



ISLE OF THE BLESSED

Book Two

Chapter 1: Post-Game Wrap

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River Road, North Hopton, South of Avalon City
New Avalon, Crucis March
Federated Suns
2 February 3073

The dull roar of an unholy thunder rolled across the shallow ferro-concrete canyons of North Hopton, rattling window panes, kicking up dust, shaking the earth. Somewhere in the distance a BattleMech had lost reactor shielding and been torn apart by the nuclear hell at its heart.

The sound left Brevet Lieutenant Robert Doucette with only two questions.

Ours or theirs?

And: Do I really want to know?

The fact that he was moving away from the sound was answer enough.

There was a chance, a *chance* that Jackson Davion had taken the few minutes that Doucette and da Rosa had bought him with their *Legionnaires* and brought the Corean facility down before the Wobblers could get their grimy hands on it.

But no matter how he twisted and turned the tactical picture in his head, Doucette just could not make himself believe that JD had survived.

And so he knew he had to put as much distance as he could between him and Corean. Before the Wobblers set up a perimeter patrol. He'd changed into the pair of olive coveralls he'd shoved into the couch's storage compartment, but he knew he couldn't pass as a civilian.

So he'd just have to keep from being found.

He ducked down a side street and confronted a pile of rubble blocking his path. A warehouse had come down, scattering red bricks painted a rich cream color on one side. Mixed in with the pile of brick were pieces of steel rebar, twisted and mangled I-beams, glittering shards of blue-green glass, and one more thing.

A boot.



It was a combat boot, black, and polished to a fine sheen, sitting upright atop the pile, giving no sign of its mate or its former owner.

Doucette tried to swallow in a dry mouth.

MechWarriors were insulated from the battle up in their cockpits, protected from the ground-level sights, stepping over the destruction, shielded from the horrible sounds, the cries of anguish, the awful smells...

Down here it was so much more real.

He glanced behind him, thinking. The pile of bricks would slow him up, but it would also slow anyone pursuing him, maybe convince a Wobbie patrol to take a different route. And it would get him off the main north-south arterial.

Doucette made up his mind quickly.

He moved to the east side of the road where the pile was thinnest and began climbing. It was hard going. The mound of bricks was treacherous, shifting suddenly under his weight to reveal new obstacles. Four times he fell, twice he nearly turned an ankle, once he missed being impaled on a jagged piece of rebar by four centimeters.

There had been a time when Doucette's balance had been incredibly good, but that had been years ago, back before an injury to his inner ear had finished his first career as a MechWarrior. He could no longer get by on superhuman balance.

Now he was just going to have to rely on luck.

He pushed up and over the brick pile, not stopping until he made it to the other side and he was sure he was shielded from view from the intersection. He stopped then and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his arm, took a swig of water from his canteen.

It wasn't until he screwed the cap back on that he really took a close look at the debris that choked the side street.

His eyes automatically catalogued the junk, a trio of streetlights felled by a blast concussion, a smashed hoverjeep, a fire hydrant fountaining water, and a—

Doucette's breath caught in his throat and the canteen clattered to the ground as he at last recognized the final piece of junk. He



stood there staring at it, his mouth hanging slackly open, seeing, yes seeing, but not *believing*.

He stood like that for maybe ten, fifteen seconds.

And then he was sprinting toward the impossible thing he saw before him.



Corean Facility, Complex 44-J2A, North Hopton, South of Avalon City

Even before he saw Armaros's *Ostsol* erupt in a nuclear fireball, even before he heard Avitue issue her general recall order, Demi-Precentor Warner Colton knew that everything was going to hell.

All he had to do to confirm he was screwed, was look up. Look up and see the heavy metal coming up over the hill behind Corean.

'Mechs painted in the red, white, and blue of the Davion Assault Guards.

How the hell had everything gone so wrong, so fast?

"Grounders, this is Grounder Actual. Pull back. I say again, *pull back.*"

"Grounder One, Grounder Two," snapped Adept Levinsky. "We can't pull back, we have to support Demi-Precentor Arma--"

And right then the *Ostsol* erupted into a sphere of golden light, the shock wave showering Colton's troops with debris, the roar of the 'Mech's death filling the world, and swamping the radio channels with an electromagnetic shriek.

"Any other questions, boys and girls?" Colton asked.

His words were met by conspicuous silence.

"*All right, then,*" Colton roared. "Conventional infantry into the APCs, two by two. Purifier squads will lay down covering fire. We'll form up on the west side of the building. Stay out of the gunsight of those 'Mechs as long as possible. Extract along River Road and form up on Avitue. We're doing this quick and dirty, boys and girls. No one waits for anyone else."

"What are your orders when we clear Corean?" asked Levinsky stiffly, obviously still smarting from Colton's earlier rebuke.

"Only one order," said Colton. "*Run.*"



Major Alberto Quiros of the Davion Assault Guards steered his GUN-1ERD *Gunslinger* around the south side of the Corean facility



and received a trio of crimson beams to the chest for his trouble. His already brutalized Kevlar 5000 armor bubbled and melted under the caress of chromatic light. Quiros watched his wireframe flicker from yellow to red.

He flashed on a man-sized blur, khaki on slate, seven, eight meters away, like reality didn't quite mesh up with itself. *Mimetic armor.*

Without thinking Quiros dropped his right arm and triggered his Poland Main Model A Gauss Rifle. His own silver blur flashed through the air and then the blurry background abruptly disappeared.

Replaced by an untidy pile of parts.

Apparently that was all the rest of the Purifiers needed to see. Both squads (less one) fell back toward the building's southwest corner.

They were a lot easier to see when they were moving.

"I've got ants," Quiros snarled. "Purifiers. West side of Corean, moving south to north."

And then he stomped down on his jump jets and twin spires of argent fire pushed the massive *Gunslinger* into the air. And that's when Quiros let his instincts take over. He pulled his feet off the pedals almost immediately, turning his jump into a short fifteen-meter hop. Not very far.

But far enough.

He came down right where he wanted to.

On top of a armored soldier with the full force of eighty-five tons of assault 'Mech suddenly abandoned to the whim of gravity. Quiros barely felt a bump as the unfortunate Wobbie absorbed the impact.

Smashing him flat.

The other Purifier soldiers darted off in multiple directions, no one even bothering to lay down covering fire, some hitting their own jump jets, the closest sprinting for the river, another pressed up against Corean's west wall.

Clearly terrified beyond reason.



"And what do we do with ants?" Quiros said savagely as he stomped down on his pedals again, rising once more into the air. "Step on them."



The Fed Rat in the *Gunslinger* should have been more careful facing two full squads of Purifier battle suits, especially since his torso armor had been shredded, but the pilot was enraged.

Colton could see it in the hunch of the *Gunslinger's* massive shoulders, the splay of the 'Mech's legs. He saw it in the Fed's reckless leap.

That terminated in spot where Adept Michelle Yurovsky was standing.

There was a single terrible moment where she looked up and then the *Gunslinger's* jets washed over her suit, cooking her alive a split-second before the 'Mech came down. Colton looked away.

Not quite soon enough.

It was like watching someone step on a jelly doughnut. Colton didn't think he'd forget the image for the rest of his life.

However long or short that might be.

"Scatter," he said in a hoarse voice. "He can't get us all."

And then he hit his own jump jets, feathering them at random, to zigzag him through the air. At the apex of his leap he switched off the right and kept the left on, bringing him about in a tight circle.

In time to see the damned *Gunslinger* come down on another one of his troopers.

And one other thing. Adept Mark Pensk was frozen against Corean's western wall. If he was counting on his mimetic armor to save him, he was going to die very soon, his silhouette flash-burned into the building's khaki paint.

"Pensk," shouted Colton. "Get moving. NOW."

Colton's eyes flickered right and he saw the assault machine lumbering toward his soldier.



For just a second, Colton played his small laser across the ferroglass of the *Gunslinger's* cockpit, hoping to draw the pilot away from his trooper.

The Fed Rat didn't take the bait.

And then Colton had to turn. He hit his jump jets again, righting himself. He hit the ground in a crouch and jumped again, bounding away from the battle scene.

The image of the doomed Mark Pensk frozen against that khaki wall flashburned into his mind.



When Jackson Davion had been a boy he had played club football, not the plodding sport that some people called American football, but actual, real, football. Sometimes he played forward, although more often than not he played midfield. One summer, when he was eleven, his club had played in a tournament

It had been a grueling test of endurance with one game scheduled immediately after the last. After each match, their coach gathered them together for a quick post-game wrap, in which they recapped the previous game and made adjustments for the next. It only took five minutes, but that planning session was essential to their success.

Davion's team won the tournament.

And that's what he had to do now, Davion realized, a post-game wrap. Because although his men and women had won the battle for Corean, they were going to lose the battle that followed if he didn't make the correct decisions, right *now*.

A fact as he realized just as soon as he heard a voice on his comms circuit say. "I've got ants. West side of Corean, moving south to north."

"On it," said Zibler, at once.

An APC marked with a Word of Blake sword zipped down River Road, followed by a second. Zibler missed the first with his twin medium lasers, but Davion got the second with his medium laser.

The APC pitched over. Five or six Wobbie soldiers spilled out and ran in all directions. Zibler stepped in Davion's line of fire just as Purifier armor bounded by on jump jets.



Davion gritted his teeth. He didn't think for a second that Zibler's move had been an accident. Davion was tired of his troops throwing themselves in harms way to protect him.

And then inspiration hit. His people had paid a fearsome price for their victory, but there was an opportunity to capitalize on it. The Wobbie force was broken and running. If he could just pin them in place he could use the Crushers to pound the hell out of them.

He glanced down at his area map.

They'd already blown the Hopton Bridge. If he took out the floating bridge to the north, the Wobblies without jump jets would be trapped on this side of the river. They still could cross, of course, but that would burn precious time and stretch out their column.

He would cut them into little pieces. And then he would kill them.

He could call in an airstrike in from one of the combat air fields hidden in the Boreal Reaches. He'd give up the location of the airfield, for a quick strike at the bridge and some harrying close air support. It was one hell of a trade.

He tasted the order on his lips.

And then he felt an itch in the back of his neck, a terrible itch, like someone was watching him from behind.

From above.



Just Off River Road, North Hopton South of Avalon City

Doucette reached the overturned command couch. It was over on its side, part of it sliced cleanly away by a laser's ruthless touch. He could see where the beam of chromatic light had melted the couch's steel frame. But none of that mattered.

What mattered was the man in the couch.

Pops.

He was still strapped to the couch, his head lolling to the one side. His bald head was covered with an ugly blue bruise, his nose broken, his jaw and cooling vest stained rusty red with blood, his left arm twisted back at an impossible angle.

But there was still color in his face.

Doucette reached out for the old man's shoulder with a trembling hand...

It was warm.

The old man shuddered and drew a shallow breath. His injuries were grave.

But Pops was alive.



Corean Facility, Complex 44-J2A, North Hopton South of Avalon City

Ruby fire washed over Quiros's canopy, like rain sheeting over a windscreen, the Purifier squad leader's attempt to draw him off the soldier trapped against the wall. For a second Quiros ignored the gambit, stepping *through* the fire, toward the soldier frozen against the wall.

And then he pivoted left and snapped a shot off with his right Gauss.

The slug missed left by a couple meters, slashing right past the bounding officer. Quiros side-stepped right, lining up a second shot.

At the last second he pivoted left on his right foot and lunged for the soldier trapped against the wall.

The trooper finally moved.

The Purifier hit his jump jets and rose on a pillar of plasma.

Too late.

Quiros swung the massive Gauss rifle in his right arm, swung it like a cricket bat.

And suddenly the world was filled with the unhappy clang of metal on metal.

"And the crowd goes wild," Quiros shouted, dark jubilation filling his voice.



Mark Pensk pressed up against the building's wall, trying to blend in with his surroundings, praying that in the heat of the battle the Fed pilot would miss him, that his mimetic armor would save his ass one more time. It would have to.

Because he just could not move.

The *Gunslinger's* pilot was not engaged in a battle. More like a rampage. It wasn't a man piloting that machine, oh no. Pensk had known that as soon as he watched the terrible way Michelle died. No, not a man.



The *Gunslinger's* pilot was the incarnation of brutality. An avatar of carnage.

Of *fury*.

There would be no surrender, no mercy.

No hope.

The assault machine came down on Christina Morton just as she reached the river's edge. *How the hell was he doing that?* Two perfect death from above attacks in a row.

And then the monster turned toward him and Pensk nearly passed out.

Still, his traitor muscles would not move.

Don't see me.

Crimson light splashed across the monster's face. For a moment he thought the *Gunslinger* was going to ignore the attack, but then it turned and fired at its attacker.

YES. Kill them, not me.

The 'Mech's shot missed wide left and then it drifted right, trying to line up a better shot.

"It's almost over," Pensk whispered. "Almost over."

And then the monster pivoted suddenly and threw itself at him.

Pensk slammed down on his jump jets, so terrified he didn't realize he'd just sprayed piss all over the inside of his expensive Purifier battle armor. He shot *up*, thinking of nothing but the desperate need to escape.

He never even saw the blow coming.

One moment he was riding an arc of fire into the sky and the next he lay on the ground twisted and broken, writhing in pain.

Surely the *Gunslinger* would kill him now.

But no. This servant of death had something worse planned.

The great machine stalked forward.

Pensk looked up at the monster, towering ten meters above him, so high that it looked like it was growing right into the frickin' sky, and suddenly all he wanted was for it to be over.



The *Gunslinger* set itself and then it raised one foot and brought it down on his chest.

Slowly.

Using all of its massive weight to delicately pin him to the ground. The *Gunslinger* massed eighty-five tons and Mark Pensk felt every one of them, pressing him into the ferrocrete roadbed, trapping him against the dirt.

Only the questionable mercy of the Fed pilot stood between him and a horrible death. Only mercy and the pilot's balance.

And so Mark Pensk laid there, waiting for the horrible thing that would happen next, seeing in his mind Michelle Yurovsky's horrible death over and over again as he waited.



Davion watched Zibler's *Salamander* pour laser fire after the retreating Wobbie infantry. Then Zibler's machine stepped left, back out of River Road. "They have speed on us. But North Hopton's torn up pretty good. That'll slow them down. If we can take out the floating bridge, we'll hold them on this side of the river. Candy, I want our four fastest long-range hitters moving north, along Inland Avenue. They should have an unobstructed path to--"

Davion cut into the Crusher's command circuit. "Belay that order."

The *Salamander* turned and for a moment Davion felt as if the great machine were peering at him in confusion. "Sir. I think we could cut off the--"

"Crushers Actual, this is New Avalon Actual," said Davion, his voice ringing with steel. "And I said no."

"Yessir," said Zibler crisply, but not so crisply that Davion didn't hear the confusion in his voice.

And why not? Davion had just publicly berated one of his best general officers and passed up a textbook opportunity to route a retreating enemy force in the bargain.

And why?

Because his instincts told him there was a deadly trap here. One he'd almost stumbled into once before.



Post-game wrap. Davion closed his eyes. Had to make the right decisions, right damn now.

Or they would lose.

"Marshal Zibler," said Davion, "get me an update from North Albion."

Silence for a heartbeat and then Zibler gasped as the implication of Davion's order sank in. "Yessir."

One of the Crushers cut in on the channel. "Crusher Actual, This is Crusher Bravo One," said the man in an excited voice. "I got me a Wobbie."



Davion pushed his massive *BattleMaster* into a lope. He ran down to the edge of the Corean facility and hooked left.

And stopped.

What he saw took his breath away.

A *Gunslinger* holding a soldier in power armor pinned to the ground with his foot.

"Bravo One, this New Avalon Actual. Is he still alive?"

"That's affirm, Marshal," said the man.

Davion stalked his 'Mech forward.

"Release him," said Davion.

"But Marshal, I--"

"Release him," Davion roared.

The *Gunslinger* took a step back, pulling its right foot off the infantry trooper. The soldier staggered to his feet.

And Davion leaned down and snatched him up in one of his 'Mech's hands. He delicately plucked the man's helmet off his head. The man started, but Davion held him fast. "Soldier, what is your name?"

The man stared up at him goggle-eyed.



"I am Marshal of the Armies Jackson Davion," Davion said coldly, his amplified voice reverberating off the building's high wall. "I have defeated the best Word of Blake could throw at me. Do you really think *you* can stand against me?"

The man said nothing.

"Your orders are to conduct a fast retreat, even if that means taking heavy losses," said Davion.

The man's jaw sagged open. "H-how did you—"

Zibler's *Salamander* stepped around the corner. "Marshal, one of our techs was able to make it past the booby-traps in the *Nexus* II's cockpit. We have a location for the Wobbie base. And a snippet of raw data feed."

"Let's hear it," said Davion grimly, muting his external speakers.

There was a pause and then he heard a woman's voice over his radio: "—tor Force, Gold. Withdraw across the river at best possible speed. You will form up on—"

It was no more and no less than what he'd already guessed. "North Albion?"

"Nothing yet, Mar— Oh, wait. I have a report coming in." There was a pause and when Zibler resumed voice was suddenly tight and fast. "The university observatory's reporting *Mordred*'s dropping into low orbit. Overhead in two one mikes."

Davion dialed up a circuit that gave him all the Crushers. "OK, Assault Guards, listen up. We are cutting the Wobblers loose. Company's coming and we need to get ready."

He quickly outlined his plan. No one interrupted and no one asked questions. Davion hoped that meant they all got it. Their lives would depend on it.

He released them and suddenly Corean was a desperate flurry of motion.

Davion flicked his speakers back on and looked down at the Wobbie cradled in his hand. "Now, soldier. I want a name."

"My name," he squeaked. "My name is Mark Pensk."

"Not *your* name," Davion roared. "*Her* name."



The Wobbie soldier trembled in Davion's hand, shrinking back from his voice, and the Marshal wondered if he'd pushed it a little too far. Just when he was sure the trooper wasn't going to talk, the man looked up, his face stricken with terror, and whispered a single word.

"Avitue."



Westbound on the M26 Motorway

Avitue pushed her *Grim Reaper* just as fast as it would go down the west-bound highway. Already she could feel the earth tilting madly beneath her feet; everything she believed in, everything she'd fought for teetering on the edge of the precipice. Corean was lost.

And Jackson Davion lived.

The fierce resistance put up by Davion and his *Legionnaires* had badly damaged the force of infantry and light machines Armaros had led and her heavies had been mauled by the Davion Assault Guards when they punched through Acheron. And while her attention had been occupied with Corean, a joint strike force made up of the Davion Heavy Guards and the Fifth FedCom had slipped into Camp Alpha, smashed through the light defenses, and set the facility ablaze.

Her forces were battered, dispersed, and lost.

A cruel smile stretched across her face. At least that's how it must look to Jackson Davion.

The truth was, even though Plan A had turned out to be a miserable failure, there was always a Plan B. *Mordred's* captain had finally overcome the engineering casualty that had kept the WarShip sidelined the last few weeks.

North Hopton had been badly damaged by the fighting. Surely, most of the civilian population had fled. Which meant she could bring *Mordred's* capital weapons to bear without much risk of collateral damage.

She hoped Davion and the Assault Guards were bunched up around Corean, where they could be easily dealt with. But even if they were pursuing her lights, they'd lag far behind, making them easy targets. Either way, *Mordred* would have a clear shot.

This time, there would be no escape for Jackson Davion.

And if there were? If somehow, impossibly, he wriggled off the hook *again*?

Her 'Mech slipped past a green roadside sign that said: "Cormarc Falls 54."

Well, there was always Plan C.



Just Off River Road, North Hopton South of Avalon City

Doucette gently touched the old man's shoulder. "Pops."

Nothing.

He studied his old friend for a long moment. Pops was laying on his side, the five-point restraint anchoring him to the command couch. Doucette knew it was unwise to move someone who's been in an accident.

He heard a rock skipping across pavement.

But it was unwise to stay here, too.

He pulled out the long, combat knife he wore strapped to his leg. He pulled the straps loose, revealing angry pink marks in Pops's skin where the blood had pooled beneath the skin. He cut the straps quickly, careful to catch the old man when he rolled out of the couch.

Pops moaned.

"Shhhh," said Doucette. "I'm right here, old man."

The MechWarrior's eyes fluttered open. "Robert?"

"That's right," said Doucette with more confidence than he felt.

"What're you—?"

"Well they needed someone sharp to an old, broken-down wreck like you. And I'm the best tech in Corean."

Pops closed his eyes and sighed. "Not, 'wreck.' *Mean.*"

"Yeah, seems like I heard this speech before," said Doucette. "Mean *and* crazy."

"Mean *an* crazy," said Pops and starting chuckling. His laughs devolved into a liquid cough.

Doucette frowned, deeply concerned about his friend. He reached into his pack and pulled out a pre-wrapped plastic pouch. He tore it open with his teeth and pulled out a blue square a couple centimeters on a side. He placed the patch inside on Pops's chest. Next came a green patch.



"There, analgesic and antibiotics."

Pops sighed and closed his eyes.

That's when Doucette came across the black foil squares wrapped in clear plastic. His mouth tasted dry just looking at them. He drew a deep breath and scooped them up. He found a piece of medical tape, unzipped his coveralls, and taped them to his right thigh. Then he zipped back up.

He looked up and was startled to see Pops looking at him. Doucette dropped the pouch, spilling the remaining patches on the ground.

"That one." Pops's gaze fixed on a red foil square. "Stim."

Doucette shook his head. "No," he said firmly. "You're not strong enough for a stimulant."

"Gottoo get outa here," said Pops, struggling to speak.

"Don't worry," said Doucette, "We're hidden along a side street. The Wobbie patrols won't look for us here. They'll keep to the main roads. No reason to come this way unless you're a fugitive."

"Let me just think through what's wrong with that reasoning," said a deep voice behind him.

Doucette wheeled around to see a mess of Wobbie infantry behind him, mostly regular troopers in body armor, with five or six Purifier troops mixed in. All their weapons leveled at him.

For a second Doucette thought about the slug thrower on his hip; and then he thought, No. Might as well use one of the black patches for all the good the gun would do. He slowly raised his hands.

"Tol ya," muttered Pops.



Eagle-class WarShip Mordred, Low Planetary Orbit About New Avalon

Precentor Garbis Muradian watched the beautiful sapphire blue orb of New Avalon rotate beneath him. No light illuminated *Mordred's* bridge, not even the standard GQ blue lights. The watchstanders had the illumination of their consoles, and that was all they needed. The rest was black.

The black of night.

All the better to enjoy this final, delicious moment.

Muradian had anchored himself to the forwardmost part of the *Mordred's* bridge, surrounded by ferroglass. He could almost imagine he stood naked above the world, a terrible God in the moment before he unleashed his terrible vengeance.

The heart of the Federated Suns lay at his feet, its end drawn to him by the inexorable workings of orbital mechanics.

Stretched along the limn of this ocean world he saw an arc of green-brown. Sea giving way to land. *Albion*.

And then a voice in the darkness said, "Primary target coming up in seven minutes."

"Stand by your guns, Officer of the Deck," said Muradian to the darkness, and a smile touched his lips. Because this time there was just no way for Jackson Davion to escape.

How could you hide yourself from the eyes of Heaven?



River Road, North Hopton, South of Avalon City

The shrill cry of sirens punched through late afternoon, their faint echo reverberating even through the sound-proofed cockpit of Jackson Davion's *BattleMaster*.

Somewhere in the distance he heard a deep voice shouting, the deep, amplified voice of a MechWarrior warning the civilians of North Hopton.

Davion could almost make out the words: *We are expecting Word of Blake to attack any moment. Take nothing and flee.*

By order of Marshal Jackson Davion.

Davion gritted his teeth. North Hopton was a company town, a set-piece designed to fool the careful observer. A lot of what looked like town was actually support facility.

But there were real civilians here, many of them people who worked in or around Corean, but some of them who were just here for window dressing so the town would stand up to scrutiny. When the Wobblers attacked there would be real casualties.

And he had brought this storm down upon their heads.

He stalked his *BattleMaster* down River Road and then took a turn down Mercer Road. Low clouds the color of gunmetal wreathed the sky, the miasma of war filled the air.

And Davion was about to add more.

A flatbed truck passed behind him, carrying ammunition and armor rescued from Corean. Davion just hoped they'd be able to recover at least one of the *Legionnaires*, too.

He turned down Corston Avenue and stopped.

He stood there, before an oil refinery, a maze of silver pipes and valves and tanks. Oil pumped from offshore wells was shipped here for distillation. It was a mammoth facility designed to feed Avalon City's insatiable appetite for gasoline and heating oil.

Davion toggled his comms set. "New Avalon Actual, confirm target clear."

"Force ANGLICO, target clear, Marshal."

ANGLICO was the code name for a team of spotters who usually called in artillery or naval gunfire. This time they had taken on



a different mission. They'd worked with the plant's engineers to energize every pump in the facility.

Open every valve.

Millions of liters of gasoline and light, sweet crude poured out onto plant's ferrocrete deck. Volatile gasses filled the air.

Davion lowered his left arm.

He reached out and triggered a pair of small pulse lasers.

There was a flash of emerald light and then suddenly the plant was consumed by a glowing white fireball the size of a DropShip. He heard the boom, even through his cockpit. The massive concussion rattled the teeth in Davion's head and staggered his 85-ton BattleMech. Shrapnel battered his massive machine, pounding like angry hail.

And then in an instant it was over.

The explosion was *gone*, replaced by something else.

A tower of fire, yellow-orange flames licking at the remnants of the hydrocarbons, clawing their way twenty, thirty meters into the leaden sky until they gave way to a column of billowing black smoke. His gift to Word of Blake. To Avitue.

Post-game wrap.



Westbound on the M26 Motorway

For Robert Doucette, the ride was a nightmare, trapped in the back of an APC, breathing in diesel exhaust, his left hand shackled to a steel padeye above his head, his butt pressed into the APCs canvas benches, grinding against one of the steel supports.

But none of that was the really bad part.

The really bad part was Pops, slumped up against him on his right.

The old MechWarrior was chalk white and his breathing was shallow and labored. Pops winced and gasped with every pothole the APC rolled over, every piece of debris its wheels found, every jar, every shock.

And it was puzzling, too. If the Wobblers had taken Corean then why the long ride? They'd taken Doucette's watch when they'd been captured, but he was certain they'd been riding for more than an hour, maybe closer to two. And he'd heard the hum of the APC crossing a bridge, probably the floating bridge, which meant they were moving northwest.

What the hell was going on?

Doucette, glanced at the soldiers sitting across from them, their backs up against the APCs steel bulkhead, weapons out. They might as well have been carved out of stone for all the emotion they showed.

Doucette tried to swallow in a dry mouth. "Hey, any chance we could divert to your base camp?" He jerked his head at Pops. "He's not in very good shape."

Nothing.

Like he'd asked a statue for the time.

"Or at least give him some water and slow down."

The soldier looked thoughtfully at Doucette, grabbed the barrel of his slug thrower, and clubbed the lieutenant in the face.

Pain exploded in Doucette's face and then darkness swept over him. The question of where they were going or whether Pops would live or die, suddenly unimportant.



Eagle-class WarShip Mordred, Low Planetary Orbit About New Avalon

Precentor Muradian was still smiling when the gray patch of ferrocrete and glass that was Avalon City rotated into view. The thread of blue that was the Thames bisected the city before losing itself in the crumpled relief of the mountains to the north.

Are you watching? he asked the city. Because you are about to see the end of all that you know.

All that you love.

"You have weapons free, Deck Officer. You may fire at will."

Muradian heard a slight pause instead of the crisp repeat-back he'd expected. He turned to peer into the darkness.

"Excuse me, Precentor," said the Deck Officer. "I have no clear targets."

"What?" Muradian shouted. Then he glanced back at the world beneath his feet. Avalon City in all its glory, yes, but south of it an ugly smudge of gray.

"Big telescope," he snapped. "Put it up on the main screen, right now."

The image of New Avalon was replaced by a projection of the planet below, or rather the blanket of gray-black smoke hiding the planet below. Visual targeting was out.

"Thermal imaging," Muradian snarled.

The realtime visual was instantly replaced by one painted in false greens overlaying a map of North Hopton. Huge parts of the image were washed away by bright white splotches of lights. Gas stations and factories were burning and the refinery was an inferno.

He peered closer at the diagram, picking out beads of emerald green moving up and down Hopton's shattered streets. "There," Muradian shouted. "There is Davion. *Engage.*"

"But sir—" began the Deck Officer, but Muradian saw it before the man could get the words out. There was a flare of emerald light, followed by another.



'Mechs shooting at each other.

Muradian ground his teeth. He couldn't fire into North Hopton, not without hitting his own forces.



River Road, North Hopton, South of Avalon City

Distracted by his thoughts Davion didn't notice the other 'Mech until it fired on him. A *Cerberus* painted in the red, white, blue of the Assault Guards, popped out from behind a building and speared Davion in the chest with its medium pulse lasers.

Davion fired back with one of his medium lasers, leaving a scorch mark on the big machine's paint, but doing no real damage to the armor underneath.

The *Cerberus* ducked back behind the building and Davion listened to the reports coming over his radio.

"Crushers Actual, this is Crushers Charlie Two Three, River is clear north of Leigh Avenue."

"This is Crushers Alpha One Four. Estimate that River will be clear north of 17th in five min--"

"New Avalon Actual, Crushers Actual. Updated report from North Albion. *Mordred* is maneuvering. Overhead in two-three minutes."

Davion cut in to the all-unit circuit. "All right, that's it, Crushers. Cease all recovery efforts. Execute immediate withdrawal, now, NOW, NOW."



Westbound on the M26 Motorway

Even over a thousand kilometers, Avitue could hear the indecision in Muradian's voice and it made her sick.

It made her *furious*.

"Muradian, you must hit the Assault Guards. Hit them *now*."

"Precentor, I have no way to separate our troops from theirs."

"Our troops should be clear."

"I'm seeing signs of 'Mech-on-'Mech fire. Picking up chatter on Word of Blake freqs."

Avitue chewed her lower lip, thinking furiously. Only about half her units had mustered. Were the rest destroyed or were they trying to fight their way free of the Assault Guards?

And did it matter?

If she could destroy Davion and the Crushers, wouldn't it be worth the sacrifice Maybe.

But not yet.

"Muradian, use the Blakist forces in North Hopton as spotters. Have them direct your fire."

"Precentor, we weren't able to synch with the fleeing Blakist units before our orbit carried us over the horizon."

Avitue gasped. In that instant she saw it all: Davion literally hiding within the fog of war, staging mock battles between his 'Mechs, generating false message traffic over Blakist frequencies, all to cover his withdrawal.

"*Muradian. You will engage all 'Mech targets immediately.*"

"I repeat, Precentor, I cannot differentiate between Fed 'Mechs and Blakist 'Mechs."

"*You fool,*" Avitue exploded. "*There are no Blakist 'Mechs.*"



River Road, North Hopton, South of Avalon City

Jackson Davion stood on the banks of the Thames, watching his 'Mechs march into the river. He had divided his forces into three parts. He had sent Zibler and Alpha Company north with the trucks carrying what could be salvaged from Corean and the Legion project. He'd sent Bravo southeast to fade back into Acheron.

While Charlie slipped beneath the Thames, their heat signatures hidden by the river.

Despite Zibler's protests, Davion had made his place at the back of the line. This was one time he didn't mind letting his troops go first.

The long line of 'Mechs moved smartly but carefully down the reinforced cargo ramp. Davion was the last to gain the safety of the river, the last to see the gray-blue water close over his cockpit.

Leaving nothing behind in the war-torn city of North Hopton but a sudden, final silence.



Westbound on the M26 Motorway

"Precentor."

Avitue heard the hesitation in Muradian's voice and closed her eyes. "Go ahead," she said icily.

"We maneuvered boack into firing position and--"

He drew a deep breath and Avitue could almost picture the color draining from his face.

"The enemy forces have disappeared."

Of course. "Avitue, out," she said crisply. She'd let Muradian wonder if he'd keep his head.

"Damn you, Jackson Davion," she whispered.

I will not lose to you again.

On the blood of the Holy Blake Himself.

Not. Again.



Undetermined Location

Doucette awoke to darkness. His face felt curiously swollen and puffy. He touched his right cheek and white flashes exploded behind his eyes and he gasped. Now *that* was a mistake.

W-where am I?

Darkness.

But not *black*.

Dim gray light, filtering through--

Window.

He closed his eyes. A small window, maybe thirty centimeters by ten. Pipes running through room. Ductwork. The high-pitched whine of...*equipment*.

He tried to bring his left hand up, but it was secured to the cot he was lying on. So, he was a prisoner.

But in a make-shift prison. In an...equipment room.

The cuff was loose on his wrist and by twisting around and con-torting his left hand he was able to pull it free. He propped himself up into a sort of hunched-over sitting position. He saw--

Pops.

Pops was laying on a cot next to him. His color looked better, though it was hard to tell for sure in the light.

And then a shadow moved in the semi-darkness. A man's voice said, "I see you're awake."

W-who was *that*? Sounded familiar.

The man took a step forward and the dusty light from the window illuminated a kind face with wide brown eyes. Doucette blinked rapidly trying to— It was Jerry...Evans. *No*. That was a lie. That wasn't this man's name. This man was...

Geoffrey Zucker.

