

Assault on Ares

A Battletech/MechWarrior short story

By



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Chapter 5

Timely Arrival

Eight days had passed, since the Capellans had first touched down on Ares. Battles had been fought all over the planet, in areas where the Capellan dropships had landed. Casualties had been slowly increasing on both sides, but without reinforcements, it was estimated that the Capellans could only afford to continue the planetary assault for two more weeks, three at the most. Even with this estimate of the Capellan's combat limits, the invaders continued to push toward the major cities and spaceports. For the time being, civilian casualties were low, but as the battles closed on the population centers, this would change.

Strangely, the primary base of operations for the Federated Suns Royal Guard had not come under attack. Yet. Minor skirmishes were being fought closer and closer, though; as if the Capellans were testing the defenses and patrol routes. Patrols were doubled once the five hundred kilometer perimeter had been breached. With the number and type of Capellan mechs spotted or engaged, the command staff began to speculate that there was at least one Capellan dropship a lot closer than they had first plotted.

General Steve had ordered dedicated scouting lances, in an attempt to find any dropships within a one thousand kilometer perimeter. Unfortunately, they were getting very little assistance from Admiral Gandt's forces in orbit, as the atmosphere was highly ionized due to the proximity of the nuclear explosions. Although the base had been ready for an attack minutes after the Capellans had first entered the solar system, nothing serious had happened locally. Hours after the remaining CC dropships had touched down, the radioactive saturation of the upper atmosphere had increased to a degree that orbital tracking had lost contact with most of the dropships. In the following few days, ground forces had located eight out of the eleven surviving dropships. And now, with several Capellan dropships still 'missing', concern was mounting.

The General glanced back at his tactical summary regarding the Capellan dropships. Of the initial twelve, one *Union*-class had been shot down while still descending from low orbit; the Royal Guard had ambushed another *Union* and had come across the wreckage of a *Fortress*-class. Four *Unions* and the last two *Fortresses* had managed to land in the northern hemisphere, obviously heading for the planetary capital and its critically important hyper-pulse generator.

Spaceports and a few other major cities had come under harassing attack, most likely in an attempt to spread out the defending forces over too much ground.

That left the three highly mobile *Leopard*-class dropships. Each was only capable of carrying four battlemechs and two fighters, but their relatively small size and maneuverability in an atmosphere made them ideal for sudden hit-and-run strikes against bases and spaceports. Of course, they couldn't match the sheer firepower of their larger brothers, such as the popular *Union*-class and the even more massive *Fortress*-class.

Those larger spherical dropships were more expensive, and were usually used for directly assaulting bases while descending from orbit, in the earliest stages of most planetary assaults, and later for setting up regional command posts.

Of course, the planetary HPG station was the most heavily defended point on the entire planet, although with the Royal Guard temporarily stationed at this spaceport, it was a close second, for defensive firepower.

If the Capellans managed to secure the HPG, they would be able to call for reinforcements. Although physical travel time still had to be taken into account, secure communication was possible with any planet that also had one of the massive HPG stations.

The HPG grid was a technological marvel, and had been abhorrently expensive to build, but it allowed live communications across any distance, even to the opposite side of the Inner Sphere. The HPGs were always protected at any cost, and were never directly targeted for destruction, as the loss of the station, would effectively cut off the planet from the rest of the galaxy. The technology used to create the HPG network back in the 2600's had long-since been lost, between the many civil and interstellar wars, and the infamous Star League Defense Force Exodus.

Needless to say, none could be built from scratch, or even rebuilt; only repairs could be done, within reason. And if an HPG were lost, only the vital jumpships, which were nearly as valuable, would then link the planet to the rest of civilization and critical resources. The destruction of HPGs was basically forbidden and that was agreed upon by all of humanity, but a few have still been destroyed, over the centuries. Even the destruction of jumpships was often considered more heinous than even civilian casualties.

As the General continued to ponder the possible whereabouts of the missing *Leopard* dropships, an aid approached him, "Sir, we have just received a communication from Colonel Farslayer's lance. At 1632hrs, a lance of Capellan mechs was spotted approximately four-eight-seven klicks northeast from here. He is currently tracking them at five klicks."

"Did he say what mechs are in this lance?"

The com-tech nodded, "Affirmative; a *Raven* and three *Shadow Cats*."

Suddenly a seated technician chimed in, "General, we have tracking data coming through now from the Colonel's scout lance. Updating the tactical map now."

The General glanced down and watched as four red blips appeared on the huge tactical plotting map table. And trailing them, were the four blue dots of Farslayer's lance. It appeared that the Capellans were going to make a close pass to the base at an oblique

angle, obviously an intelligence-gathering run. And that meant there were more battlemechs out there, somewhere.

“Send out a lance of fighters, and try to stall them long enough for Farslayer’s lance to engage them. I want those scouts taken out! Comms, get me the Colonel.”

“I have him on secure channel Delta-nine.”

“Farslayer, Steve here. I want those Capellan scouts neutralized. I am scrambling some fighters right now; ETA, approximately eight minutes. After they engage, I want your lance to close in and help finish them off. I can’t send any more backup, as we still don’t know where the missing *Leopards* are.”

“Roger. We will throttle up in four minutes.”

As the group of fighters thundered down the runway in full afterburner, the command complex shuddered slightly. The General continued to stare at the plotting table. The timing of this little strike would be critical, as Farslayer’s lance was very likely way outgunned, although he did have surprise on his side. Still, a *Bushwacker*, a *Hunchback*, and two *Ravens*, would most likely be torn up by the more advanced Clan-tech *Shadow Cats*.

Six minutes later, the command station burst into sudden activity, as the fighters began making their attack runs on the Capellan mechs. The pilots reported one *Shadow Cat* damaged, now currently at approximately 55% combat effectiveness, but the other three mechs had taken little damage. Their max-throttle speed was capable of making them very difficult targets to hit, but the fighters had managed to turn the Capellans around and force them head-to-head with Farslayer’s oncoming lance. Barely seconds before maximum missile range for Farslayer’s lance, two of the fighters were shot down by large pulse laser fire from the *Shadow Cats*.

“Base, this is Gold leader. I just lost Gold’s 3 and 4. Scout-lance two is engaging now; requesting permission to pull back.”

“Gold leader, base. Permission granted. Just try to keep those Capellans from getting away.”

As the two remaining fighters pulled away into a high combat orbit, effectively out of battlemech weapons range, the Capellans came under fire from Farslayer and his lance. Long-range missiles rained down on the *Shadow Cats*, but the lone *Raven* was able to dodge most of the distant weapons targeted at it.

“*Ravens*, keep your distance and hammer away with your missiles. Viper and I’ll move in on them. Let’s take out that crit *Scat* first and move on to the other two.”

The comms clicked in acknowledgment to Farslayer's commands. As the combat range closed to six hundred meters, and then five hundred, the *Bushwacker* and *Hunchback* began pounding away with their heavy ballistic weapons, a mixture of Autocannon 10 and 20's. As the range closed even more, short-range missiles entered the mix, from both sides.

With the concentrated fire from both the *Bushwacker* and *Hunchback*, the already damaged *Shadow Cat* fell in seconds. But at the same time, Viper's *Hunchback* took critical damage of its own. He wasn't out of the fight, but would be very soon. Suddenly, two *Ravens* came racing into range and repeatedly crossed in front of the Capellan *Shadow Cats*. They both took several hits, but that saved the two heavier mechs some damage, allowing them to take out a second *Shadow Cat*. But due to their close proximity, both critically damaged *Ravens* were knocked to the ground by the resulting reactor explosion from the Capellan mech. Both were now out of the fight themselves.

Suddenly a flight of long-range missiles rushed in and destroyed Viper's *Hunchback*, but hearing the missile lock warning tone, Viper was able to safely eject in time. And had Farslayer dared take his eyes off the remaining *Shadow Cat*, he would have seen the two remaining fighters pour lasers and missiles into the distant Capellan light mech.

Just as Gold leader radioed that the *Raven* was down, the *Shadow Cat* wheeled about, and rushed in the direction of the low-flying fighters. Farslayer cursed, and rammed his throttle right to the stops. He fired several volleys of SRM-6 missiles and paired AC10 slugs at the fleeing *Shadow Cat*, but it quickly pulled out of optimum range.

As the fighters attempted to accelerate to a higher altitude, pulse laser fire from the *Shadow Cat* took them both out. Farslayer cursed again, and continued to fire his two autocannon-10s at the fleeing *Shadow Cat*. The medium mech continued to take damage, but once it pulled out of maximum AC10 range, it began to circle Farslayer at approximately six hundred and fifty meters, hammering away with large pulse lasers. First his shoulder-mounted short-range missiles pod was destroyed, and then his right arm began to suffer ammo feed troubles, indicating near-critical damage.

Farslayer turned the torso of his *Bushwacker* to the right, in an attempt to protect what remained of his right arm. Fortunately, the left arm was empty, but it provided a good impromptu shield for the torso. But apparently this didn't fool the Capellan pilot for long, as he quickly shifted his aim to Farslayer's legs. Armor began to melt from the extreme heat inflicted by the lasers, and then his computer began to detect feedback building up in the myomer of his right leg.

Unable to close on the *Shadow Cat*, Farslayer pounded on his console, hitting the reactor override, pushing the reactor and engine to 125%. The resultant momentary burst of power and speed brought the *Shadow Cat* to five hundred and ninety-seven meters, and Farslayer whipped his torso around and fired an alpha right into the center torso of the Capellan mech. The surprised Capellan frantically fired several alpha strikes of paired

large pulse lasers in Farslayer's direction, but the hammering of the heavy AC10 slugs against the mech knocked his aim off repeatedly.

Warning alarms sounded in both cockpits, but for different reasons. The *Shadow Cat* was suddenly engulfed in a cloud of green. Still not glancing down to see what was wrong with his mech, Farslayer grinned. The Capellan had fired his hot lasers too often, and was attempting to fight the automatic shutdown by flushing his reactor coolant system with his emergency reserves. The built-in safeties were designed to prevent reactor overload and unintentional self-destruct. But too little too late, and the *Shadow Cat* slumped over.

Knowing he had a bare minimum of eight seconds, before the computer would even allow a power-up attempt, Farslayer glanced down to his own damage display. When he had hit the reactor and engine power override, the resulting power surge had spiked the feedback loop in the myomer muscles of his *Bushwacker*, and the damaged right leg had sustained damage. The top speed was now severely limited, but not crippled. If he was careful, he figured he should get about fifty-five kph. As long as the terrain was flat and smooth.

Returning his attention to the still powered down medium mech, Farslayer throttled down to ten percent, and began hammering at the reactor casing armor on the rear of the *Shadow Cat*. Six AC10 slugs later, there was a flash near the front of the still powered down mech, and the Capellan mechwarrrior ejected into the sky. At that, Farslayer throttled up and began to back away from the critical mech. When he was once again four hundred meters away, Farslayer fired once more, with both canons, and the Capellan mech suffered a reactor breach and flared into its own miniature nova.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Farslayer set a course for the Federated Suns base, and radioed in his situation.

Back in the command center, the General was meeting with Major Tiger Claw.

"I'm sorry Tiger Claw, but we can't spare any dropships right now. With the current increase in enemy scouting activity, we are expecting an attack in the next twenty-four hours; I am ordering all dropships back to orbit, and to dock with the Admiral's starships."

"Okay, but we currently have no targets within the one-k perimeter. I'd like to request permission to take one additional mech and escort Farslayer in. He is now passing three hundred and seventy kilometers. Twelve hours, that's all we'll need."

"That better be all, because that's all I'm prepared to allow two additional combat-worthy battlemechs to be off-base and unsupported. And twelve hours? I guess you plan on taking *Dahak*?"

Tiger Claw grinned and nodded, “Yes. He’s completely repaired and all ready outfitted for this mission. And yes, I could cut the time in half, even with a heavy mech, but if we get into trouble, I want the capability to defend us. Like you said, we’ll have no back-up.”

“Uh-hunh. And who were you planning on taking with you.”

Tiger Claw shifted his position awkwardly. “Umm, he pretty much ordered me to make this request in the first place, and he’ll be contacting you shortly.”

The General sighed, “Let me guess: ‘Big Benn’?”

Tiger Claw barely nodded, a little uncomfortably.

“Okay, Tiger. You have a go, but I want you to take Zymoses instead.”

The Major nodded uncertainly and replied slowly, “Yes sir.”

And with that, he left the office and headed for *Dahak*’s hanger, after commandeering a parked hover-jeep, and speaking to Zymoses over private comms on the way.

Back in General Steve’s office, “Dammit, sir, I can’t protect you if you go gallivanting around the desert like this.”

“Steve, you know I’ve been itching for just a little action, and besides, I need to get off the base, even if it’s just inside a battlemech cockpit. Besides, we have had no additional enemy contact in that direction anyway.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m afraid of. It’s too quite up that way, even taking into consideration the recent skirmish. And taking the commanding officer of your Elite Guard for a simple escort? We will need our best pilots here if we come under attack.”

“The Elite Guard is under my direct command, and since there will just be the two of us, I will be taking the best. My *Warhammer* is on the tarmac and ready to go. No one else need know who is in that battlemech. End of conversation. Besides, this isn’t the first time I’ve been in a battlemech, and it most certainly will not be the last.”

“Yes sir. I’ll notify Tiger Claw right away, and get Zymoses re-reassigned.”

“Thank you, Steve.”

The two friends smiled, and then the comm channel went dark.

As the Prince turned to his aid, he gave a shallow node, “All right, let’s go.”

“Yes sir. I have an APC waiting outside.”

The Prince glanced over at the aid, with one eyebrow slightly raised. “I think that might draw just a little too much attention, to use. Just get a standard hover jeep here.”

“But sir...”

The Prince cut him off with a wave, “Just do it. It’s only a thirty-second drive, and we are in the middle of the base. Or I’ll just walk. It is a beautiful evening, after all.”

“Follow me sir. My jeep is just in front.”

The short trip was uneventful, as expected, and as the Prince was climbing up the ten meters to his cockpit, he glanced around at the sudden shuddering felt even through the *Warhammer*’s dampeners, and saw a jet black *Blood Asp* slowly exiting its hanger, cockpit still open.

The Prince chuckled to himself softly. As much as Tiger Claw was at home in a battlemech cockpit, he loved the open air. Apparently, he had even once looked into having his chief mechanic disable the safeties that prevented most of the mechs capabilities, including weapons, from being used while the cockpit was still open. It was just a rumor, but one that the Prince did not doubt actually having some basis in fact. Anyway, slow taxing with an open cockpit was still optional, but one that few pilots actually used.

The Prince settled into his cockpit, connected his cooling vest, but did not power up his reactor until the *Blood Asp* had pulled up barely twenty meters, nose-to-nose. Tiger Claw gave a salute visible only to the pilot opposite him, which was returned, and then closed his cockpit, and slowly backed away. And with that, the Prince closed his open cockpit, and began his own startup procedures.

Once he had verified the status of all the systems, “Base, this is Big Benn. We are powered up and all systems are green.”

“Roger that Big Benn. You have a go. Proceed to nav point one for base exit.”

“Thank you. Tiger Claw, I’ll take lead.” And the *Warhammer* throttled up to thirty kph.

The *Warhammer* was a heavy chassis, but much of its body structure design was reminiscent of heavier assault mechs, especially the bulky legs and feet. The huge arm-mounted canons each held the standard configuration of a PPC, each. But due to the higher average ambient temperature, lighter weapons had been removed in order to mount additional heat sinks. Even so, there were still two medium lasers in the torso, and a pod of class-6 short-range missiles mounted in the distinct right shoulder pod. And to round off the seventy-ton battlemech’s loadout, was an effective compliment of

electronic options: a Beagle Active Probe long-range sensor system, a laser anti-missile system, and an IFF jammer.

As the two battlemechs approached the base gate, it dropped into the ground, and the two passed through, with the hulking assault mech pausing to glance around at the open terrain ahead.

“All right Tiger Claw. Once we are clear of nav two, get that beast throttled up to max speed and take up position to my right, on a heading of five-zero degrees. And I’m sure you will, but make sure you keep your sensors powered to max.”

“Roger”

Almost three and a half hours later, and past the expected rendezvous point, a lone blue dot finally appeared on their radar displays.

“Farslayer, this is Tiger Claw. Do you read me?”

After repeating the call several more times, with only silence each time, there was suddenly a burst of tortured static. It quickly subsided, and a response was finally received, though struggling to stay above the background static. “I got you Tiger Claw. Sorry about that, but something jarred loose somewhere in the system about an hour ago, and several secondary systems went down, including comms and autopilot. Luckily this is pretty flat ground, so I just strapped the stick straight, and began working on rigging up some temporary comms. Looks like its pretty short range.”

“Roger that. We have you at nine hundred meters; see you shortly.”

As they pulled into visual range, the severely damaged *Bushwacker* continued straight ahead, while the two escort mechs looped around and took up positions on either side and throttled down to match speed.

“I see you brought the cavalry.”

“Roger that.”

“Farslayer, this is Big Benn, what is your weapons status?”

After a slight pause, obviously one of surprise at who was with Tiger Claw, Farslayer responded, “Well, my missile pod is destroyed, my right arm-mounted AC10 is sporadic with twelve rounds remaining, but my torso-mounted AC10 is operating just fine, but only has eight rounds left. Also, I can barely make fifty-kph, and I think that is really pushing it. All things considered, I think my luck-account must be overdrawn by now.”

“Okay, make sure all your sensors are powered down, and try to keep your comm transmissions to line-of-sight laser only.”

“You got it.”

Barely one hour after rendezvousing with the crippled *Bushwacker*, and still one hundred and seventy-eight kilometers out from the base, things got just a little worse for the trio, Farslayer specifically. Suddenly there was a flash from the damaged right leg, followed by bits of smoking metal hitting the sand, accompanied with an ominous groaning.

Cursing yet again, Farslayer whipped his throttle back to full stop. Seconds later, the accompanying mechs stopped also, and took a defensive posture facing opposite directions.

“Sorry, guys. Looks like my right leg has almost had it. I had another power spike, and the myomer is almost toast. I think I might be able to max at thirty-kph, but will probably be pushing it.”

Tiger Claw grimaced, “Well, don’t break it right off, what ever you do. If you weren’t so attached to *Gunslinger*, we could leave it here and send a retrieval crew for it later.”

“Well, if my luck keeps going downhill like this, I just may take you up on that offer.”

“Clear comms!!” barked Big Benn suddenly. “I have a visual on a lone mech at heading right for us, from the north. Looks to be at about two clicks out and closing fast.”

Tiger Claw swung his torso around to the indicated heading, and noticed a dark speck trailing a cloud of dust. Activating the zoom on his HUD, the speck materialized into the vague shape of a *Wolfhound*-class light battlemech. “I got ‘im. But look at the way he’s driving. It’s like some half-assed attempt to dodge weapons. Ha! Reminds of some of our beer-loving pilots after a long night drinking.”

“All right, clear the comms, and keep your eyes open. This could be a decoy. Farslayer, see what you can do about minimizing those power spikes, and get that thing moving. Now!”

As Farslayer slowly advanced the throttle and began moving forward again, but at only half his previous speed, Tiger Claw kept pace, but Big Benn stayed back to intercept the oncoming mysterious mech.

“Keep moving you two. I still have no IFF signal on this *Wolfhound*, and I can’t get a stable target lock either – he’s definitely got ECM.”

As the *Wolfhound* closed within eight hundred meters, Benn finally got a solid lock. He was about to pull the trigger on his PPCs as a warning signal, when suddenly his comms beeped, on an unsecured open channel.

Switching over from the secure FedSuns channel, "...come in please. Repeat, Federated Suns battlemechs, come in please. Please hold your fire."

"Hold your position and identify yourself," Benn replied tersely.

While awaiting a response, Benn continued to visually scan the now stopped *Wolfhound*, when he saw something he hadn't seen in years. More specifically, the pilot's custom insignia: the old but popular 'skull and cross bones', but with a twist. Instead of the ancient traditional crossed bones or swords, there was a pair of crossed beer bottles. It only took a fraction of a second, but memories came rushing back.

He was about to address the pilot, but he never got the chance, "Your voice sounds familiar. Is your callsign, by any chance, Benn?"

"Actually, it's Big Benn." And after a long pause, "Nasty! You old drunken war dog! That is you, isn't it?"

"Haha, yes it is. And that is you, isn't it?"

"Clear comms. Nasty, I'm sending you an authentication for our secure comms via direct laser link."

"Roger that. Authenticating and switching now."

Once verification had been received, Benn ordered his now full, but extremely irregular, lance, to resume their previous heading on a return course to the base. Once all mechs had begun moving, and keeping pace with Farslayer, "Tiger Claw, Farslayer, I'd like you to meet an old friend of mine; he goes by the callsign Nasty. We share plenty of history, but this is not the place, and we definitely do not have the time."

Nasty chimed in, "You don't know how right you are, Benn. That is actually why I'm here. Once I heard the news about the Capellans entering the system, I decided to do a little lone-ranger scouting. Out of curiosity, do you have the locations on all of the Capellan dropships?"

"Well, last I heard, we still had no tracking data on all three of the *Leopards*. Those damn nukes really messed up our orbital and satellite tracking capabilities."

"Then I suggest we get going ASAP. All three touched down approximately eleven hundred clicks due north from your primary base, and have been creeping closer every day. They are making numerous low altitude hops. And I do mean low; barely a few hundred meters above the ground."

"No offense, but are you sure about that?"

Nasty sighed, "Transmitting all my data to your system now. By my estimate, they'll catch us just before we get within any defensive range of your base. One more thing, just as I was first entering the desert, I spotted several mechs jumping from a dropship that was obviously minutes away from a really rough landing. They all had on those heavy retro-rockets, and eventually landed southeast from the base, maybe fifteen hundred clicks away. I counted thirty-one mechs, mostly heavies, with a small variety of assaults, mediums, and lights."

Barely thirty seconds after receiving and scanning all the intel that Nasty had obtained on his own, Big Benn was on the comms sending an urgent message to General Steve. But after several attempts to get a single clear transmission, it suddenly dawned on him. Broadband jamming, and the interference was getting stronger. There were still enough breaks in the interference to finally send and receive coherent burst transmissions, though. As Benn was attempting to send a final voice transmission, there was a sudden swelling over the comm channel, as the interference finally gained enough strength to effectively block all communication within range.

"Sorry sir, that's all the gain I can get out of the system. I'd just be boosting static now."

As the General reread over the severely garbled communications, his concern grew. "Damn," he thought to himself. "He just had to gamble, no, both of them, and now they may never make it back."

"General, I'm getting a laser communication relayed from Padre. He has visual verification on three *Leopard*-class dropships closing on Alpha-lance's position. Sir!! They are dropping mechs: two *Masakariss*, and four *Thors*! From their current position, they will be in range to engage Alpha-lance in fifteen minutes.

"Shit!" swore the General out loud. Swinging around, "Lieutenant, make the call."

"But sir, I thought only the Prince....."

The General swung around sternly, "Just...do it."

The Lieutenant nodded at the seemingly vague order, but knew exactly what the General wanted. Entering a series of coded commands, and waiting several seconds, his screen flashed with updated coded information. "General. Message received. ETA one-nine minutes."

Elsewhere in the solar system, in the total blackness of a shadowed asteroid, massive thrusters suddenly flared to life; and two huge shapes separated from the cold gray rock.

“Sorry guys, but it looks like we’re on our own. Nasty, thanks for the intel, but this isn’t your fight anymore. Get out of here, while you still can.”

“No way. I’ve done too many things that I regret. I’m not going to leave now, and add one more to that list.”

Suddenly Tiger Claw broke in, “Benn! I have a massive contact closing on us fast from behind. Wait, make that three. Looks like those missing Capellan dropships.”

“This is Nasty, I have them also.”

“Roger that you two. I’m getting a track on them also. Okay, throttle down and take up a defensive posture, but hold fire. They may be after bigger fish.”

As the four mechs stopped and turned around, they watched as the dark spots in the distance quickly grew larger. Still quite a distance out, two of the targets began to slow, while the third veered to their right, staying well out of range. Suddenly there were several flashes, and they counted six mechs dropping onto the desert sand in the distance. And then the two Capellan dropships veered off and followed the first into the distance.

When it was clear that the dropships weren’t after them directly, Benn ordered his hodge-podge lance up to full throttle, but to keep pace with Farslayer.

“General! We have incoming battlemechs from the southeast! We also have confirmation on three *Leopard*-class dropships approaching from north-east; course-plotting suggests they plan on a rendezvous.”

“Red alert! I want all available mechwarriors to their mechs and to hold position at their assigned coordinates. How many mechs from the south-east?”

“No exact count yet, but the scouts count at least twenty mechs, mostly heavies. I will update you when we get more data.”

As the base alarm began to sound, General Steve activated the base-wide comms system, which was loud enough to drown out most noise and the alarm. “Attention all personnel. We have incoming hostile forces. This is what we have been waiting for. You all know your business, so let’s get to it”

“Sir, we have a final count: thirty-one mechs, plus whatever those *Leopards* have on board.”

“Okay, thanks. Upload all tactical data to all stations, and get me a readiness report. One more thing, get my Chief on the line, and have him prep my mech for close-quarters

fighting. I want it ready at a moments notice, and on stand-by right in front of the command complex, here.”

“Yes sir!”

Glancing down at his tactical display yet again, Tiger Claw’s concern didn’t let up, “Blast! At our speed, they’ll be in maximum range in twelve minutes. At least it looks like those assaults are slowing them down some.”

“Well, I don’t necessarily think that that is a good sign. They are probably packed with weapons and armor, figuring that speed wasn’t a critical issue.”

Farslayer then broke is long silence, “And they were right.”

“Bah, they just had a lucky guess, in a string of bad ones,” responded Tiger Claw. “I’d say this whole assault was a bad idea from the beginning, considering all the forces that are on-planet right now for the tour.”

With that, the Federated Suns pilots resumed they silence, and Farslayer silently pleaded with the fates to keep his mech moving.

Barely ten minutes later, and with a totally casual attitude and nonchalant tone, Nasty calmly announced, “Hey guys, we got some missiles incoming.”

Switching to his rear camera view, Tiger Claw watched as several flights of long-range missiles arced up and then began to rain down in the general vicinity of the four mechs. Only a few lucky missiles impacted battlemech armor, and with Farslayer safely in the lead, his ravaged *Bushwacker* was effectively shielded. The only damage sustained was blackened paint, but they would not be so lucky, as the following Capellans slowly closed their range.

“Dumb-fire shots. That means they can’t get solid locks yet. Nasty, I want you to weave from side to side behind us. That should delay any tentative locks they may get, and give us just a little more time.”

“Time for what Benn?” Tiger Claw asked. “We are still an hour away from the base, we have no reinforcements, and we have no effective cover within feasible range.”

As the Major waited a response, his console beeped, indicating a new private text message. Glancing down, he read two words, “Trust me.”

Grinning slightly, Tiger Claw suddenly realized what Benn had in mind. More realistically, what he was hoping for. Suddenly he had no more time to ponder the possibility, “They got positive lock! I can’t break it!”

Benn responded, “Get out from back there Nasty! They’ll lose their locks when you pull in front of us.”

As the gaunt little thirty-five ton mech gunned its throttle and attempted to speed around and in front of the three larger mechs, a firestorm of missiles rained down and pummeled the speeding mech all over the back, legs, and arms. Just the sheer force of the physical impacts sent the tiny *Wolfhound* headlong into the sand; but the accompanying explosions tore shreds of ferrofibrous armor from the now prone battlemech. But by sheer luck, the timing of the missile volleys was such that only the first two hit him, and all the others slightly over-shot him as he went to the ground. Impacting barely ten meters ahead of him, Nasty was still almost buried in ground debris thrown up by the multiple explosions.

“Nasty! Are you all right? Can you get up?” demanded Big Benn.

Grunting over the comm channel, Nasty responded amidst static, “Yeah, give me a sec here. I’ve got some torso damage, and my weapons indicator has blacked out half of my weapons, but it looks like my large pulse laser is still in action.”

Tiger Claw moved to make himself a shield in order to give Nasty the necessary time to get back on his feet.

“Incoming!”

As more missiles began to head their direction, the laser anti-missiles systems on the three larger mechs activated and began destroying most of the missiles that were locked onto their specific battlemech. Many were destroyed, but nearly 30% found their targets, and armor began to blacken and pit.

“Okay guys, I’m back up. All things considered, I’m not in too bad o’ shape, but my left arm looks pretty twisted.”

“Roger that Nasty. All right fellas, it’s our turn to shoot back. They’re passing through eleven hundred meters now, so let’s get within our own range and hit ‘em back.”

As all four mechs turned and began closing on their Capellan attackers, the two *Masakari* assault mechs began to reverse direction, but the four *Thors* throttled up. Closing within their own weapon’s range, Tiger Claw and Big Benn opened up with their twin gauss and twin PPCs, respectively. Meanwhile, Nasty was swinging wide, and peppering the oncoming mechs with large pulse laser fire.

As the ranges lessened, so did the number of incoming long-range missile volleys. But once they closed within eight hundred meters, all four *Thors* began hammering away with their Clan extended-range large lasers. The Clan lasers had the bonus of a longer range than the Inner Sphere lasers and weighed less, but those bonuses came at the expense of high heat output. And if not carefully regulated, the buildup would soon force a mech

into automatic shut down, unless the computer was overridden. And as witnessed in previous engagements, they did indeed begin to shut down. But one reckless pilot kept on firing, as he tried to swing past Tiger Claw and get a shot at Farslayer's *Bushwacker*.

Farslayer began to fire furiously at the rushing heavy mech, but due to his damaged systems, only two-thirds of his shots actually found their mark. Noticing Farslayer under attack, Nasty reversed course, and made a beeline for the *Thor*, splashing its legs and rear torso with laser fire. This was just enough to jar the Capellan pilots aim off, barely, a few times, but several laser shots hammered the medium mech. Glancing at his damage indicator, Farslayer rolled his eyes. After all the pounding he had taken, the flashing weapon status indicator for his right arm had finally gone completely black.

Suddenly, there was flash of light, and the *Thor* was only a smoking black crater in the desert floor.

"Thanks Nasty, he almost had me."

"Uhhh, it wasn't me. He wasn't nearly damaged enough, not even for a lucky shot. I think he hit his override once too often. Looks like a suicide to me."

Meanwhile, Tiger Claw's *Blood Asp* had the focused attention of two *Thors*, while Benn traded blows with the fourth. Closing to within three hundred meters, Tiger Claw was finally able to start hammering away with his four Clan heavy medium lasers. Dividing his attention and weapons fire between the two Capellan battlemechs was a tricky tactic, but he managed to keep both pilots on their toes, as he swung from one target to the other, and back, as each specific weapon type cycled.

Every seven seconds, his cockpit thundered with the fire of the two overhead gauss rifles. But the constant fire from his heavy medium lasers was beginning to catch up and slowly overwhelm his efficient Clan double heat sinks. As the temperature inside his cockpit continued to climb, Tiger Claw was finally rewarded with a flash of blue of severed myomer and electrical conduits, and two-thirds of the right arm of Thor-4 was transformed into shrapnel, and smoking chunks of armor and metal splashed the sand below.

Deciding to switch his firing scheme, Tiger Claw flicked a switch, linking all his weapons to a single trigger, thus activating full alpha-strike firing. Grinning to himself, Tiger Claw waited patiently as for all his weapons to cycle and his heat to drop. Deciding he needed to get his heat sinks as much leeway as possible, Tiger Claw even pulled his throttle back to zero, to eliminate any extra heat put out by the massive engine.

Noticing his silent weapons and lack of movement, both *Thor* pilots began firing as fast as their weapons cycled, including several dumb-fire volleys from their LRM pods. As his assault mech began to rock with the combined onslaught of the two *Thors*, Tiger Claw counted the seconds and carefully watched his heat indicator begin to finally reverse its course, and finally drop into the yellow zone. It was only seven seconds, but it seemed

like an eternity, as his mech took a pounding. The specialty reflective armor helped a bit against the energy of the large lasers, but it wasn't invincible.

Muttering to himself, "All right you slackers, you had your chance, and now you lose," Tiger Claw suddenly swung the torso of his mech to the left and fired a full alpha-strike directly into the midsection of target Thor-4, punching right through the armor and into the reactor. The resultant explosion was instantaneous, and so was the massive heat spike that enveloped him; his heat indicator peaked right into the critical red zone. Simultaneously hitting the override and emergency coolant flush, he managed to stop the computer from automatically shutting down his reactor, but it took almost sixty percent of his emergency reserves, just to pull back barely into the orange zone.

Enveloped in a massive cloud of thick green steam, Tiger Claw switched back to his freshly cycled gauss rifles again, and continued to fire at the now obscured target, Thor-3. Using only his radar, the Major managed to get a carefully placed shot off right into left leg, sheering it completely off mid-thigh.

Breathing a deep sigh of relief, which instantly caused him to wince slightly, as the scorching cockpit air flooded his lungs, Tiger Claw powered down in order to give his *Blood Asp* enough time to properly cool off into the lower end of the yellow.

Elsewhere, Benn seemed to be in an even contest with Thor-4, and both powered down several times in an attempt to shed excessive heat, trying to save their precious coolant flush for just the right moment of advantage. Although his short-range missiles and two medium lasers gave him a slight advantage at such a close range, they also added a lot more heat into his own system. Three shots later, the heat indicator spiked to a critical level, and he decided to finally make a quick coolant flush from the emergency reserves, instead of hitting the override.

Seeing that three of their comrades had fallen and the powered down *Blood Asp*, the two distant *Masakaris* began resuming their long-range missile barrage of the Federated Suns battlemechs. Once again closing to barely eight hundred and fifty meters, they also began smashing their opponents with Clan extended-range particle projection cannon blasts. In addition to damage, the ERPPCs also imparted heat to their targets as a side effect. Deciding that Benn's *Warhammer* was a more immediate threat, they soon focused on that heavy mech.

Nasty attempted to distract them, but was knocked to the sand again while speeding around at over one hundred kph. Not knowing if the lack of movement from the *Wolfhound* was a result of battlemech damage or personal injury, Farslayer limped his *Bushwacker* in Nasty's direction. Meanwhile, Tiger Claw was trying to get his assault mech in position to give Benn some covering fire.

Quickly realizing he was the primary target, Benn broke off from the remaining *Thor*, and began to pull back in a weaving course to rendezvous with Tiger Claw. Not nearly quick enough though, a blast from an ERPPC blew his right arm into sparking wreckage;

armor so hot is was actually liquefying, and running down his torso and legs. Another ERPPC blew off his shoulder-mounted SRM pod. It wasn't actually blown clean off, as heat from the blast cooked off the remaining ammunition in the armored pod. That explosion was not as bad as it could have been, had the pod been fuller, but it still took out Benn's LAMS pod and his sensors.

As Tiger Claw's *Blood Asp* closed within their weapons range, the *Masakaris* now split their attention between the *Warhammer* and *Blood Asp*. Their own heat output had obviously caught up with them finally, as soon the only incoming weapons were more long-range missiles. One particular barrage fell slightly to the side of Benn's mech, and plowed into the ground. But a combination of explosion shrapnel and sand, splashed over and into a ragged hole on the *Warhammer's* left leg, which quickly shorted out the exposed conduits. The power surge, sent a massive pulse through the neighboring myomer, causing it to suddenly convulse and then lock in place. This tripped up the fleeing heavy mech and it lurched forward falling to the ground on its left side. Unable to support the sudden weight of the massive mech, the left arm and its PPC cannon were mangled into useless garbage.

Switching to single fire, Tiger Claw began hammering the two *Masakaris* in attempt to distract them and give Benn the time he needed to his mech back on its feet. But a single gauss round at a time fired at an assault mech doesn't cause much damage. And with full armor, it was more of an annoyance, as the gauss slugs packed more than enough kinetic energy to rock even an assault mech around, though much less than they would a much lighter mech. Aimed just right, a single gauss round could knock a light mech right on its ass.

As another barrage of long-range missiles was launched, the area darkened, as though something were blocking out the sun overhead, and there were sudden flashes as pulse laser fire intercepted most of the missiles, destroying them harmlessly overhead. Glancing up, Tiger Claw saw a *Leopard*-class dropship seemingly coming out of the sun. Glowing red hot from its high-speed atmospheric reentry at an extremely steep and near-suicidal angle, the dropship slowed only slightly as its airbrakes were fully applied and braking thrusters engaged.

He continued to watch as the dropship flashed overhead, seconds later shaking his cockpit with a deep sonic boom, and leaving huge smoke clouds trailing behind. It made an impossibly tight loop back around, and two mechs made hot-drops from the sides, massive drop thrusters flaring to slow the mechs enough from crushing themselves upon impacting the ground.

Still a hundred meters above the ground, the massive thrusters were jettisoned, and a Clan *Mad Cat II* assault mech and a *Thor* heavy mech continued to the ground with only their internal jump jets to slow them. Before they had even touched down, between the Capellans and the downed Federated Suns Prince, they were hammering the three Capellan mechs with gauss rifles, large lasers, and streak short-range missiles.

In the distance, Tiger Claw watched the dropship circle again, slow, and drop two more mechs to the sand behind the Capellans: an Inner Sphere *Highlander*-class assault mech, and another *Thor*.

Returning his attention to the Capellan mechs and the newcomers, he was about to hail them when, “This is Gravedancer, commander of the Eridani Light Horse. Somebody called?”

Breathing a small sigh of relief, “This is Major Tiger Claw, commander of the Federated Suns Elite Guard; nice timing guys. Big Benn is down, and seems unable to respond. We have three critical mechs, but my *Blood Asp* is still combat worthy.”

“No need. You guys regroup and cover Benn; find out his situation. We’ll mop up here.”

“Roger that. Thanks guys.”

“Hey, it’s your money,” came the cheerful response.

While the four Eridani mercenary mechs pummeled the Capellans into the ground, Tiger Claw, Farslayer, and Nasty limped over to Benn’s still prone *Warhammer*. Still not receiving any type of response, Tiger Claw swung his mech around and paused, while searching for the nearest Capellan target. The unlucky one happened to be the sole remaining *Thor*, which was actually managing to evade the Eridani mechs and was currently looping wide to come at the Fed Suns lance from the side.

Gunning his throttle, and ordering Farslayer and Nasty to stay put, Tiger Claw thundered right at the *Thor*. The first shot from oncoming mech shredded his left shoulder gauss cannon and LAMS pod; additional shots steadily shredded his already severely damaged armor till the status indicator read barely twenty percent remaining on the entire torso. Tiger Claw held his fire till he was within range for his lasers to strike, and then let loose a full alpha-strike right into the center torso of the charging *Thor*.

He was expecting an explosion, but he must have instead destroyed the central computer processor, as the mech suddenly went totally limp and dove right into the desert floor, plowing a deep trough for nearly thirty meters.

Looking around for any other targets, Tiger Claw noticed the four Eridani mechs approaching in an arrowhead formation, with the *Mad Cat II* leading the way. To the left, the *Leopard* dropship was touching down. To the right, a massive *Union*-class dropship was settling onto its massive landing pads, huge clouds of smoke and dust obscuring the view; the sand beneath it lay in stark contrast to the drab surrounding desert sand, having been turned into black glass. And on the curving hull, a huge yellow and black emblem of the Eridani Light Horse proudly stood out against the plain dark gray hull armor.

Tiger Claw returned to Benn's downed mech in time to see Nasty and Farslayer forcing the cockpit hatch open.

Getting on his handheld radio, "Farslayer, what's the situation down there?"

"Benn's fine. Nasty is looking over the systems now. It looks like the central computer was somehow severed from all the controls, effectively isolating it. The primary systems are still operational, but the computer wasn't receiving any commands."

"This is Big Benn. Thanks for the assistance Gravedancer. Any chance we could get lift to our base?"

"Actually, we need to talk about that. The base is under heavy attack, but from what we counted on the way in, your people should manage. Besides, none of your mechs here are in any shape to fight off an assault. But let my techs get to repairing what they can of your units right now, and meet me in ten minutes."

"Ten minutes will be fine," Benn replied. "But I at least want to get in touch with General Steve ASAP."

Inside the cockpit of his *Mad Cat II*, Gravedancer smiled slightly, "I think we can manage that."
