to allow her to organize her forces and close in simultaneously from three sides. At the last minute, as she surveyed the terrain, she had reassigned several MechWarriors and their rides; specifically those with jump jets. Her intent was that she would not allow the ground to be turned against her again.

"Alright Fusiliers; deployment pattern bravo. Secure the LZs and deploy skirmishers out two kilometers from the LZs to probe for signs of enemy recon and surveillance. Await my orders for assault." She moved her massive *Atlas* forward at a ponderous

stride as her sensors switched to long range. There was nothing—no sign of the enemy. No, they had dug in at the Castle Brian. If I have my way, it will be their grave.

One by one her commands signaled in. Just short of three companies of the Free Worlds League's best MechWarriors and fighters fanned out and prepared to rush the Castle.

She had the command company form up alongside of her, lance formations, in a wide V with her at the apex. The ground was dry, unlike what she had left in the southern hemisphere of Dixie. The waving grass billowed in the wind looking like a sea of brown and green. While it was spring in the south, it was fall here in the north.

"Fusiliers!" she barked in her best impression of a drill sergeant. "Roll!" She moved her *Atlas* into a slow run at the front of the formation while the rest of the command company followed. They tore paths through the tall grass as they moved forward driving the small animals in the grass before them.

Colonel Hansi led her company up over a long sloping hill. As she reached the crest she could see the downward slope leading outward to a much larger hill in the distance. There were huge piles of dirt and rock piled up, obviously recently dug. Some of the construction equipment was still there in place. Tracks from either bulldozers or tanks tore up the sod. This was it. A Castle Brian. Unconsciously she licked her lips and carefully pushed her throttle forward. I never thought I'd live to see one—a virgin one.

Off to the north she could see a trench where Treacher's Company was going to be coming from any moment. From space it had appeared to be more of a roadway, but now that she was on the ground she could make it out. It was at least ten meters and was very deep. An anti-'Mech trench if she ever saw one. Damn. This was bound to blunt Treacher's assault. "Treacher, this is Hansi on discreet. You have an anti-'Mech trench to your front. Shift to the north and see if you can find the end of it. Put your jump-capable 'Mechs over. Flank that trench with everything else. We'll see you at the objective."

Treacher acknowledged the message as she felt her *Atlas* pick up a list leaning forward as she went down the hill. She was still in the front but her company's formation was now more of a jagged disjointed line than the perfect V it had been at the start of the run. "Hansi to command company, dress that line," she said. She surveyed the hillside but saw no signs of the enemy. "Where are you hiding?"

Suddenly the ground in front of her *Atlas* disappeared. The tall waving grass collapsed down into darkness. Her *Atlas* slammed forward, hitting a wall of dirt and sod just below the cockpit. Her entire body weight was tossed in an instant into the side of the trench she had fallen into. Damage indicators flickered red at the loss of center torso armor from the fall. "Command company hold up!" she barked as she still attempted to contemplate the situation.

"Command Strike Lance, we're down!" came one of her Lieutenants. From what she could tell they had hit the same concealed obstacle she had.

Suddenly her sensors picked up fusion reactors coming to life, powering on in a quick-start mode. The 'Mechs had been hidden behind the massive mounds of dirt that had been piled up, obvious excavations from the trench. Her trench had been covered like a tiger trap, a thin layer of sod and grass put in over the top. "All units, be aware this is a trap. There are anti-'Mech trenches here. Secure your lines where you are. Advance jump-capable 'Mechs per our plan. Get some infantry forward," she said as a wave of short range missiles blasted into her *Atlas*, hitting her cockpit and right shoulder. A missile shrapnel fragment cracked her cockpit canopy, warning just how close death was.

She wanted to fire back but couldn't possibly raise her *Atlas*'s arms enough. "Get me cover fire now. I want a Prime Hauler over here and pull me out of this hole!" She saw a *Phoenix Hawk* from her Eagle Claw lance rise into the air and land in front of her. It was firing at a target near the Castle Brian. Another wave of missiles came in, this time at the *Phoenix Hawk*. A chunk of armor plating from its left arm was blasted free and rained down in front of her cockpit. One piece came to rest on her shoulder as a PPC blast sent additional shards of armor in every direction. Damn it!

Troops jumped into the trench and on top of her *Atlas*, most carrying heavy cables. Lasers stabbed the air just above and to the left of her cockpit, obviously aimed at her 'Mechs. Waves of missiles came back, along with brilliant bursts of charged particles. Above, around, and in front of her, battle was raging. "Damn it. You guys get moving and get me up now!"



Hauptmann Angela Dickerson of the Dixie Militia watched as one of the companies of Free Worlds BattleMechs stopped just shy of the exposed anti-'Mech trench. She had a lance. The odds were three to one. They fired down at her force. One of her 'Mechs, a *Locust*, didn't stand a chance. A PPC blast of azure energy lanced its right leg as it fired desperately back. The leg was cut at the mid-shin, severed with a wave of sparks and smoke. As it toppled to its side a ripple of missiles, long range missiles, caught it. The 'Mech quaked on the way down, sending up billows of black smoke. As if that wasn't enough, several medium lasers stabbed at the fallen form. Two red beams missed, cutting through the smoke, while three more hit the fallen *Locust*. They seared the carcass of the crumbled and smoldering BattleMech. The Senior Warrant Officer who was the pilot, Drain Hurst, never stood a chance. Flames lapped upward out of the space where the cockpit windshield had been, gutting the fallen militiaman as if a blast furnace had been turned on.

She flanked the debris of the *Locust* with her *Centurion* and spotted at least one of the assailants that had killed Hurst. It was an *Assassin*, along with a *Stinger* that had lit their jump jets and had come across the trench. Further down she saw a *Vindicator* that had come across as well. She locked onto the *Assassin*, her targeting reticle fixed on her enemies sloped head-cockpit. Lock tone filled her ears as she hit the primary target interlock circuit trigger. Payback...

Her Luxor autocannon and long range missiles fired at the same time. A stream of autocannon rounds stitched up the right torso, each one violently rocking the Marik *Assassin*. The missiles followed a second or two later, plastering the BattleMech everywhere, including the already crippled chest. As she felt the cockpit temperature of her *Centurion* swell up around her she watched as the *Assassin* MechWarrior fought for control of his/her 'Mech and turned to face her.

Then came the explosion as the missile ammo stored in the torso went off.

The blasts inside the chest of the *Assassin* burst out in several areas, tossing armor plating off and into the nearby *Stinger*. The blast was fatal. The *Assassin* twisted at the knee actuators and dropped down to the ground with a sickening thud. The *Stinger* and *Vindicator* turned to engage her as a wave of missiles from a Marik *Archer* on the other side of the trench tore into her. The *Centurion* rattled and shook as more than half of the missiles

found their mark. Red and yellow damage indicators lit up on her secondary display, telling her the true story of the carnage. Smoke blocked her direct vision but she knew that the *Stinger* and *Vindicator* on the edge of the trench were there, preparing to turn and take her out.

She keyed the code into her battlecomputer. It transmitted the signal to the detonation charges that were set. The militia had located several dozen barrels of petrocycloline, used primarily in inferno missile rounds. Nastier than napalm, this substance had been sprayed carefully into the tall grasses on the militia side of the trench. There was only enough to cover a few areas but she was sure that both of the enemy 'Mechs were in the right spot. As they had moved in the grasses both of them had been coating their legs and feet in the sticky flammable substance.

The charge went off to her right and from there a wall of intense fire shot up nearly ten meters into the air and at least five meters deep. She used the opportunity to swing in on the other side of the fallen *Locust* to see what happened. When her field of vision cleared, Dickerson could see both of the Marik 'Mechs in flames. The *Vindicator* half-fell, half-stumbled into the trench, making matters even worse as its flaming and blackened legs poked up. The *Stinger* lit its jump jets, making the heat and flames worse, but managed to get back across the trench before it overloaded itself and shut down.

Hauptmann Dickerson locked onto the *Stinger* and blasted it with her autocannon. The rounds ripped up the arm and toppled the already damaged BattleMech. As it dropped, the Dixie Militia officer juked her joystick and started to fall back before that *Archer* could reload.

"Hurst, I don't know if you can hear me, but I hope your death wasn't in vain," she said under her breath. Opening a channel, she called out to Colonel Volger, "Iron Crown, the left flank is holding—barely."



Sergeant Hearn's of the Dixie Militia climbed the gantry at the rear of the *Hussar*. The old 'Mech was nothing more than a rotting shell, but the Colonel had ordered it brought out and supported

with a steel gantry from the rear. They had salvaged what they could from the weapons, but so far the Castle Brian had yielded little more than junk and souvenirs for antique collectors. The rotted fist and leg had been tack-welded into place. Now that the tarp that had covered it had been pulled away the *Hussar* was basking in the light of day for the first time in ages.

What a piece of junk.

The fusion reactor of the *Hussar* was operational but its power feed controls had rotted away over a century before. They had test fired the reactor and it worked, barely. The power levels it produced could have lit up a desk lamp but not too much more. Hearn and his tech team had wanted to remove it but the Colonel had other ideas. It seemed nuts to him but then again who could make sense from officers?

Reaching into the makeshift reactor startup controls he had wired to the rear of the 'Mech he activated the fusion reactor and throttled it up. It wasn't much, but it was working. It was the only thing that was running on the *Hussar*. Hearn settled and watched in the distance as the battle unfolded. Hell of a place to be in a fight...hiding behind a rotting hulk.



Colonel Volger ignored the five-pack of long range missiles that slapped into his *Orion*'s left leg and watched as Warrant Officer Kreiger's highly modified *Blackjack* stepped out of the Castle Brian tunnel entrance. The welders had been busy and had done a fairly good job, if not sloppy close-up. Adding some additional armor plating on slowed the stride of the *Blackjack*, but it created a necessary illusion. The feet of the 'Jack had been trimmed away as well. Most of the work was sloppy but it only had to hold up to long range sensors.

The modifications had been to make the head more cylindrical and to alter the shape of the torso and arms. It was all cosmetic, the 'Mech itself was still essentially a *Blackjack*. There were a few other modifications but they had been done by the techs, not simply a welding crew. But to a long range sensor, it would appear to be something else, something quite different.

Kreiger lumbered off to the flank where at *Atlas* was half-in and half-out of the anti-'Mech trench. The arm-slung PPC that had replaced the autocannon in the right arm was the most significant modification. The weapon whined as its capacitors charged then Kreiger fired it. The searching white-blue energy beam cracked outward and slapped into the *Atlas* at its midriff. The hit was a miracle. The *Blackjack* was not properly balanced with the additional shaped armor plating and the targeting computer was jury-rigged to compensate for the weapon.

The Free Worlds 'Mech was left with a blackened hole near its waist, a hole billowing white smoke from the hit. Volger smiled. Good job, Kreiger. The Marik recovery team wrenched it hard out of the trench onto its back and the *Atlas* pilot lumbered upright. A lance of Marik 'Mechs flanked it, pouring on cover fire as they all drifted back out of weapons range. Some shots hit the mocked-up *Blackjack*, blasting off some of the cosmetic work—not enough to ruin the disguise.

While Hauptmann Dickerson's front had held, First Leutnant Oak's flank had been swarmed by a lance of jump-capable 'Mechs that had fought hard and fast. Oak had only a lance for defense and had fallen back so that the Free Worlds League force could not rely on the non-jump 'Mechs for fire support. The battle had been a slug-fest, literally, the last combat being physical with 'Mechs punching and kicking. In the end Oak and the rest of his lance were down, but so were the Marik 'Mechs. He had held the front at the cost of every machine.

His augmented company was short, with the battered remains of the lance with Leutnant Raven still days away. Half of his company that was there was gone. There were no reserves. Everyone, including his own *Orion*, had suffered some damage.

They only have to push and push hard and we're toast. In amazement the assault didn't come. In fact the Oriente Fusiliers began to drift back, laying down smoke and covering fire as they did. It was a waste of ammo—Colonel Volger had nothing with which to launch a pursuit. Fires lit the tall dry grass in areas where errant missiles, shrapnel or lasers had missed their targets. Smoke from the trip that Dickerson had laid on her front still rose up, blotching out the sun like a fast moving storm cloud.

Don't tell me it worked?



Colonel Hansi was still furious when she reached her DropShip. She personally had been insulted when she had fallen into the trench leading her troops into battle. The Lyran militia had pummeled her and a number of her 'Mechs. They had lost eight 'Mechs, two full lances in the fighting. When she had deployed the jump 'Mechs to rush the trench, it had never dawned on her that there might be concealed trenchworks on the other two assault fronts. Then there had been the fire trap that had totally blunted one company's assault. I hadn't expected each front to have some sort of trap and layers of defense.

Captain Treacher came on the command channel. "We have all pulled back to the LZs and are rearming and refitting, sir."

"Good," she spat back. "They were tougher than anticipated."

"Sir, did you check your long range sensor data?" Treacher asked.

"No, not yet." Why?

"Colonel," the Captain came back, "we need to talk."

It took two hours to assemble the MechWarriors at the ad hoc command post at her DropShip—part of the price of spreading out the Landing Zones. Each brought burned data with them on disks. She pulled her own feeds and those of her troops and now understood why. Staring at the long range sensor feeds she then made eye contact with her company commanders.

"You are seeing what I see then?"

They all nodded.

"Star League-era BattleMechs," she replied. One of them, a *Black Knight*, had fired a PPC right at her, hitting her *Atlas* in the waist. *I was probably lucky it didn't move in to finish me off.* The *Hussar* was apparently only starting its power-up cycle during the attack but the fact that it was there was significant.

"This Dixie Militia has recovered some of the treasure from that Castle Brian and is using it," she said carefully.

"Those 'Mechs are equipped with lostech," one Lieutenant said. "We were probably lucky we stumbled into that trench. They might have eaten us for dinner if we'd gotten any closer."

Fear. She didn't like it but understood it. She heard it in the Lieutenant's voice and saw a hint of it in almost every face. "These Lyran money-changers are smarter than we gave them credit for. They are equipping themselves with Star League technology. Chances are if we had pressed them harder they had more hidden in that Castle Brian just waiting to come out. As it stands, our withdrawal probably saved most of our lives." She did what she could to spin the retreat. It probably wouldn't hold up with her superiors or her former peers in SAFE, but it was a start.

"Colonel," Captain Vargus asked, "What are your orders, sir?"

She looked at the data, the three-dimensional image of the militia *Black Knight* that hovered in front of them, then stared down at the topographical map on the portable holotable. "We can't rush in like that again. We aren't sure what they have tucked away there. We have a solid perimeter around them so we know that they can't be reinforced with additional MechWarriors or supplies. We'll need a way to breach that trench for starters. We need to probe their defenses and get a better assessment of what we are up against. In a few days we will mass our forces along one front and hit them. That tunnel entrance will be secured and held as our primary objective. We can then move inside and take them on—one-on-one if necessary.

"For now set up perimeter patrols and sentries," she said slowly, "For now we rebuild and refit."



"They had us balls-to-the-wall," Hauptmann Angela Dickerson said. "Why didn't they just finish us off?" She leaned forward on the folding chair and into the light that hung down in the old tactical ops room of the Castle Brian. The room had been pumped of water but was still a mess.

Colonel Volger allowed himself to smile. "First they were surprised when they hit that trench line and the one fire zone. It shattered their initiative. Then they thought they spotted Star League-era 'Mechs. That caught them off guard and sent a little

fear into them. They outnumber us but are afraid of what we may have pulled out of this Castle Brian.” He spoke like a man quite proud of himself.

“But sir,” Leutnant Oak said, wincing as he adjusted his seat. His arm was in a sling and his head was wrapped in field dressing. “We didn’t get squat out of this dump. It’s a bust.”

“They don’t know that,” Hauptmann Dickerson said, now fully understanding the Colonel’s plan. She gave her CO a knowing nod.

“We should have just let them take the facility. They would have seen it was a disaster.”

“No good,” Volger said. “They would have assumed that we had stripped it of the good gear. As long as they thought that, Dixie would not be safe. In fact, no matter what, they will assume that we have hidden or concealed the hardware that doesn’t exist. That’s fine by me.”

“Sir,” Dickerson pressed, “What’s next? How do you take advantage of this?”

“We need to hold them off for a few days or so. At least one of those they are bound to be reassessing what happened to them and repairing damage. If we’re lucky, we’ll have Leutnant Raven’s remaining force on the continent and moving in our direction. That will add some degree of confusion to our Marik guests.”

“What happens after two days? How are we going to defeat these Free Worlders?”

Colonel Volger smiled broadly. “Let’s just say defeating the enemy isn’t the key to winning this fight. We beat them with the one thing they can’t control and don’t have much of—time. Trust me.”

***Landing Zone Charlie
Sixty-Eight Kilometers North of New Wichita
The Northern Continent
Dixie
Lyran Commonwealth
9 July 3025***

"Colonel Hansi," the sentry said as he stepped into her tent and saluted.

"What time is it?" she said, sitting up, wincing slightly at the light being turned on.

"0500 Hours, sir," the sentry replied. "My apologies for waking you sir, but you said if we—"

"I know the orders Corporal. Spit it out. What have we got?"

"Air lance on Combat Air Patrol has detected a reinforced lance of 'Mechs and vehicles coming up from the Port Blue Savannah. It apparently is the force we faced on the Southern Continent. They must have taken a barge or ship and are heading this way to reinforce the militia we have bottled up in the Castle Brian."

She smiled. "They'll never make it. I am going to detach Treacher's Company. They should be more than a match. Then when he gets back we can complete our fascines and rush that Castle." The fascines were rolls of logs and sticks that she planned on pushing into the anti-'Mech trench. Once there, her 'Mechs and tanks could run over them and into their inner defenses.

"Yes, sir," the sentry said, still at attention.

"Our hosts have made their first big mistake," she said with a feral grin. "Go wake up Treacher and tell him to prepare for immediate operations."



Colonel Volger's battle weary *Orion* moved to the forward position, a massive mound of mud, dirt, and rocks that had been excavated from the trench. Any further forward and he would be in

range of the forward position of the House Marik forces. Likewise if they came only a few meters closer, they would feel waves of long range missiles raining down on them. He could make out a *Warhammer* in the distance, watching him as closely as his unit watched the Marik invaders.

The weather had held and had almost been pleasant. His techs had salvaged a number of 'Mechs, some of which were cobbled together to operational status. He was short on MechWarriors and had gone so far as to press one of his technicians as a MechWarrior. All part of being in the militia.

"Alright Kraus," he said into his microphone that transmitted to the scout that had called him up. "I'm here. What is it that you've spotted?"

"They have stripped away a reinforced company," came back a Germanic accent in his neurohelmet's earpiece. "Started hauling ass and gear out just before dawn."

Volger adjusted his long range sensors and sidestepped out from behind the dirt mound. Sergeant Kraus was right of course, he usually was. Were they being sent out to another front as part of a general assault? Or did they have another target? He paused then activated his command channel. "Iron Crown to Rainbow Actual," he signaled.

Leutnant Hollister Raven came back in his ear and mind. "Go Iron Crown."

"It looks as if you have guests heading for you. One company reinforced."

"We are down to one lance, Iron Crown," the voice said wearily back. "I am open to suggestions." There was a hint in her voice that she wasn't going to like what he was going to say next.

On occasion, I like to surprise those in my command.

"Break and run, Rainbow Actual. You have hours before they are on you. Hit the road, best possible speed. Take these boys on a long hike away from here. Run 'em like dogs on a hunt—long and hard."

"Sir?"

"You heard me," he said. "Remember, God loves the militia."

Pirate Point Bixby
Jumpship Haberdasher
Dixie
10 July 3025

"All ships report safe emergence sir," the captain of the Jumpship *Haberdasher* said.

General Raymond Vargus looked out of the portal at the massive orb of Dixie that hovered below him, casting a blue/green light on the bridge. "Dump the data from the MILSAT satellite to my console."

He scanned the situation reports that had been beamed up from the Dixie Militia. It was a standard procedure, but the lonely militia was facing a non-unique situation. Most militia commanders when faced with a vastly superior force did things that made little sense.

Most dug in to wait for reinforcements. That worked if you were on Hesperus, but usually when outnumbered three to one or more, most positions were far too weak. Others tried to make a name for themselves and attack. Those militia commanders usually were dead. The good ones, the smart ones, called for help and kept the enemy busy and moving until reinforcements arrived.

So, what kind of commander was this Colonel Volger?

General Vargus looked at the reports. Castle Brian...decoy location...fortification. "Signal all commands. Immediate combat drop operations in ten minutes." He floated over to the egress door for the bridge. "A Militia commander who understands tactical and strategic concepts...that's a man worth saving. Comm—send a message to all Militia officers. Let them know we're here and the Archon and high command send their compliments."



Captain Treacher maneuvered his command lance to the far right flank. The area was a swamp and it was that swamp that had finally slowed down the militia force he had been tracking. They had led him on a merry chase across the countryside, wasting hours and forcing him to detach from the logistical support of the

rest of the Fusiliers. When the small militia force had made a run through the swamp it gave him just what he needed, a chance to catch up and intercept them. Now they would pay for running.

"This is Captain Treacher of the Oriente Fusiliers, Fourth Brigade," he said clearing his throat. "Militia commander, you are penned in. We have your flanks covered and the only road out. I will allow you to surrender. Power down and you and your troops will live. Slug it out with us and we outnumber and outgun you more than three to one."

There was a pause, which he expected. Treacher opened his mouth to order the assault when a ragged female voice, dry, weary, came over the open channel. "This is Leutnant Hollister Raven of the Dixie Militia," she said with an eerie calm. "You gave us quite a chase Captain. I compliment you for sticking with us."

"There will be plenty of time for pleasantries once you have powered down your 'Mechs and vehicles, Leutnant."

"I don't think so," she said with a hint of sternness creeping into her tone. "You pursued us quite far. Have you spoken with your commander lately?"

The question caught Treacher off guard. For the first time since the fight at the Castle Brian he felt a chill run down his spine. "Why?"

"Check in with her, then we'll talk," Raven said with a slight chuckle.



Rage. That was the word that best described how Colonel Hansi felt. Pure white burning-hot rage. The three jumpships had arrived at a pirate point undetected. Now the DropShips were only minutes away from landing. The transponder told her the story—The Eighth Lyrn Regulars. They were coming in with full force, nearly a regiment of troops. Their intended LZ was between her force and Treacher's detached company, far off in the hinterlands.

Hansi pounded the control console of her *Atlas* to release her fury but it didn't help. The situation had changed and wasn't in her favor, not at all. The commander of the Dixie Militia had been

craftier than she had ever thought. He had tricked her into giving up the one commodity that he needed: time. He had no intention of slugging it out with her. He was buying time to trap her on Dixie.

She wanted to fight...wanted to kill. Reason crept into her thoughts. It wasn't going to happen today, not now, not in this situation. She had been outfoxed by a simple militia commander. It hurt but not nearly as much as if she lost her entire battalion to the Eighth Lyran Regulars. A "strategic withdrawal" could be weathered, could be spun with her upper command. Defeat and destruction were permanent.

"This is Colonel Hansi to all units. We are evacuating immediately. We have less than an hour to withdraw. All commands report to your DropShips for immediate hot-lift."

A jostled voice came on the command channel. "Colonel, this is Treacher," his voice seemed nervous.

This was the hardest part of all. "Yes Captain."

"We can't be back at the LZ in time...you know that. Request extraction at our current coordinates or others that you designate."

She licked her lips. An entire regiment of Lyran forces were dropping on Dixie—smack-dab between her and Treacher. He didn't know yet, couldn't know. Hansi bowed her head and took a moment to close her eyes and think.

"No can do Captain," she said.

"Sir?"

"We have a regiment inbound, regular troops. We can't make the hook-up." Her words rang like a bell. There was an uncomfortable pause before Treacher spoke up again.

"Do you have any last orders, sir?"

"Yes, I have message I want you to pass on to the militia commander..."

Leutnant General Raymond Vargus, the acting CO of the Eighth Lyran Regulars took long careful steps towards the Castle Brian to avoid the numerous mud-filled holes. His uniform was a dress uniform, crisp and pristine, as opposed to the mud-encased militia men that stopped their work and saluted him. The man at his side was a MechWarrior followed by a Lyran guard. The trio made their way to the massive door of the Castle Brian.

Colonel Volger saw the General and realized that he hadn't bathed or shaved in days. He ran his fingers through his short hair and realized it was a waste of time to try and improve his appearance. Instead he stepped forward and saluted. The General replied kindly and smiled.

"Excellent job here, Colonel," General Vargus said, surveying the area. "You and your troops are to be complimented." He said his words loud enough for the non-commissioned troops nearby to hear them.

"Thank you, sir. My troops deserve the praise. All I did was make sure that we followed the established battle plans."

"Indeed you did," he replied. "You held off the Fusiliers long enough for us to deploy. Their retreat left behind a company of force that surrendered to us. I want you to know that we refused their surrender until your Leutnant Raven could accept it on behalf of the Commonwealth."

"I appreciate that sir." He was more relieved to hear that Raven was still alive. He was worried that the Marik Company might opt for a military solution to their plight and would wipe out the small lance.

"In fact," the General said, stepping aside. "This is the Captain of the force that was pursuing your lance. This is Captain Vitto Treacher of the Oriente Fusiliers. He indicated that he carried a message for you."

Volger's eyebrows cocked as he gave his head a surprised twist. The Marik Captain appeared as worn out as he felt himself. He gave Volger a curt nod, an informal salute. "You are the militia commander here?"

"I am Colonel Volger of the Dixie Militia."

"I report—eh, reported, to Colonel Eve Hansi. She was who you faced here. She wanted me to extend her compliments to your defense of this facility and this planet. She said that she hopes

your commanding general will put you on front-line status and that you will offer her a rematch of this fight on the planet of your choosing.”

It was a compliment—and a threat. For a Free Worlds League officer, it was the highest compliment that could be offered. Volger nodded. “If you are traded for prisoners in the future and see her, tell her that I look forward to the rematch.”

“And,” the General added, “I think it’s safe to say that he will have his choice of assignments after his successful defense here.”

Volger smiled broadly. Half to himself, half to the General, he muttered the words, “God bless the militia.”

He was shocked when the General responded. “God bless them indeed, sir,” and with that he offered a congratulatory salute to Colonel Volger.