

TO SERVE THE DRAGON

by Loren L. Coleman

PART I



KA-418 (Garrote)
Periphery
12 May 3062

Sho-sa Traci Sikaro paused outside the *Black Wind's* command, control and communication's center. Rubbed at her eyes, red-veined and dry. The bitter taste of the wake-up pill she'd dry-swallowed in her cabin burned at the back of her throat. Her skin felt as if it were trying to crawl off her body though every muscle felt weighted down by several extra kilos.

Alone in the corridor, unobserved, she slumped forward; allowing her head to rest against the bulkhead's cool metal. Only for a moment.

Three hours sleep. Just enough to lull body and mind into a false sense of relaxed comfort before a wake-up call shattered that hope. No help for it. Here, time served the bandit warlord Lukas Sjardd, not the Draconis Combine's *Ryuu-no-ha* task force.

Every moment put the madman one step closer to the tools for Armageddon.

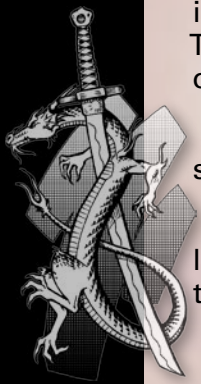
No!

Feeling herself dropping off again, the samurai shook herself awake and scrubbed hands over her face. Squared her tan field uniform with a tug at the jerkin's thick hem and quickly finger-combed dark bangs up under the brim of her cap. Then, undogging the hatch door with its quick-release lever, she passed into the command center with a quick, confident stride.

As always, the first thing to hit her was the ozone tang of warm electronics and the "live" feeling of electricity which crawled along the back of her neck, standing up tiny, dark hairs. Wall lights broadcast with a muted glow, and a few cones on the ceiling threw spotlights over the many individual stations as needed. Technicians and aides worked the room, manning those consoles or standing by at tactical, ready to assist.

A single, armed infantryman came to attention, bowed, and resumed his post when she returned the courtesy.

Conversations, charged with an air of expectancy, died to a low background buzz as Traci worked through the tight quarter in between console stations, taking her spot at the head of



a holoprojector table next to *Tai-i* Chan Morada, her intelligence analyst. Morada shaved his head clean and trimmed a thin, dark goatee close to his face. He, too, wore a light tan jumpsuit and thick jerkin. And the dragon-sword insignia of the Ryuken—one of the Combine's most successful and still somewhat controversial combat commands.

With a slight bow, Morada handed her his briefing on a small noteputer. But this she ignored for the moment and instead stared at the world rotating in the air over the holotable's blue-black glass. Projected by the same holographic imagers which would soon take her onto a new battlefield, a brief loss of vertical sync cut the projection apart every six or seven seconds as the only world in system KA-418, unofficially dubbed "Garrote," spun through an accelerated display of its rapid, eighteen hour rotation. Extremely barren: gray, brackish seas washing up against shores, dead-brown swathes of permafrost fighting white patches of ice and snow. "Hotspots," created from geothermal venting, pocked the landscape with gray-green splotches like a disease. What little life the world supported grew around these warm pockets, twisted and stunted by the world's poisoned biosphere.

Garrote was a world easy to hate. Traci did not put up the slightest resistance.

Tearing her gaze away from the holographic projection she performed a quick scan of the data dumped to the noteputer's small, amber-glowing screen, reading the katakana characters from top to bottom, row by row, paging through the entire report very quickly. As expected, it summarized information gathered from a captured survey vehicle. As feared, it substantiated the initial data.

"It is confirmed then," she said. More statement than question.

Morada did not believe in rhetorical questions. "*Hai*, commander. There is no doubt. The Cemetery exists. Somewhere on Garrote's northern polar basin. And Lukas Sjjardd is after it."

Optimistically, perhaps even foolishly, she'd hoped for another explanation. "He is," she said, admitting it aloud. "Of course he is."

Traci's gaze returned to the holographic projection, the world staring back at her like some poisoned, malevolent eye. The Garrote system was appropriately named; the only stable star within five parsecs along this stretch of the Combine's border, it sat astride a natural choke-point in JumpShip travel. Centuries ago the Star



BATTLECORPS

League had apparently noticed the same strategic implications, choosing it for an outpost, constructing on the world several small production facilities and hidden equipment caches.

And, according to at least one Eyes-Only report compiled by House Kurita's Internal Security Force, the guardians of mankind's supposed "golden age" had also created here one of their (possibly many) Cemetery sites. A place to store chemical, biological and radiological weapons outlawed by the Ares Conventions. Weapons thought—and proclaimed to be—destroyed.

Another of the League's dirty little secrets.

Warlord Sjardd would sell them to the highest bidder. What he did not keep for himself. Some of the deadliest weapons known to mankind, in the hands of terrorists and fanatics.

"Bandit kings have fought over Garrote for at least a hundred years before the Clan arrival. All these rumors of Star League equipment, why hasn't Combine intelligence ever picked up on them before now?"

Morada pursed his lips, considering. "Most likely the ISF did. But how many different tales have *you* heard in your lifetime concerning lost colonies and Periphery treasure worlds?"

She sighed. "Dozens, hundreds," she admitted. And the analyst nodded. She clenched her hands into fists. "But to miss this one, with a Star League Cemetery sitting here—"

"There was no way of knowing. Automated defenses kept bandits from recovering much more than a fraction of any potential salvage. No hard evidence ever surfaced. Then the Clans came. And we had other things to worry us. As I read the initial briefings, the ISF was more concerned with Sjardd's erratic boasting of having recovered Clan technology. A more likely claim, with the Smoke Jaguar's destruction."

Ironic, that it was the reformation of the Star League which put the entire Inner Sphere in danger again from such terrible weapons. The combined armies of the Inner Sphere, in a grand assault against Clan Smoke Jaguar, had destroyed the Clan's entire warrior caste and left such Periphery outposts as Garrote easy targets.

Enter Lukas Sjardd, with the morale center of a viper.

Clan technology in the hands of a bandit king and self-styled warlord like Sjardd would have caused the Combine trouble.



Especially if he went through with his wild boasts to equip other bandit kingdoms for the right price. Enough to finally gain the attention of the ISF. And when they saw the possible danger of a rediscovered Star League Cemetery, Traci Sikaro had been picked to lead one of Ryuken-san's companies out for a reconnaissance of the situation. Three months ago. The last night she'd known decent sleep.

To have the lives of thousands, even millions, riding on her every order was not conducive to an easy conscience.

"Reconnaissance in force," Traci whispered. Remembering her ISF briefing. She shook her head. "Shouldn't need more than a reinforced company. *Hai? Hai.*"

Morada frowned. "Commander?"

He'd heard her right. Hell, he'd been at the same briefing, listened to the same lies, and had a sharp enough mind of his own. But officers often grew amazingly dense when criticisms were aimed at senior officials in House Kurita's Internal Security Force. Either that, or very sharp-eared.

Of the two, she'd prefer the former. Every time.

"All right, Morada-san." She breathed out heavily, easing tensions from her muscles with a practiced relaxation technique. "Take my mind off this. What's on the board?"

Morada nodded to the *gunsho* running the holotable's imaging system, and the enlisted man typed some commands into a console. One of the tiny gray-green splotches that speckled Garrote suddenly colored over a bright cobalt blue.

"Our position," she noted. Swallowed dryly. At the small landing field they'd discovered, and taken from one of Sjardd's garrisons. A bloody battle, but never in any really doubt. Two *Catapults*, a lance of battle-scarred tanks, and a dozen men with shoulder-launched missile packs and assault rifles had been no match for a reinforced company out of House Kurita's line regiments.

Or, for that matter, the Ryuken-san's *Union*-class DropShip which they'd landed over the site's defensive turrets, using the *Black Wind*'s drive flame to burn those turrets down into ruined slag.

"Coming up now," a tech whispered to Morada. And another point on the planet's face flashed under new color, this one highlighted



in yellow. What looked like three to four hundred kilometers was Traci's guess from the scale of the world.

Morada clasped his hands behind his back in fastidious fashion. "A bonus from the survey vehicle we captured. It located a site where forces from Santander's World and Port Krin clashed right before Clan occupation smashed Valasek's capital and ended that rivalry for good. This battlefield is near one of the smaller 'hotspots.' Possibly the reason it has been overlooked for so long. Recon fly-bys from aerospace fighters show no evidence of recent salvage attempts."

"All salvage resources have been diverted to the Cemetery site up north." Traci nodded, and felt a slight charge of fresh strength. "Show me."

The yellow patch strobed brightly, and the planet faded away as holographic terrain suddenly rose to cover the table's slick surface of blue-black glass. Such detailed work, reconstructed from an earlier feed, it engendered the thought of being some kind of old-world God, staring down at the planet and preparing to move about men and women as if they were nothing more than pieces on some large game board.

But they were not! She scolded herself for the thought. Even as tired as she was. Every name on the roster was a loyal son or daughter of the Dragon. A Ryuken! She would not be allowed to resurrect them after a wrong move.

Traci leaned down over the table, propping herself up with hands splayed against the cool glass, fingers lost beneath a small mound of hillocks bordering the map. Magnified to this greater level of detail, the terrain appeared even more bleak and hostile. The permafrost was cracked and creviced from the planet's severe tectonic activity. A large pool of standing water spread across the plain, scummed over with brackish algae and ringed by low-laying scrub brush and isolated patches of dead or dying forests, and littering the ground like some child's discarded toys were the broken forms and scattered parts of BattleMechs and armored vehicles. Like a tangle of bones left to blanch under the sun's harsh, white light.

A blasted, wrecked, graveyard of a world. If Traci had truly been a god, the floods would not be long in rising here.

"That salvage could conceivably bring us back to full material strength," Morada offered.



Traci nodded, tucked her service cap into her belt then fit on a communications set, smoothing raven-black locks of hair beneath the strap and pulling the wire-mic to the corner of her mouth. Garrote was littered with several such battlefields from a century of hard combat between Periphery powers. Easier than finding and then matching themselves against automated defenses left behind to guard remaining Star League-era caches would be picking over this dead battlefield.

Pulling on a black glove studded with tiny, button-sized sensors, she looked patiently over the simulated terrain. Frowned.

"Where are our forces?"

A technician at the table's controls did rapid input. "*Sumimasen*, commander. That was just a reconnaissance flight overview. I'll patch in the tactical feed from *Chu-i* Rakai."

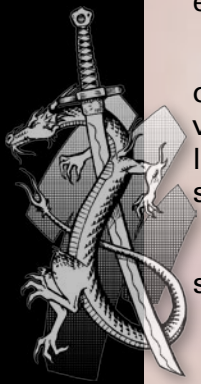
A single 'Mech, Yotimara Rakai's captured and reconditioned *Vulture*, appeared on the map. With its backward-canted legs, the *Vulture* strutted in a short, bobbing gait as it stalked among the wreckage.

Another 'Mech appeared. Two more. Then the rest of two lances filling in, giving Traci an overview of the plains and the array of her forces as they safeguarded the salvage trucks crawling up from behind. The illusion was not complete. Missing was any roost-ertail of dry, tan dust raised by the passing vehicles. The deep, shovel-blade footprints stamped behind each BattleMech. But close enough.

She issued a flurry of quick orders, guiding her warriors forward. Brushing her gloved hand over the old battlefield, painting a large box, she then set an operational area within which her forces could mainly exercise their own judgment. Where she tapped a 'Mech, a silver halo wrapped about the machine. It opened a direct line of communication to that MechWarrior, tying her headset into the encrypted communication bands used by Ryuken-san.

Mostly, she worked with *Chu-i* Rakai, trusting him as her senior, on-site officer. Agreeing where they would post a *Daikyu* as their advance guard. Letting him set the rest of his forces into an encircling line, casting it quickly into a wide, loose net, while she worked the salvage trucks in close to pick the graveyard clean of useable parts.

Something nagged at the back of her mind, seeing this loose spread of forces. A caution. A danger. But some final trace of her



exhaustion, and her concern for when warlord Sjardd might penetrate the Cemetery's seals, kept it from her until nearly too late.

She watched her people crawl about on the planet's ruined surface, spreading over the battleground in search of better salvage. Rakai ordered the scout lance to break farther afield, homing in on a large pile of parts and pieces. It was the carelessness of his order that did it, and she recognized the threat only seconds before alarms rang out. She tapped Rakai's *Vulture*.

"You're scattering your forces too far. Rakai! Pull back the recon lance."

Too late.

The potential salvage shook. Pieces rolled off and away; something beneath it moving as if stirred from slumber, or rising from the dead. Then, from a shallow pit beneath the wreckage, a Clan *Mad Cat* rose with arm-mounted large lasers pointed at one of her *Raptors*.

Ruby energy lanced out, slicing deep, deep into the machine's chest. Scarring through the armor, and skeletal framework, and the thick shielding which protected the BattleMech's fusion reactor. Releasing the reactor's power in a fiery explosion, reducing the scout 'Mech to scrap before Traci had barely finished her warning.

Her throat tightened. She swallowed against a sudden, dry metallic taste. As quickly as that, she'd lost a man.

And the battle was just beginning.



Hard winds carved at Garrote's northern plain, piling frost-covered drifts of tan earth against the windward side of a scrapped *Phoenix Hawk*. The old war machine rested on its back, showing the jagged, death-blow scar a particle projector cannon had slashed across its chest.

Chu-i Rakai leaned forward against his restraining harness, feeling the weight of his neurohelmet straining in his neck. Hands resting lightly on the *Vulture's* control sticks, he surveyed the wreckage through his cockpit's ferroglass shield, gauging the



amount of weathering the *'Hawk* had suffered and if it could be rendered down for useable parts still. One arm looked fairly whole. And there was no guessing the valuable electronics which might be salvaged out of the cockpit. Gyroscopic stabilizers. Actuators.

All good.

And armor, of course. Though *Sho-sa* Sikaro would need to order Ryuken-san astechs to scour any useable plating down to fresh base; scraping away every last trace of paint, any dishonorable touch of Santander-red.

Samurai or no, the Ryuken-san warriors would demand that much for their honor.

Of course, such concerns fled his mind at once when a threat icon suddenly popped on his head's-up display, and the *sho-sa's* excited call blasted over his neurohelmet's comm set, warning him to reign in his scout lance. Bring them back!

A rude hand shoved his *Vulture*, then, and a wash of static crackled loudly in his ear. He dipped forward, leaning into a stumbling walk, and slowly worked the controls to bring his 'Mech under control. The neurohelmet translated his own superior sense of balance into a regenerative feedback signal, helping keep the sixty ton OmniMech on its feet.

"We've lost *Chu-i* Akomata!"

Other reports poured in, but few mattered more than this. He wrenched at the *Vulture's* control sticks, manhandling his OmniMech. Twisting around. Shuffle-stepping until the small pillar of roiling smoke and golden fire could be seen through his forward screen, as well as the Clan *Mad Cat* striding forward over the wreckage which had been one of Rakai's machines. One of his soldiers. The OmniMech had an all-too familiar mottled gray paint scheme, and centered on the side of its forward-thrust cockpit was an insignia Rakai had thought never to see again.

The leaping silhouette of Clan Smoke Jaguar!

And the *Mad Cat* was only the first. Amidst more alarms, several OmniMechs previously hidden beneath piles of scrap metal stirred to life on the old battlefield. One, a sixty-five ton *Loki*, clawed its way up from where it had laid in wait behind an overturned Harasser.

A trap! Sikaro had let him walk his forces into a trap!



Pulling his crosshairs over, he eased into both triggers before worrying about a solid lock. Coils discharged, and Gauss rifles mounted in each of the *Vulture's* arms spat out large nickel-ferrous slugs, reaching downrange to slam the rising *Loki* back to the ground.

With some breathing room, he shoved his throttle to its limit stop, pushing into a hard run as the crackling static finally cleared.

"Is Akomata down or EVA?" he asked, teeth clenched so hard his jaw hurt.

No telling yet how many bandits they faced, and already Rakai had lost his recon lance commander and probably the third best warrior Sikaro-*san* had on her roster. It lowered his advantage to seven against five. The bandits were fighting only a reinforced lance, but they were Clan-designed 'Mechs, every one. And with a definite advantage in weight when measured against the three salvaged OmniMechs in Rakai's short company.

"EVA," someone finally responded. "I saw the ejection."

It gave Akomata a chance. Slim, but a chance. The *chu-i's* ejection seat would launch her well clear of this battlefield, putting her up on a paraglide 'chute. But exactly where she would land—and the situation by the end of the battle—was anyone's guess. Which left roughly six hours in which to be rescued, before Garrote's caustic atmosphere finally ate away at her lungs past the point of medical help.

Not a great deal of time, he knew.

Cursing, Rakai threw out another pair of Gauss rifle shots, smashing two more tons of armor into broken shards as he kept the enemy *Loki* pinned to the ground. Circling to get behind it, he kept his *Vulture* pressing forward at better than eighty kilometers per hour.

He hadn't passed the order, but on his tactical screen he notices *Kashira* Nichols rejoining fast with his *Daikyu*. If they could work a crossfire against the *Loki*, perhaps both get at its six...

"Rakai, form a skirmish line. Don't over-extend."

Traci Sikaro's voice. Calm and strong, as if nothing worried her, though Rakai knew his commander better than to believe that.

He also knew better than to argue with a superior officer, even if he had the ground command. Toggling for his all-hands circuit, he opened a channel.



"Recon lance, pull back south and east. Take shots of opportunity at that *Mad Cat* and try to pull it away."

Across the battlefield, his remaining *Raptor* led back a *Venom* and a *Panther*. Gem-colored lasers and the coruscating energy whip of a PPC slashed at the Clan-designed assault 'Mech. Minor wounds slashed over its armor. A few splashes of molten composite dripped down onto the ground.

Sikaro's voice crackled to life once more, but this time a small indicator light flashed at the corner of his vision to remind him that she had selected their private frequency. "You certain?" she asked. "That *Mad Cat* is pretty big for them to handle."

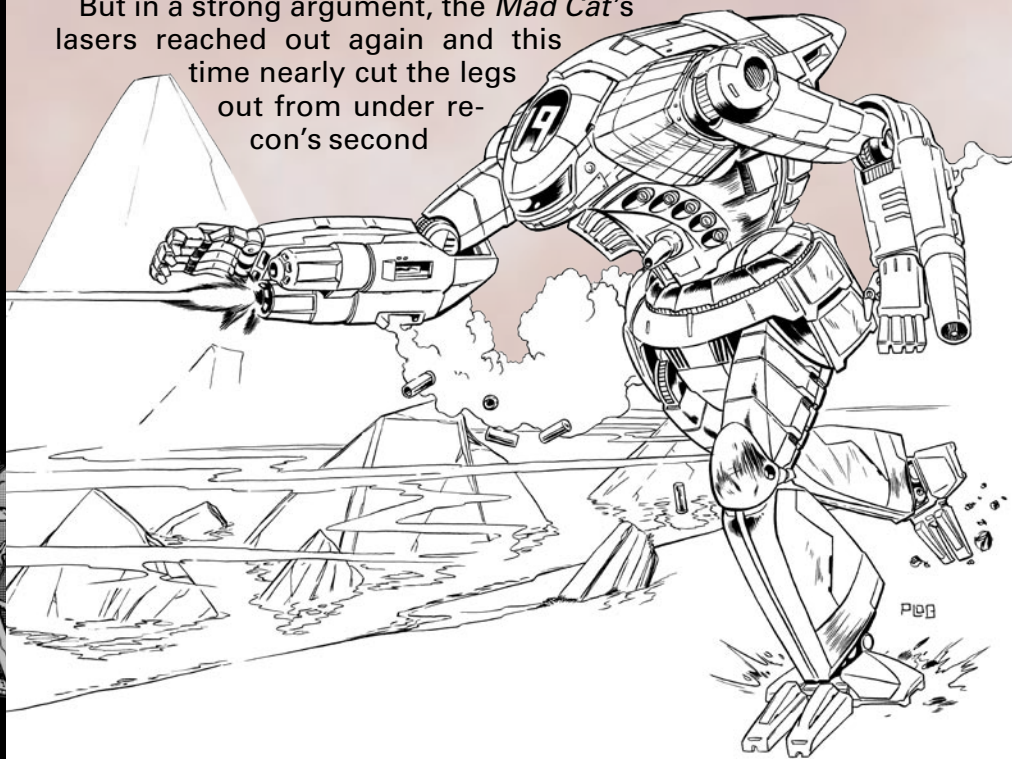
"It's the biggest beast they have on the field." He counted a *Black Hawk* and two forty-five ton *Shadow Cat*'s as well. "We'll try to cut it from the pack."

Despite his best efforts, the *Loki* had finally gained its feet. Two extended-range PPCs flailed at him with manmade lightning, one drawing an angry slash across his *Vulture*'s right leg.

Nichols's *Daikyu* gave back just as good, gashing the *Loki*'s side.

"Clan technology does not bestow Clan skill," he said, still on their private channel. Still hoping.

But in a strong argument, the *Mad Cat*'s lasers reached out again and this time nearly cut the legs out from under recon's second



Raptor as it attempted to pull back. The light machine stumbled, nearly fell. Then raced quickly out of range, separated from the other two light machines.

A new voice, strong and hard, cut in over the unsecured frequencies. "Aff, run pathetic *surats*. Show courage only in large numbers, like the *freebirth* dogs you are."

The strange words burned in Rakai's ears. Everyone knew the more prevalent Clan-speak terms, but the familiar ease and confidence with which they'd been spoken argued for more than false bravado. Clanners? It couldn't be!

Sikaro wasn't taking chances, or simply respected the *Mad Cat* warrior's skill. "Recon, get out of there. Get some range against that monster. Rakai, dress up your skirmish line. You're being forced back. Buy time for the salvage trucks."

The *chu-i* passed along her orders. His next paired Gauss shots missed the *Loki* which lumbered forward in ungainly steps. Its slow speed and slightly unsteady movement told of possible gyro trouble.

But instead of returning fire against him, the *Loki* joined in with both *Shadow Cats* to ravage armor from the *Grand Dragon* anchoring the end of Rakai's skirmish line. Four flights of LRMs buried the *Dragon*, blossoming in small, orange fireballs over its head and massive shoulders, erupting around it as blackened earth and gravel geysered up into the air.

A single PPC pierced the veil of falling debris, cutting deep into the *Dragon's* left arm.

Clanners did not use concentrated fire. But then, the bandits Rakai had faced so far could never have held together so well in a stand-up fight either. Looking to find out, he swallowed some life back into his throat and dialed up an open frequency.

"Bandits or *freeborn* renegades from a dead Clan, we don't need large numbers to deal with you." That was about as insulting as he knew how to be to a Clanner.

The answer came back quickly enough. "If you try to provoke me to *zellbrigen*, you will not succeed. My Star will execute you in the same manner you brought genocide against our Clan. And when Sjardd digs what he needs from the polar basin, your false Star League will know its own form of treachery."



A prickling sensation crawled up the back of Rakai's neck. He placed a Gauss slug perfectly against the enemy *Loki*, cracking the armor over its chest and sending the slug internal to finish off the Omni's gyro. But Rakai felt no victory in its fall, especially as the *Grand Dragon* pulled back from the skirmish line with a faulty gyro of its own and barely enough engine shielding to keep the 'Mech functioning.

One for one was no trade with this enemy! He cut back over to the private frequency he shared with Sikaro.

"*Sho-sa*, those are Smoke Jaguars out there, Star formation and all. They'll cut my forces to pieces."

Sikaro responded immediately with new orders. "Recon lance, angle back in and get that *Mad Cat*'s attention. Keep it chasing you. Then pull back to grid echo-three. Rakai, break off completely. Follow the course I'm outlining and avoid enemy contact."

Abandon his lance—his command—and avoid contact? Rakai's *Vulture*, with its paired Gauss rifles, had the best take-down firepower on the field. "Commander, I'd like to—"

"You'd like to save what's left of our people," Sikaro cut him off. "And you will if you do exactly what I say. Now!"

Despite the shared fault over Akomata's loss, Rakai had neither the opportunity nor desire for recriminations. Traci Sikaro would be hard enough on herself. He didn't need to make it worse.

And if she thought she could get them out of this mess, he trusted her. Their time together, serving Ryuken-san in the liberation of Combine space from the Smoke Jaguars had taught him as much. He pivoted the *Vulture* hard right and ran it up to eighty-five kilometers per hour as he circled back to the rear of the battlefield, leaving his people fully in Sikaro's hands. He dodged around junked BattleMechs, the rusting armor reminding him of dried blood, and the few small stands of trees struggling in vain for life on Garrote. Watching the ground closely, Rakai was careful not step in a hole gouged out of the barren landscape or to tread over rubble blasted from the small hills by artillery and heavy weapons fire in the field's previous battle.

"Come on, Traci-sama," he whispered, careful not to speak so loud his voice-activated mic would open his comm channel, "get us out of this junkyard."



The outlined course ended him up behind a low hill, scarred and gouged to basically a large pile of loose boulders and rubble. Here, Sikaro ordered him to wait. She had never stopped delivering other orders to the MechWarriors on the field, and observing his tactical screen Rakai could see her plan forming.

Of course she continued to shield the salvage trucks, buying time for them to pull back with the desperately needed material. The heavier units had kept to a fairly successful skirmish line, trading ground for time in a successful rear-guard action that held back the bulk of these bandit-Clanners.

While Recon lance, minus Akomata, appeared to be leading the *Mad Cat* around their flank.

"Rakai." The commander's voice was quiet, as if careful of not being overheard, "On my mark, run for grid echo-three." She waited for two long seconds. "Mark."

Throttling up into a run once more, Rakai raced his *Vulture* forward and around the corner of the small hill which had offered him some protection, finding himself in a narrow alley that ran between large piles of scrapped 'Mechs and vehicles. He missed one step, the *Vulture's* foot coming down on the amputated leg of an old *Wolverine*, and nearly stumbled. A deft touch at the control sticks kept him up. On his own tactical monitor, he saw Recon lance passing through echo-three dead ahead, followed closely by the *Mad Cat*. If they could keep the Clanner distracted for a moment longer...

On a cue from Sikaro, the three remaining 'Mechs of Recon lance pulled up and spun back, flailing away at the heavy OmniMech with every weapon at their disposal.

The *Mad Cat* stopped almost dead center in Rakai's sights, and he floated his targeting reticule over the Omni.

The crosshairs burned golden. He triggered both Gauss rifles at effectively point-blank range.

One smashed into the *Mad Cat's* upper right arm, already damaged in the running firefight, snapping it off at the elbow.

The second shot careened off the heavy machine's shoulder to take it in the side of the head, smashing the entire right side of its forward-jutting cockpit inward. The heavy machine tottered and fell, collapsing into a nearby pile of junk; returned to the grave.



Rakai strode the *Vulture* forward, standing guard over the site, pivoting toward the skirmish line and adding a few long-range shots of his own. He opened a comm channel to Sikaro.

"If you have a salvage truck nearby, I think we can wrestle a nearly-whole *Mad Cat* onto it." Salvage they had, but at a high cost.

Garrote had raised the stakes on them once again.



Traci Sikaro rogered her company commander's last communication, pulled the headset off and tossed it to a nearby aide.

"Clear the salvage vehicles from the field and then pull them all back," she ordered crisply. Losing their heaviest machine, and undoubtedly their commanding officer, the Clanners pulled back for a bit of long-range jousting. It was clear the fight was over, though neither side could really claim victory.

A shot-up *Mad Cat* and salvaged parts in exchange for a *Raptor* and *Chu-i* Akomata. Hardly a good day's work, losing her best light 'Mech officer.

She clenched her hands into shaking fists, staring down at the bleak terrain simulated on the holographic table. Her people fell back under cover of the skirmish line, leaving behind a field full of dead husk BattleMechs and, somewhere, one of her pilots.

They should have called this world Graveyard, not Garrote.

A lousy eulogy. But for now, they had to take what they could get and move on. There would be time for mourning later, after they stopped Sjardd.

She looked to Morada. Swallowed against the knot in her throat. "What do you think?"

The analyst chewed at his bottom lip, thinking, and letting his indecision show on his face. "They were ready for us, Traci-san. The only reason not to set a trap with overwhelming force—they are short of warriors."

"Clanners don't use overwhelming force." But Traci felt a twinge of uncertainty. "If they are what they claim."



"Clanners never struck from ambush or use concentrated fire either," Morada reminded her. "At least, not before. But we heard the comm exchanges, and I'm with Rakai. There was at least one Clan warrior out there today. The way I saw those 'Mechs move in Star formation, I'd say they were all Smoke Jaguars. Remnants from the recent fighting."

"Threatening us with the *Cemetery* arsenal?" Traci wasn't about to give up. Truthfully, the consequences were too frightening. "Following bandit scum like Sjardd?"

Morada kept his same calm, analyzing manner. "The new Star League stole from them their purpose, their honor—their very life, *sho-sa*. They have no home to return to, and certainly expect no leniency from the Inner Sphere. Sjardd gives them purpose again. And he's teaching them revenge. You know the saying. *Otearai ga sumimasu tsukurimashitara, anata nezumi o benkyo shu.*"

If forced to live in the sewer, study a rat. Traci nodded, resigned. The real problem was, they couldn't *not* afford to take the idea at face value.

Picking up the noteputer from where she'd set it aside earlier, Traci cradled it in her gloved hand and scanned Morada's briefing again. Noticed he had left out any time estimate for recovery of the CBR weaponry. The analyst hated to commit to anything without hard evidence to back him up, but he would have a good idea.

"How long?" she asked. Although she doubted that his answer would make a difference. With a few weeks, they *might* be able to get back to the Combine and return with a large enough task force to shut Sjardd's operations down. But she could not take the chance that even one nuclear weapon or canister of nerve agent would make it off this rock in her absence.

"Two days," Morada said, deadpan. "Maybe three. That's worst case, of course. Could be longer."

"Not with our karma." Traci could feel her nails digging into the flesh of her palms, and suddenly her lack of proper sleep was weighing on her like a funeral shroud. Two days, three on the outside, to prevent the widespread delivery of terror unlike the Inner Sphere has known in centuries.

"And now we have to plan on facing Clan warriors whenever planning a battle as well."



"And," Morada reminded her, "don't forget that the Jaguar commander spoke freely of the Cemetery. They must realize the extent of our knowledge. They can guess our path of travel."

Traci caught his line of thought. "The northern base?" she asked, referring to an ancient Star League mountain facility Sjardd had refurbished to safeguard access to the polar basin.

He nodded. "They'll pull reinforcements into the area now. We need to hit the DropShip pads at that base, as soon as possible. That will at least slow them down." He exhaled heavily. "After that, it will be a race to the *Cemetery* site. With the bandits and any Clanner allies at our heels the entire way."

Leaning heavily against the table, watching as her forces finally pull back with no further losses, Traci Sikaro felt very tired. Garrote was beginning to get to her; pitching her against a gauntlet of bandit—and now Clan—forces under a time limit. And it wasn't just her life hanging in the balance, or even those of her command, but millions of lives across the Inner Sphere who had no idea the danger rallied against them.

She could almost wish to be back in a 'Mech herself, leaving the decisions to someone else while she simply followed orders and engaged the enemy on the simplest of terms.

But there was no one else. And service to the Dragon had its demands.

"Set it up," she ordered Morada. Then walked wearily from the command center.

To Be Continued...

