

**A LOYAL
SON OF TERRA**

By Steven Mohan, Jr.

BATTLECORPS



DropShip Civilization's Sword

Combat Drop over North America, Terra

13 March 3068

Despite the brutal opposition the Case White fleet encountered en route to Terra, Adept Epsilon III Mark Kovachev never doubted the mission's ultimate success—until he heard the muffled whine of an aerospace fighter's close, fast pass.

Kovachev sat in the DropShip's lower 'Mech bay, strapped into the cockpit of his silent *Nexus*, hatch open, listening to the keen of the atmosphere as it fought the great ship's descent.

The fighter's scream cut through the sound of reentry like a knife.

Kovachev frowned. The fighter screen should've been spread out, dispersed to give the spaceborne assault cover from the few surviving Word of Blake naval assets. Why would a—

A bass rumble rolled through the *Union*-class DropShip and she shuddered, jerking Kovachev's body against his five-point safety restraint. The tone of the fighter's engines dropped as it flashed past, followed by the staccato bark of *Sword's* autocannons following it out.

They were under attack.

The very idea took Kovachev's breath away. Yes, the fleet had met stiff resistance, but the Com Guard Navy had assembled a mighty armada: Twenty one WarShips and a dozen jumpers loaded with DropShips. The great fleet had jumped into a pirate point and raced toward cislunar space at maximum burn, giving Word of Blake almost no time to react. ComStar naval assets should've swept a lane clear for the DropShips.

So where had the enemy fighter come from?

He scanned the bay for clues. It was a cavernous slice of the DropShip's interior. A lance of BattleMechs lined the arc of the bay's bulkhead. Helena's *Exterminator* was billeted next to his *Nexus*. Beyond her 'Mech he could see Nodjimbay's *Mercury* and Henderson's *Raijin*. Each members of the scout lance was painted in a high desert camouflage scheme—splotches of brown and khaki and forest green. The ComStar logo adorned the left breast of each 'Mech and the white lions of the 394th Division had been

carefully painted on the machines' right shoulders, so Word of Blake would know just who had come to call.

When the *Sword* touched down, the bay would swarm with activity, but for now all was still, the 'Mechs as securely strapped in as the pilots and the techs who served them.

He saw no clue as to what might be happening outside.

It didn't matter, though, *couldn't* matter.

Every aspect of Case White had been meticulously planned since the day Word of Blake had wrested Terra from ComStar. So some fanatic on a kamikaze mission had gotten through their defenses and had managed to get in a lone hit, so what?

In the end it would make no difference.

ComStar had beaten the Clans and ComStar would beat Word of Blake.

And they would do it on this world, where it meant so much. Without thinking, he touched the simple band he wore on his right ring finger, savoring the gold's smooth, cool feel.

Then he folded his hands in his lap and leaned his head back, concentrating on the ship's vibration, the steady thrum of *Sword's* massive V250 engine as it battled gravity's iron grip.

By the Good Blake, how he hated combat drops. Once they reached the surface the MechWarriors would be the kings of the battlefield, but here they were little more than cargo and no one in the ship's company bothered to tell them anything.

He longed to be down and outside where he could *see*, not strapped into a metal coffin hurtling toward a planet's surface with only the skill of a DropShip captain and four thrust points standing between him and a sudden, fiery death.

Still, Kovachev wouldn't have given up his place on the *Sword* for all the worlds in the Inner Sphere.

They were dropping toward *Terra*.

Terra was the birthplace of humanity and a potent symbol in ComStar's struggle with the fanatical Word of Blake, but it was more than that to Kovachev. He touched the ring again.

It was his home.

The sound of more fighters shattered his reverie.

He heard his lance commander's voice over the lance's command circuit. "We're under attack."

Kovachev pictured her sitting in her command couch. Adept Epsilon VII Helena Nowak was beautiful: full lips, short copper-colored hair that was forever getting into her dark eyes, and a body that really did something for a cooling vest.

Now she was all business. "Brace for impact."

"How bad is it?" Kovachev asked.

She started to answer, but her words were carried away by the thunder of multiple explosions somewhere below decks. The initial blast was followed quickly by the ripple of secondary explosions. Then the blasts cut out like someone had thrown a switch.

Helena's voice carried over the lance's circuit "DC reports coming in. They've secured Number Two Plasma Line. Fire's out."

For a heartbeat there was silence.

And another.

Nodjimbay said, "Hey, we made it."

One of the thrusters suddenly stuttered.

And cut out.

Kovachev felt the change in his bones.

The great ship's motion was more of a controlled fall than true flight. The 3,500-ton *Sword* descended on a pillar of plasma generated by the four thrusters arrayed around the spheroid's base. There was enough design margin that a combat-loaded *Union* could make it safely down if she lost one thruster.

Kovachev wasn't sure about two.

Which was what he was thinking when the second thruster cut out.

He felt the change in the deck's vibration, the sudden imbalance in forces that told him the dead thrusters were next to each other. For an instant, *Sword* started to tip, Kovachev felt her going over, and then the captain cut another thruster opposite the ones that had died to keep his ship from tumbling. Suddenly they were down *three*.

And all doubt was erased from Kovachev's mind.

So much for a controlled fall.

"What's hap—" Henderson began, but he was cut off by the steady gong of the collision alarm followed by the deep voice of the ship's boatswain over the 1MC, saying "All hands, brace for impact. *All hands, brace for impact.*"

The ship tilted as her captain fought asymmetrical forces, trying to lose the battle with gravity as gracefully as possible.

Suddenly Kovachev's cockpit was filled with the sour stink of terror. Mark Kovachev was a MechWarrior, a man used to facing death in all its myriad guises, but not like this.

Not like this.

The ship bucked and dipped and *rolled*, slamming him against his restraints, his command couch, his panels. Even muffled by the ship's hull, the rush of the atmosphere screaming past them sounded like the howl of a tornado.

Sword was going down.

And there was not a damn thing anyone could do about it.

The shrill whistle that was "attention" sounded over the 1MC. "All hands, impact in ten seconds."

Kovachev felt his seat slide out from beneath his butt as the surviving thrusters fired at full power. Overbalanced, the DropShip suddenly tilted over and then back again as the engines cut out and station-keeping jets grudgingly pushed the ship back to level.

Then *Sword* dropped.

Kovachev was a talented MechWarrior with a great gift for balance, but once during a winter exercise he'd walked his *Nexus* across a sheet of ice and slipped.

One moment there was the sick feeling of *falling* and then his world was bone-jarring impact and the shriek of fractured ice. It had been his worst moment in a BattleMech, far worse than anything he'd ever experienced in combat.

Until now.

For an instant Kovachev felt the great ship shudder and *give* under the sheer power of a non-zero velocity vector. Then a reaction force jerked him up. His restraints bit into his flesh, jerking him back down. His head slammed into the control panel, *hard*, and—

***Sweetheart Orchards
Yakima Valley, Washington
North America, Terra
28 February 3058***

Morning frost crackled underfoot as Mark strolled through the quiet orchards. Like an unwelcome guest, this year's winter had come early and stayed late. More than cold made him shiver.

Winter wasn't the valley's only unwelcome guest.

Dogger had told him he'd seen a column of Saladin hover tanks painted the royal blue of the Twenty-first Centauri Lancers moving down the old highway that ran north-south through the town of Yakima.

Dogger was a fast-talking kid who played split end for the East Valley High JV squad. He liked to tell stories and Mark was tempted to write this one off, only he'd heard something in Dogger's voice he'd never heard before.

Fear.

Yes, there were rumors of DropShips burning toward Terra, of ComStar troop movements, but the specter of war wouldn't really come to the valley.

Would it?

Silence reigned among the orderly rows of trees. Mark heard the gurgle of the small river that cut through their property and the whisper of the chill wind, but other than that no sound disturbed this morning.

Somehow that was fitting.

The sun's upper limb peeked orange and broad above the horizon, coloring the eastern sky a pale yellow against the zenith's midnight blue. Mark drew in a deep breath of crisp, cold air. Ever since he'd been a boy, the orchard had made him think of the smell of soil and green leaves and most of all the sugary perfume of Fuji apples. But not this morning.

This morning the orchard smelled like death.

A sound came to him, then, more a rumble felt through the earth than a noise carried to his ears. It was the distant sound

of earth-moving equipment or maybe the faint echo of a small tremor.

Mark ignored it. He came to a marker inlaid in the grass. It was an unassuming thing, pink granite, polished, and no more than half a meter on a side. Inscribed on its face was the legend:

Barbara Kovachev
Beloved Wife and Mother
June 7, 3019-April 14, 3052

Mark came to visit his mother every morning. Normally, his father came with him, but not this morning. Robert Kovachev had put off the morning walk to take an urgent call from Hilton Head and the Kovachev's morning ritual became just one more casualty of the growing crisis.

"Hello, Mom," said Mark softly. "Sorry, Dad couldn't be here this morning."

He remembered his mother: waves of dark brown hair spilling over her shoulders, gray eyes that saw everything, a knowing half-smile that hinted at merry laughter.

Suddenly his throat felt tight.

Would you know what to do, Mom, he wondered, if you were still here?

It had been six years since she'd been killed in a groundcar accident. Six long years.

He'd been ten.

Mark licked dry lips.

In a way it was like a part of his father had died that day, too. Robert Kovachev hadn't remarried, didn't even date. His father had left ROM and had come back to the orchard to be with his son.

"Mom," Mark said in a hoarse whisper, "I just wish—"

He was cut off by a harsh, mechanical sound, a sound that had been steadily growing just beneath the threshold of his notice.

Mark's head jerked up.

There.

Something moving through the trees. Something blue. Something mechanical.

And *big*.

Mark saw something that looked like a great ant's head—canopy like a compound eye, lasers like mandibles, striding roughly toward him on a quartet of spindly legs.

Tarantula.

Without thinking, Mark sprinted toward the 'Mech, driven by the sudden need to have a closer look.

He pounded through the orchard, cutting towards the machine, his ragged breathing a counterpoint to the solid *thunk* of the 'Mech's footfalls.

Mark burst into a clearing and then stumbled to an abrupt stop as the metal beast's right foreleg came down not five meters from where he stood.

He just had time to gape at the monster and the other front leg came down and he was *beneath* it, looking up at its metallic belly.

The monster raised its right back leg and Mark threw himself clear before the pilot could bring it down. He rolled and came up just as the four-legged 'Mech passed over him.

Mark swallowed hard as he watched it move off.

Then he took off running.

The *Tarantula* was painted royal blue with a pair of crossed red-tipped lances displayed prominently just below the cockpit. But in the instant the 'Mech had passed over him, he'd flashed on a second logo, this one hidden where the *Tarantula's* legs met its turret, one the superstitious pilot must not have been able to resist adding. The emblem was nearly invisible, but Mark's sharp eyes had picked it out.

It was a downward thrust sword centered on six concentric rings, the familiar ComStar logo engraved in the weapon's haft.

The *Tarantula* was painted in the colors of a friendly merc. But it didn't really belong to the Twenty-first Centauri Lancers.

It was Word of Blake.

And it was heading straight for the house.

DropShip Civilization's Sword
Near the ruins of Texas City, Texas
North America, Terra
13 March 3068

Reality was a queasy swirl of gray tinged with scarlet.

Someone was shaking him.

A voice, a—

“Mark, *Mark*. Come out of it. *Now*.”

Kovachev opened his eyes, looked up, saw, saw . . .

He blinked.

Helena.

Helena leaning over him, her short red bangs in her eyes and a fist-sized purple bruise marked the exposed skin just below her cooling vest. Very close in the small space. Close enough he could smell the warmth of her: sweat and lube oil and a surprising note of lilac.

“*Mark*.”

“What izzit?” he said, slurring his words.

“The Blakists are engaging the LZ. *Wake up*.”

Kovachev scrunched his eyes shut and shook his head. The blinding white fireball that erupted behind his eyes told him that was a bad idea.

Concussion.

He had a Concussion.

Helena squeezed his shoulder. “We are under attack. Come *on*.”

“Wh—”

But she was already gone, riding the lift down, making her way back to where techs were working frantically to remove the support brackets that held her *Exterminator* in place.

Kovachev sucked in a shaky breath, noticed that down on the deck a medical officer was working on Henderson's arm, the jut-

ting bone a horrible, gleaming white against the MechWarrior's coffee-colored skin. Next to Henderson was Nodjimbay, his body sprawled across the deck at an unnatural angle.

No one was working on him.

Kovachev screwed his eyes shut and tried to get a handle on what was going on.

Blakists couldn't really be attacking, could they? Kovachev knew they were fanatics, but he still didn't believe they'd throw themselves into the teeth of the armada's DropShips.

He buried his hand in his face, trying to mute the throbbing pain that pulsed just behind his eyes.

Minutes, it would take long minutes for Helena to get her *Exterminator* fired up and moving. Why the panic? Surely other DropShips were deploying their forces.

He opened his eyes, looked up. And blinked at a sun-bright flash of blue light. A tech with an oxy-acetylene torch was cutting through the bay door. More techs scurried around her, bracing the door with hydraulic rams, as if they were fighting to get it open.

What the hell was going on?

His *Nexus* was still locked down, but he could see a gaggle of techs working furiously to free Nodjimbay's *Mercury*.

"Hey," Kovachev shouted over the debarkation circuit, "not that one, *this* one."

One of the techs glanced back at him, but didn't stop working.

"Look. That 'Mech's pilot is dead. Free the *Nexus*."

That got the reaction he wanted. The technicians scurried over to the scaffolding surround his *Nexus* and started unbolting support brackets.

The *Nexus* was a ComStar update of an old Star League design, the *Jackrabbit*. He was glad they'd changed the name. The *Nexus* was a lean, humanoid 'Mech, small compared to Helena's massive *Exterminator*, yes, but a tough, scrappy 'Mech nonetheless. It didn't look like any kind of *rodent*. With its knife-blade head and its sleek canopy it looked more like a *velociraptor* wearing wrap-around sunglasses.

He felt more than heard the resonant clang of metal on metal and turned. The *Exterminator* took a tentative step forward. The deck was canted a few degrees from level, but Helena managed to move her 'Mech out of its alcove and toward the cargo bay door.

Kovachev heard a great crash and glanced back. Where the cargo hatch had been, now there was an irregular rectangle filled with khaki prairie under a bright blue Texas sky.

Terra.

Hope welled up within Kovachev's chest. Whatever else had happened they had made it to Terra. At that moment he knew he could take on all of Word of Blake by himself.

He connected his vest to the 'Mech's cooling system and started his pre-ignition checklist. He winced as he brought the neurohelmet down over his much-abused head.

He waited a second for the flare of white-hot pain in his skull to fall back to a dull ache. The neurohelmet was heavy under the best of circumstances, and this clearly wasn't the best of circumstances.

He leaned forward and began running through the emergency start-up sequence. Kovachev had never cold-started a 'Mech's fusion reactor before, but like every MechWarrior, he'd memorized the procedure against the day when desperate need forced him to use it.

Today seemed to be that day.

Systems flickered to life around him.

"Voice authorization required," said the computer.

"Adept Epsilon III Mark Kovachev," he said, and then, because voiceprints could be faked, he added the code phrase known only to him, "*I am a loyal son of Terra.*"

"Authorization recognized. Systems on-line."

A voice crackled over his comms system. "Sir, this is Adept Zeta V Clarice Johnson. You're clear to move out. Good hunting, sir."

He glanced out his canopy and saw one of the techs far below him come to attention and snap off a crisp salute.

Kovachev couldn't quite return the salute—the *Nexus* had a pair of Blankenburg medium pulse lasers instead of hands—but he raised

his right arm to head level as a gesture of respect. "Be safe, Adept Johnson. I'll need someone to service my 'Mech when I return."

He heard her rich, musical laughter over the comm circuit and then she scurried away to free yet another 'Mech.

Kovachev took a tentative step forward, concentrating on keeping his 'Mech level and upright on the sloped deck. He took another cautious step, careful to keep his *Nexus* within the yellow lines that marked the egress lane.

The ramp of a *Union's* lower 'Mech bay was designed to support the weight of even the heaviest assault 'Mechs, but *Sword's* ramp had been badly damaged during the attack and so it shifted under his twenty-five tons. Kovachev stumbled forward before regaining his balance. He worked his way down the ramp slowly, remembering that long-ago moment on the ice. Finally he reached the bottom.

He took another step, and felt the *Nexus's* foot sink into the hardpan of the prairie. *He had returned to Terra.*

He took another step, leaving the ramp entirely behind. He was home and nothing would ever force the Kovachevs to leave again. He felt joy welling up within him again and glanced up at the beautiful, blue sky.

The joy died within him.

The sky was filled with numerous DropShips and a sea of orbital insertion pods, some still high in the atmosphere, others only a few clicks from the LZ. None of them had made it down yet.

And every third pod burned plasma gold.

Kovachev's mouth tasted dry. Aerospace fighters darted in between the DropShips, harrying them. *By the merciful Blake.* What had happened? They were supposed to have air superiority.

A radio crackled and a deep male voice said, "Lion Two Four and Three One, this is *Sword* Actual. Bogies inbound. Threat vector is zero one niner."

He heard Helena's voice over the command circuit. "This is Lion Two Four. Thank you, Captain."

The captain's voice softened. "We fought hard to get you down, Lions. Do some good. *Sword*, out."

Kovachev turned his *Nexus* to the north. Helena's *Exterminator* was a good three, four hundred meters ahead of him. He raced to catch up. His little 'Mech was capable of reaching nearly 120 kph—more than enough speed to keep up with a heavy.

The *Exterminator* was a nasty-looking humanoid 'Mech with a heavy body and a cockpit built into a curved, ridge that bisected the machine's body. It had originally been designed to take out enemy command 'Mechs, but the same traits that made it a lethal assassin made it a superior scout. It was fast for a heavy—ninety-seven kph at a dead run—and its Chevron II jump jets gave it superior mobility.

Helena's *Exterminator* was one of the things that made their scout lance—known as the Claw, because they were usually the first of the Lions to engage the enemy—so special. They were one scout lance that could stand and fight if they had to.

And it looked like they were going to have to do just that.

The Lions' original op orders were to take the city of Colorado Springs and the key command center at Cheyenne Mountain. As the division's premier scouts, the Claw was supposed to lead the way.

Now that plan had been shot completely to hell.

Much of the original assault force had been lost during drop. The survivors came down in an arc that stretched from Mexico to Texas. Now they had only one objective—to hold.

"I'll take position in the refinery to the north," said Helena.

Kovachev's glance followed her words. The BP Refinery was a brooding presence, a reminder of past tragedies. It was a tangle of silver pipes and valves, pumps sheltered under sheet-metal sheds, soot-stained stacks thrust into the blue sky.

As Kovachev watched, Helena stalked past a downed IndustrialMech, its yellow paint job bleached by time and the brutal Texas sun.

It didn't surprise Kovachev that no one had bothered to salvage the 'Mech. On his maps the mill was marked with a yellow-and-magenta border. Radiation.

One more gift from the Usurper.

"I will find cover that gives me a field of fire that includes the highway that runs past the refinery," said Helena. She stopped

behind a massive building. The structure was old and dilapidated. Kovachev doubted it offered much cover, but it would hide her from enemy forces moving south until it was too late.

"You will position yourself two zero zero meters south of me on the opposite side of the ruins of the highway. Your orders are to engage whatever gets past me. Let's keep these bastards off our debarking forces, Mark."

"That's affirm," Kovachev answered crisply.

Helena's plan was sound tactical doctrine. Any Blakist forces attacking only minutes after the *Sword* grounded were likely to be highly mobile. Staging the fight in the ruins of the old refinery would reduce the enemy's speed advantage and turn the fight into a close-quarters slugfest, a fight Helena's *Exterminator* was sure to win.

And her placement of Kovachev's *Nexus* outside the refinery preserved the small 'Mech's extraordinary mobility while simultaneously giving her a second 'Mech to cover the broken ribbon of concrete that snaked past the ancient oil works.

Kovachev stalked his twenty-five-ton 'Mech across the ancient highway. The non-reinforced concrete cracked under his weight. He frowned. Nothing was going to make it down this way except hovercraft.

Still he had his orders.

He reached the other side of the road and found himself in an abandoned neighborhood. Time had smashed the windows of an ancient gas station and blowing wind had filled the station's interior with drifts of dirt. Four of the houses on the street were blackened hulks, but two still stood.

Kovachev turned so that he had a clear view of the highway and then crouched his great machine down behind one of the standing houses. Speed and surprise were the best weapons of a small 'Mech like the *Nexus*.

Three centuries before Texas City had been a small city on the Gulf Coast, just southeast of Houston. Unfortunately, the city was heavily damaged when Kerenksy's forces liberated the world from Amaris the Usurper. The few surviving citizens of Texas City abandoned it, leaving it to nature to reclaim.

The sudden orange flash of missile plumes ahead of him and to his right jerked Kovachev out of his reverie.

"Lion Three One, visual sighting of one Hotel Tango. Engaging with LRMs. Close and destroy, over."

One Hotel Tango. A hovertank. So Helena's instincts had been right. "This is Arrow Three One, close and destroy. Acknowledged."

Kovachev didn't trust the footing on the road so he hit his jump jets. Twin jets of golden plasma lifted him into the air and carried him more than a hundred meters north. He was only airborne a couple seconds, but that was long enough.

Long enough to see Helena's first salvo of missiles ripple across a low-slung ghost-white Pegasus scout racing down the highway at better than 100 kph. Long enough to see the downward-thrust sword painted on the box launcher that made up the tank's turret. Long enough to target the heat bloom of Helena's missile hits with his own fire control system.

Kovachev descended firing the medium pulse lasers mounted in place of his 'Mech's hand actuators. Green darts of energy met at the base of the molten orange fireball that had swallowed the tank's forward armor.

Kovachev came down hard, bending his 'Mech's knees, the concrete buckling and sliding under the sudden weight of the twenty-five-ton *Nexus*. Kovachev ran his way out of the fall, pushing his machine clear of the tank's dangerous turret and its Starstreak SRMs, and never letting up on the laser fire.

The tank's turret spun madly trying to catch up to its attacker.

Kovachev realized that as long as he was on the ground, the light, fast tank had the advantage. The Pegasus could match his *Nexus* speed for speed, but unlike a 'Mech it wouldn't be slowed by the poor condition of the highway.

But the hovertank couldn't launch itself into the sky.

The shrill warble that signaled enemy target lock filled Kovachev's cockpit. He hit his jump jets just as the Pegasus loosed a flight of SRMs. The first missile zipped right between the 'Mech's feet, the rest were a clear miss.

Kovachev short-hopped his *Nexus* over the Pegasus and came down on the other side. He aimed both medium lasers at an aft lift fan and let go at point blank range.

The fan's whine was suddenly replaced by the angry rattle of high speed machinery tearing itself apart.

The Pegasus collapsed to the deck with a crash.

Kovachev hit his jump jets and his comms set at the same time. "Hotel Tango down. I say again Hotel Tango *is* down."

"Clear datum," Helena shouted back.

"This is Lion Three One," he answered bringing his machine down in a lethal crouch. "I am clear."

"Engaging."

Kovachev saw the results in his rear monitor. While he'd been busy, Helena had walked her *Exterminator* backwards, keeping the tank's SRMs out of range. Her second flight of LRMs impacted the motionless tank dead center, guided straight in by the IR signature of the previous attacks.

The Pegasus's ProTech armor must've been weakened by the first hit, because the missile impacts were immediately followed by the bass roar of a massive secondary explosion. A column of black smoke marked the blue sky.

Kovachev threw a triumphant right hand in the air.

Just as a flat white VTOL zipped past him.

And another.

And another.

Kovachev wheeled around just as the fourth helo plunged past him, running flat out at better than 160 kph.

He raised his arm-mounted pulse lasers and sighted in on the last one. The VTOLs were weaving in and out, juking and jumping, making for a hard firing solution. Green pulses of monochromatic light flashed after the trailing VTOL.

And missed cleanly.

The helos were sleek machines. He'd seen a faceted canopy and a chin turret as they blazed past him. Now he saw counter-rotating main rotors and a ducted tail.

"Lion Two Four, I hold four VTOLs inbound your posit. I make them Warrior H-7s."

"On it," answered Helena.

Ruby laser fire danced off the cockpit of the lead helo.

Kovachev didn't understand what the Blakists were doing. The Warrior was small and fleet, but not any more heavily armed than a Pegasus. It possessed a single SarLon autocannon and SRMs, not near enough firepower to take down an *Exterminator*.

Why was Word of Blake throwing away VTOLs on a pointless suicide mission instead of holding them back for close infantry support? For that matter, if they wanted to hit a 'Mech why were the VTOLs targeting the *Exterminator* instead of his lighter *Nexus*?

Helena's laser fire must've killed the pilot of the lead helo, because the VTOL traced a perfect arc toward the ground that ended in a molten orange fireball.

Kovachev loped after the VTOLs, unable to keep up with them, especially over the uncertain terrain.

Not that Helena really needed the help.

The second and third VTOLs opened up with their autocannons, focusing their fire at the *Exterminator's* narrow cockpit, obviously trying to punch through the lighter armor that protected the 'Mech's pilot.

It might've been a good tactic if they could've sustained their fire for more than a few seconds.

Helena answered with a quartet of arm-mounted medium lasers. The second VTOL *dissolved* under the heavy laser fire. A rain of hot steel pelted the abandoned refinery.

The third VTOL orbited around the *Exterminator* and ducked behind a row of cooling towers before Helena's lasers could find it.

Number four got off a flight of SRMs aimed at the assault 'Mech's cockpit. The *Exterminator* shook its head as if it were shaking off a blow and answered with missiles of its own. The LRMs missed at short range, but they did throw the helo off its attack. The fourth VTOL ducked under the missiles and pulled up short.

It was a fatal mistake.

Helena stalked forward and slammed one massive fist into the helo's cockpit, smashing it to the ground.

The *Exterminator* raised its hands in triumph.

Just as the forgotten third VTOL orbited back, running straight for Helena's cockpit, peppering her canopy with its autocannon as it plunged in. The *Exterminator* staggered back under the assault and lowered its arms, ready to take down the Warrior when it veered off.

But it never did.

The VTOL arrowed right into the *Exterminator's* head, smashing through the weakened canopy and telescoping into a pancake of mangled metal.

Kovachev watched aghast as the great 'Mech stood motionless for a second and then toppled backwards with a *crash* that shook the ground beneath his feet.

Sweetheart Orchards
Yakima Valley, Washington
North America, Terra
28 February 3058

Mark crested a hill and stopped, chest heaving, muscles on fire, sucking down greedy lungfuls of air. As he watched, bent over, hands on knees, but head up, the *Tarantula* stalked toward the house he shared with his father.

Mark's breath caught and for an instant everything in the world seemed to freeze: Mark and the 'Mech and the wind, *everything*, stopped for one horrible moment as if the universe had paused to make sure he was paying attention, that he was really going to *feel* what was coming.

The *Tarantula* loomed over the house—

Then time started again and the 'Mech stepped past.

Mark gasped, part of him not believing what he'd seen. His whole body shook with relief. The *Tarantula* pilot hadn't fired.

The 'Mech pushed a couple hundred meters past the house, leaving behind it the wreckage of splintered apple trees, and then abruptly turned to the right.

Mark had the absurd fear that somehow the pilot had missed the house on the first pass and now it was coming back for a second try.

But it stalked right past the house.

As if it were walking some bizarre kind of sentry duty or . . .

Or it was looking for something.

Mark's mouth tasted dry.

An urgent call from Hilton Head.

He ran for the house.

Mark's mind raced as he tore through the trees. He couldn't imagine what Word of Blake wanted with them, but judging by the mess the *Tarantula* was making of the orchard it didn't have anything to do with apples. Beautiful trees bent and shattered under

the weight of the heedless 'Mech, filling the dawn with the *crack* of exploding wood. Why didn't his father come out to see what—

Mark suddenly stopped, ten meters from his house.

Why didn't his father come out to see what was making all that noise?

Because he couldn't.

Mark had grown up on tales of his father's exploits in ComStar's ROM, had worked through numerous scenarios with his dad. Mark suddenly realized that the time spent on those scenarios hadn't just been father-son time. No, it had been *training*, his father's efforts to give him the tools needed to survive in a dangerous universe.

He pulled in a shuddery breath. He'd need all of those skills now if he and his father were going to make it through this.

Mark stood there, hand pressed against the bark of an apple tree, breathing hard, watching his house. It was modest, two floors with a peaked roof, cream edged with chocolate trim, four bedrooms and a finished basement—more room than he and his father would ever need.

Right now the lights were off, which was odd. Mark knew his father had taken the call from Hilton Head in his study, but the study's window was dark. Same with the kitchen.

Someone passed in front of the bay window that looked out from the living room.

It was only a single flicker of motion, a faceless shape highlighted against the window for maybe half a second, but the human brain was exquisitely designed to recognize individual postures: the hunch of a shoulder, the tilt of a head.

The man who passed in front of the window wasn't his father.

Mark licked his lips and bent down, scanning the ground. Until he found a rock half-buried in the soil. He dug it out and hefted it, feeling the weight of it in his hand. The stone was big and oblong.

It would make a nice cudgel, he thought grimly.

Moving quietly from tree to tree, Mark slipped around to the side of the house. He flattened himself against the wall and crept silently to the corner. A sliding glass door opened from the holo

room downstairs onto the backyard. He would be exposed to the *Tarantula's* view for a couple seconds as soon as he stepped around back, but he didn't expect the 'Mech to spot him.

No, the *Tarantula's* pilot wasn't looking at the house, because *the house was already secured.*

Mark was sure of it.

He ducked down anyway and army-crawled toward the sliding glass door. When he reached it he stopped and peered inside, laying prone and looking up, where he was less likely to be spotted.

The room was still and dark.

Seconds ticked by.

Nothing moved.

Mark stood and tried the door. *Locked.*

Locked locked locked it was locked.

Mark jerked on the door's handle again and again hoping for something to change, his hands sudden slippery with sweat, imagining the *Tarantula's* fire control radar tracing the outlines of his back.

The 'Mech.

With an effort, Mark suppressed the flood of terror and panic that threatened to drown him. He turned his head to look at the *Tarantula.*

It prowled through the woods, farther from the house than its first pass. There was no sign the pilot saw him. As he watched the *Tarantula* marched inexorably toward another apple tree.

Mark hit the glass at exactly the same moment the thunderous *crack* of the tree's death filled the air. He slipped his hand through the ragged hole of broken glass and unlocked the door, slid it open.

He was in.

He shut the sliding glass door silently behind him and then crept to the room's door.

The hallway beyond was dark and quiet.

Quiet as a grave.

The hallway passed the downstairs bathroom, his father's study, and the stairs down to the basement. It ultimately ended in the living room. If someone with a weapon suddenly stepped into the hall, he was dead. No way he could protect himself, not from a gun.

Not with a stone.

He took a single step forward. (There were voices coming from the living room.) Another step. (Laughter.) His breath rasped in his ears. (*Mean* laughter.) How could they not hear him breathing?

Somehow he made it to the end of the hallway, close enough to pick apart words and shape them into a conversation.

"—then you know it's not here," said his father.

"Of course we have the SDS records, Robert," said a voice Mark didn't recognize.

(*SDS*. The man was talking about the Star League-era Space Defense System, a cornerstone of Terra's defenses.)

"But we wouldn't put it past you heretics to move a battery," continued the man, "*just because* you know we have the records."

The Saladins. Suddenly Mark knew the second man was right. There *was* something of value in the valley and ComStar had sent the mercs to protect it. The *Tarantula* pilot must've been using the legitimate deployment order to conduct his own search.

But how had Word of Blake managed to infiltrate the Twenty-first Centauri Lancers?

Mark's father didn't answer the man's question, but maybe he shrugged or made a face, because the Blakist said, "Now don't be like that, Robert." The other man's voice was reproachful but somehow cheerful at the same time. Mark shivered. This was a man whose mind was broken. "You wouldn't want me to send Milo out to call on your son now, would you?"

"I already told you," his father snapped, "there's no SDS battery in the Yakima valley."

More laughter. "You should be more careful, Robert. The faithful have inherited the steel of ROM."

Mark heard the click of the front door.

"No wait." It was a strangled cry.

The door clicked shut.

"Too late," said the Blakist agent. "Tell me what I want to know and maybe I'll call Milo off before he reaches your son."

Mark risked a look around the corner.

His father sat on the sofa, his right eye swollen shut, his blond hair in disarray, his jaw stained with a crimson smear of blood.

The agent of Word of Blake ROM was a short man, no taller than one meter seventy and a good twenty kilos overweight. He touched his balding crown with a pudgy hand the color of weak tea. The man wore a trim slate-colored suit over his bulk.

Obviously the recently departed Milo was the muscle of this operation, but the ROM operative did hold a needler aimed at his father's chest.

"You know what Milo will do to him," said the Blakist softly. "I don't know how you can stand it. I mean that's your *son*."

"You'll kill him anyway," said his father raggedly.

"Not necessarily," said the Blakist thoughtfully. "*You* certainly, but we *could* leave the boy alone. *If* you tell us what we want to know."

Mark's father hung his head.

The ROM agent sighed. "Very well, we'll do this the hard way."

Robert Kovachev leapt to his feet and threw himself at the agent.

The Blakist's weapon coughed twice and then the two men were a tangle of limbs sprawled on the floor, Mark's father on top.

Mark charged forward.

The Blakist pushed his father off.

Mark raised his stone—

The ROM agent, still on his back, looked over at Mark, his eyes wide—

Mark brought the stone down.

There was a sickening crunch and the Blakist gurgled, choking on his own blood.

Mark brought the rock down again.

And again.

Until the agent's face was a bloody mess.

Mark crouched over the body, breathing hard.

Behind him, a groan.

"Dad."

Mark wheeled around. His father's khaki shirt was stained black with blood. His breath whistled out of him and a blood-bubble formed on his lips.

Tears burned Mark's eyes.

"Get his gun," his father croaked.

"Dad, I have to get you help, got to—"

"His *gun*," his father roared.

Mark bent down and scooped up the needler, dropped in the brief fight. Then he knelt by his father. "I've got to get you—"

"No," said his father. "Get away."

For a moment, Mark froze, not understanding his father's words. *Get away?* What did he mean? The needler's flechettes had torn open his chest, but Mark could see by the rise and fall of his chest that he was still breathing. And he was lucid. With the proper medical—

"Mark. Wake up."

Mark started at his father's shout. "I'm sorry, I—"

"You have to get *away*."

"No. I can save you. I can call the police. Or ComStar. Or—"

"They've cut the phone lines," his father croaked. "Think the 'Mech's not jamming?"

"OK, but—"

"Muscle's coming back, son." Mark's father was interrupted by a violent fit of coughing.

"I'll kill him," said Mark fiercely.

His father closed his eyes and a deep sigh leaked out of his body. *"Please. No time for this."* He half-turned his head, opened his eyes, caught Mark's gaze. *"He's trained killer. You'll be dead before. You know. He's back. Son. Your duty. Is. To survive."*

A single warm tear traced its way down Mark's cheek. For a moment he couldn't talk. *"The groundcar. I'll put you in—"*

"Mech'll see car. Maybe not bike."

"But—"

"Mark."

Mark swallowed painfully. *"I won't leave you, Father,"* he said between clenched teeth.

"Then I die for nothing."

"Dad—"

"No." His father reached down, slipped his wedding band off his finger. *"Take this with you. For me."*

Mark numbly took the proffered ring. Stared down at it dully. This couldn't be happening. None of the scenarios had been like this.

He looked up. *"We'll wait for help."*

"Mark." His father sighed deeply, the sound of life going out of him. *"On this day no help will come."*

Mark stared at his father, the pain etched into the lines of his face. *"I can't,"* he whispered. Tears streamed down his face. *"I can't."*

"Promise me," his father whispered. *"You'll. Get. Away."*

"No."

His father reached up, gathered the fabric of Mark's shirt in his fist. *"Promise me."*

Mark reached down and touched his father's shoulder. "All right," he said, his voice breaking on the words. "I'll get away."

A light smile touched Robert Kovachev's lips and then his grip loosened on Mark's shirt and his hand fell away. His eyes drooped shut and his breathing evened out.

Mark went to the front door and opened it. He heard the thump of the *Tarantula* pushing its way through the orchard.

There was nothing left of the world he knew. Not the calm peace of the life he'd made with his father, nor safety for his world. Not even the apple trees he'd loved since he was a little boy.

Nothing but his promise to his father.

He glanced back at his father's prone form. He couldn't leave. Help *would* come. He stepped outside to clear his head and, in doing so, glanced up.

He gasped. Clenched his fist around the cold metal of the ring his father had given him. He suddenly understood his father was right. The realization hurt, physically *hurt*, so bad he almost stumbled and fell. He stared up, his mouth dry, all hope gone.

On this day no help will come.

Without taking his eyes from the heavens he reached back and closed the door softly behind him.

The beautiful robin's egg sky was filled with DropShips silently descending to earth.

Somewhere West of Houston, Texas
North America, Terra
17 March 3068

The blocky *Thunderbolt* let loose with a flight of missiles from the box launcher perched on its right shoulder and Kovachev jumped.

Too slow.

Most of the flight missed, but the first three missiles caught him on the right side of his torso. The flicker of his wireframe schematic caught his eye as the last bit of green blinked out of existence. His armor was sunseting. All yellows and reds.

He angled his *Nexus* over an outcropping of blond sandstone and dropped to the other side.

Normally, he could've counted on his McArthur System to take out some of the LRMs, but the anti-missile system had long since run out of ammunition.

Kovachev stalked his *Nexus* past a towering pile of rock and lined up a shot, using the beautiful sandstone formation as a natural revetment.

The *Thunderbolt* was gone.

Damn, damn, and double damn.

His external speakers caught the sound of jump jets.

Kovachev didn't even spare a glance at his rear monitor. He just ran.

Even at 119 kph laser fire dogged his footsteps. He heard the whistling passage of a Gauss round passing to his right, but only *just*.

By the Holy Blake. The *Thunderbolt* was a plague, all the power of a heavy, but with Chilton 465 jump jets that offered it some of the maneuverability of a smaller 'Mech.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his arm. The cockpit temperature had spiked dangerously. That last assault must've damaged a piece of his reactor shielding. If not for the fact that it was a cool, spring day, his *Nexus* might've already locked up.

Kovachev couldn't afford to leave the sandstone formations; they offered the only nearby cover. If he got caught in the brush country, the *Thunderbolt* would make quick work of him. And so he and the Blakist pilot went round and round, playing hide-and-seek among the rocks.

While he roasted like a duck in an oven.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. Somehow, *somehow*, the Blakists had shattered the Case White invasion fleet. Only three of the original ten ComStar divisions had made it to ground.

The last four days had been little more than a running firefight as the ComStar forces in North America were inexorably crushed between the Blakists' Ninth and Tenth Divisions. The fighting had raged all over West Texas.

Finally Kovachev had caught a break. He'd linked up with an *Archer* from what was left of his company's command lance. The two ComStar 'Mechs had managed to isolate the *Thunderbolt*. A match of heavy and light against a single heavy gave the advantage to the ad hoc ComStar forces for a change.

Right up until the Blakist called in air support.

A pair of F-94 *Stingrays* had made an unwelcome appearance and the *Archer* had to break off to provide AAW cover.

Leaving the *Thunderbolt* for Kovachev.

The heavy came around a rock formation and fired the Gauss rifle slung under its right arm. Kovachev jumped and the massive nickel-iron slug passed under his feet, but one of those shots was going to catch him sooner or later and with the condition of his armor, it wouldn't take much more than one to end this little dance.

He had to do something different.

Kovachev swiveled his torso in mid-jump and laid into the *Thunderbolt* with his pulse lasers, vaporizing the sloping armor right below the boxy head mounted on the left shoulder just across from the missile rack.

He came down on the east side of a mass of sandstone and raced south past the granite outcropping known as Gray Rock.

It was a good place to play hide-and-seek.

Kovachev decided to do something unexpected.

He arced around the south side of the twin rock formations and moved to the southwest, deliberately moving into open ground.

This was the dangerous part of his idea (it was too crazy to call a plan.) Max speed on a TDR-9M was only sixty-five kph, so normally Kovachev could have run himself out of trouble, but the broken terrain obviated most of his speed advantage.

He loped through fields of grass dotted with prickly pear cacti and mesquite. He came over low ridge and sent a jaguar bounding off in terror.

And behind him in his rear monitor was the *Thunderbolt*, a good click or two back. The heavy was out of range.

But Kovachev was not going to lose him.

He hit a narrow road unmarked on his map and kicked up his speed. The asphalt hadn't been reinforced to support a 'Mech's massive weight so he heard and *felt* it crunching under his feet, but at least it was level and even. He couldn't safely attain anywhere close to his top speed, but he was opening on the *Thunderbolt*.

He followed the ribbon of blacktop, hoping his memory was taking him in the right direction. Sometime during the long fire fight he'd seen something that just might save him.

The formation was just what he'd remembered: a large pillar of stone with a massive boulder balanced precariously on top. Most likely the rock was made up of granite or some other mineral harder than the surrounding sandstone. As wind and rain weathered the surrounding stone, it left the harder rock untouched, until the ages had formed the odd shape before him.

Kovachev stalked his 'Mech past the boulder's perch and ducked down between a small outcropping of stone surrounded by heavy brush: mostly acacia and spiny hackberry.

He did not have long to wait.

The earth shook under the weight of the approaching 'Mech.

Sweat stung Kovachev's eyes as heat flooded his cockpit. No doubt the *Thunderbolt's* IR sensors had pinpointed his location, but he held his *Nexus* still anyway, unwilling to make the enemy's job any easier.

The Blakist pilot led off with a flight of LRMs, splintering red sandstone as if it were pine shattering under the blows of an axe, but doing little damage to Kovachev's *Nexus*.

If it had been him in the *Thunderbolt*, Kovachev would've adjusted his aim and pounded away at the lighter 'Mech with his long-range weapons, but the Blakist pilot was rash. Or maybe he just thought the heat load had locked up Kovachev's *Nexus*.

Either way, the missile volley was merely the opening shot in a full-scale assault. The *Thunderbolt* charged toward Kovachev's position, ruby lasers tracing molten scars in the stone, Gauss slugs pounding the sheltering rock.

Kovachev watched the beast come, its pale white armor marked with black scorch marks, a golden sunburst on its left shoulder, hands clenched into fists, the lasers arranged in a triangle beneath its ugly head.

Watched it and . . .

Now.

Kovachev bounded over the sandstone outcropping and raced toward the heavy 'Mech, all lasers blazing.

The Blakist paused for a second, clearly startled. Obviously the enemy hadn't expected Kovachev to move, much less to *charge*.

Those few lost seconds would cost him his life.

Kovachev hit his jump jets just as a Gauss slug whistled through the space he'd been occupying, praying with all his might that he'd be as fortunate on the end of the jump as he had at its beginning.

He feathered his right jump jet and turned himself in mid-air, hitting the massive rock with his shoulder just as the *Thunderbolt* passed beneath it.

Twenty-five tons of BattleMech had the desired effect.

The boulder came crashing down from its pedestal.

The Blakist realized what was happening and hit his own jump jets, but that only had the effect of driving him *into* the falling stone.

The *Thunderbolt* crashed to the ground, its missile box caved in.

Even so it was only a glancing blow, not anywhere the force needed to stop a heavy 'Mech. The *Thunderbolt* started to stir.

A wave of heat washed over Kovachev. For a second reality dimmed and then somehow he fought back to consciousness. He couldn't take much more of this. And neither could his machine.

But there were only seconds left.

He managed to stalk over to where the *Thunderbolt* lay, slapping safety overrides as he went. He reached the struggling machine, raised his left arm.

And poured darts of emerald fire into the *Thunderbolt's* cockpit. He gritted his teeth against the searing heat that flooded his own cockpit. He couldn't kill the machine, but he sure as hell could kill the pilot.

Darkness came for Kovachev before his *Nexus* locked up.

Sweetheart Orchards
Yakima Valley, Washington
North America, Terra
28 February 3058

Mark made his first mistake immediately after stepping outside. It would later turn out to be the only major error during what could fairly be described as a difficult and gut-wrenching morning, but it very nearly cost him his life.

He went to the garage and pulled out his dirt bike, reasoning that the *Tarantula* pilot would never hear the bike's mosquito buzz over the noise of his own machine.

What he didn't stop to consider was whether or not the 'Mech would see him.

Afterwards, Mark would realize that if he had walked the bike down the dirt road that ran past the house or even rode it at a slow speed, he never would've attracted the *Tarantula's* attention.

Instead he gunned the engine and shot off like a bullet.

He spared a single glance back.

In time to see the *Tarantula's* turret swivel towards him as he passed.

Mark's blood instantly ran cold. He opened up the throttle, felt the added power in the bike's handlebars, fighting him.

For an instant he thought he'd made it.

Then he heard the sound of a 'Mech's massive foot pounding into the earth. Followed rapidly by another and another and another. This wasn't the purposeful stride he'd witnessed in the orchard. The great machine was *running*. And *Tarantulas* were fast.

He looked over his shoulder.

The 'Mech was closing.

Mark swore quietly to himself. The pilot must've suspended his search when he'd realized he'd lost his contact with his confederates. And what had Mark done? He'd jumped on his bike and managed to grab the 'Mech's attention just as it was starting to look around.

Great.

His heart skipped a beat at the loud whine of combat lasers. Sudden heat burned the back of his neck as the *Tarantula* put a hole in the dirt road just behind Mark's bike.

Mark jerked his bike from side to side, trying to make it harder for the 'Mech to land a shot. His bike was probably too small for the *Tarantula* to get a target lock, so the best the pilot could do was fire his lasers manually.

The ground shook under his bike, almost sending him over.

Unfortunately, the *Tarantula* didn't have to hit him with the laser to kill him.

All that was needed was a careful *step*.

The great machine's shadow loomed over him, a monstrous insectoid shape reaching out for him.

"Pull over to the side of the road immediately," roared a deep voice over the 'Mech's external speakers.

Mark didn't look back, didn't acknowledge the order.

Another laser blast hit close by, showering him with dirt.

He realized the pilot's laser blasts were for effect. He wasn't trying to kill him. He was trying to get him off the bike.

Which meant the *Tarantula's* aim might get better once he decided Mark wasn't going to pull over.

Mark swerved right, off the road, weaving between apple trees at eighty kph.

The 'Mech turned to follow.

Mark heard the sound of a tree exploding, not five meters behind him and he shuddered. He glanced back. The trees wouldn't stop the 'Mech, but they *were* slowing it down. He was edging away.

He turned again, racing along the river's course. Soon he would reach the edge of the Kovachev property and the nice, orderly rows of apple trees would give way to broken hills covered with cottonwoods and alders and thick sagebrush.

Plenty of places to hide.

Mark saw the ticket to his freedom up ahead, a cedar footbridge that arced over the river and beyond it the beginning of the hills. He shot towards the small structure, trusting that the *Tarantula* wouldn't be able to hit such a small, erratic target

Forgetting that the 'Mech didn't have to target him if he knew where he was going.

The laser blast hit the far end of the bridge just as he started up the slight ramp at the near end. He threw his body *up*, jumping the bike just before he reached the bridge's burning end. For a second a monstrous cloud of gray steam swallowed his bike. Burning cinders pelted him.

Then the bike came down.

Hard.

Mark's left leg telescoped into the ground, taking the full brunt of the fall. Somehow the sound of a snapping limb reached his mind before the jolt of electric pain flashed up his leg.

He gasped.

Stunned by sudden, *terrible* pain.

Heard the rumble of the *Tarantula* drawing near.

He was hidden by a curtain of steam that had been the river. For seconds.

Somehow, impossibly, he lurched to his feet.

Molten agony stole thought away.

Miraculously, he didn't fall.

Staggered forward.

The ground trembled beneath his feet, the sound of approaching doom.

Approaching *release*.

Another step.

Stop and fall, his mind screamed. And why not? What could the 'Mech do? Kill him?

It would be an end to the bright pain that throbbed in his leg.

Another step.

Easier if he hobbled.

Sweat beaded on his forehead. He tasted the iron tang of blood where he'd bitten his tongue.

One more step. One more, *one more*.

(*Stop. Why're you doing this? Stop stop stop stop.*)

One more.

Never pain like this, never before.

Earth shook beneath him. *Terra* herself trembling before the monster.

(*Please. Give up.*)

His father's voice: "Your duty is to survive."

ONE MORE STEP.

He crested a small rise as the world behind him erupted in emerald fire. The force of the blast shoved him brutally forward, jerking his busted leg. He screamed as he slid the couple meters down the hill and then finally, mercifully darkness came.

Somewhere West of Houston, Texas
North America, Terra
17 March 3068

Someone was shaking him. Shaking him awake. Must've been. A dream. His mouth tasted sour. And. Thirsty. So thirsty.

He moved his head and winced. His skull lit up with agony.

Who was shaking him?

He slowly tilted his head. Glanced up.

Saw the *Thunderbolt's* cockpit not a meter from his own, ferro-glass slagged to nothing, armor burnt and blasted away, delicate panels melted into fused metal and plastic. If there was anything of the pilot left it was no more than his shadow flash-burned into the 'Mech's metal bulkhead.

Kovachev felt his gorge rising and screwed his eyes shut.

No, this was not a dream.

Shaking grew more insistent.

He opened his eyes, glanced left. A cracked monitor showed something off to his left.

A *Toyama*.

The heavy 'Mech had been named for Conrad Toyama, the son of a bitch who'd wrenched ComStar away from the blessed Blake's vision. The machine was just as ugly as its namesake: rounded insectile cockpit pushed down deep into the blocky chest, right arm ending in a pair of large lasers one over the other, left arm ending in an LB 10-X autocannon, the knobby ECM dome growing out of its right shoulder like some cancerous protuberance, the whole thing painted the same mealy white as a maggot.

The heavy stopped and turned his way, as if he wondered if his crippled *Nexus* was worth firing on. No doubt the *Toyoma* detected the waves of heat coming off his injured Mech. But the *Nexus* was locked in a death embrace with the *Thunderbolt* and it had showed no signs of life during the *Toyama's* approach.

After a second the heavy turned and lumbered off.

Kovachev exhaled heavily.

The *Toyama*'s pilot had assumed he was dead.

Was he?

Kovachev waited for the vibrations of the enemy machine to die down before he attempted to find out.

It was always harder to right a 'Mech without hands, but somehow he did it, levering himself up with his right arm.

He took an experimental step forward and his cockpit temp spiked, brushing into the bottom of the red zone on his indicators.

More damaged shielding.

He drew a deep breath of superheated air.

He might have enough cooling capacity left over for a single barrage of laser fire. Maybe he could still do some good.

A flicker of motion caught his attention. He turned and saw a *Raijin* stalking toward him, a brave lion painted just under the cockpit. The bipedal machine looked a little like a bird except for the massive Holly Streak pack mounted on its head.

"This is Adept Epsilon XII Gene Happert," barked a voice over the Lion command frequency. "What's your status?"

"Adept Kovachev, sir. I'm in bad shape. Serious heat problems. But I can move. What's the plan?"

"What's the plan? We're going to take down that *Toyama*."

Kovachev frowned. "Sir? Shouldn't we withdraw? Regroup? Fight our way back to the DropShips?"

Happert emitted a bark of short, bitter laughter. "DropShips? There are no more *DropShips*. No more JumpShips, either."

"But—"

"Listen," said the older officer a bit more gently, "there's no way out. The fleet's gone. Nothing we can do, but take as many as those bastards with us as we can."

With that he stalked his *Raijin* in the direction the *Toyama* had passed. Kovachev watched him go.

The fleet? *Gone?*

How could Case White have come to such disaster so quickly?

He drew a troubled breath and pushed his *Nexus* after the fifty-ton *Raijin* more because he didn't know what else to do than for any other reason.

The medium 'Mech crested a short hill and let loose with a flurry of SRMs and lasers. Kovachev followed close enough behind to see the furious assault catch the *Toyama* in the rear torso, where its armor was weakest. The enemy heavy staggered under the weight of the *Raijin*'s blows.

But it did not fall.

The *Toyama* wheeled around and engaged with the two powerful lasers mounted in its right arm. Ruby light sliced through the *Raijin*'s weak armor, vaporizing steel and composite.

Somehow Happert kept his feet, got off a desperate shot with his Blankenburg PPC.

Blue lightning brushed against the *Toyama*'s shin and the heavy 'Mech went down on one knee. But it wasn't enough damage to keep the heavy from turning its massive autocannon on the gravely wounded *Raijin*.

The heavy stutter of the weapon's bark filled the air. Kovachev watched as a stream of heavy metal stitched a line through the *Raijin*'s head armor and smashed the cockpit.

The *Toyama* cut his gun and there was a moment of silence.

And then the *Raijin* toppled to the ground.

The *Toyama* turned toward Kovachev's battered *Nexus*.

Kovachev took a step toward the great machine, intending to enfold the heavy 'Mech in an embrace and then blow his reactor. (It wouldn't be hard to do. Indeed, it was hard to keep his damaged 'Mech from blowing.)

Something stopped him.

It wasn't fear.

Mark Kovachev wasn't afraid to die. He'd lost whatever fear of death he'd had back on a cold February morning when he'd been sixteen.

No, it was something else.

A duty.

To his mother, to his father.

To his world.

To survive.

The *Toyama* stalked toward him and in that second, Kovachev made his decision. He turned and stomped down hard on his pedals, sending his *Nexus* soaring into the sky.

The *Toyama's* autocannon followed him into the sky, tearing away the thin armor in his back, smashing the delicate gyroscope within.

Not that it mattered.

Kovachev punched out at the last second, just as his beloved *Nexus* came down behind a rocky outcropping that would hide his escape from the *Toyama*.

The *Nexus* smashed into the earth and its battered armor finally let go, scouring the rocks with the golden light of a miniature nova.

Kovachev stood on shaky legs, blinking away bright afterimages. Concussion. Dehydration. And he'd just taken a massive rad dose.

But he was alive.

And as long as he was alive he could make Word of Blake pay.

He touched the ring on his finger and allowed himself a grim smile. Then he turned his back on the burning wreckage of his 'Mech and started walking.