

**BATTLECORPS**

**AN EMISSARY OF  
HEAVEN**

*Steven Mohan, Jr.*

***Cathedral of the Redeemer***  
***Tonston, Talicar***  
***Breed***  
***Federated Suns***  
***7 June 3029***

Life-long noncombatant Jessica Porter would always remember it as the day the universe finally dragged her into the eternal clash between darkness and light.

It wasn't until much later that she figured out which was which.

For all that, her day began uneventfully, with coffee, black; her short, blond hair tucked up underneath a neurohelmet; the low growl of Ralph's diesel as she stalked him past toolboxes and PortaJohns towards the unfinished cathedral.

Breed was a hard world, and Jessica had grown up here. It had made her pragmatic. She was a decent sort, but she'd never stepped foot in a church, never given herself over to love, never fought for something she believed in. To her the job at the cathedral was just a job.

The main structure was nearly finished: frame and load-bearing members and walls and the magnificent roof. What was missing was the ornamentation: stained glass and marble facing, crucifixes and inscribed verses.

Gargoyles and angels.

She keyed her radio to her spotter's channel. "Everything ready, Leash?"

Alicia Jackson's cool voice came back. "Ready to go, Jess."

A smile touched Jessica's lips. She hated being called Jess, but then, Alicia hated being called Leash. "Who's got the stick today?"

"Gennady Lukin," said Alicia brightly.

*Great*, Jessica thought. Lukin had a rep and not a good one. Ex-fighter jock, drummed out of the AFFS. No one knew what his crime was exactly, but you didn't end up on a border world like Breed as a reward.

And he would be shifting a heavy weight over her head.

Jessica glanced up. Already the zeppelin hovered above.

The airship's envelope was painted orange, but not the construction-orange of Jessica's IndustrialMech. This orange was warm and bright. *Molten*. The sky's color when the sun first peeked above the horizon. She saw the company legend in emerald letters against that golden color: "SkyMove." She saw something else, too, dangling from the zeppelin's forward lift hoist, suspended in empty space where the slightest mistake would smash her against the earth forty meters below.

The angel.

Jessica knew all about her, of course. She was an irreplaceable masterpiece, eighteen tons of luminous white marble shaped by the magical hands of Letica de Torres, and carried across a hundred light years to be installed in the New Avalon Church's newest cathedral.

But Jessica hadn't *seen* her.

Now that she had, the angel stopped her breath, *stopped her heart*.

She was that beautiful.

The angel's head tilted to the right, eyes closed, lips slightly parted, face shining with the light of rapture. She leaned forward, arms outstretched, delicately articulated hands reaching for something *just* out of her grasp.

A spark of the divine.

Jessica's radio crackled and a man's voice said, "'Mech, verify alignment, *da?*'"

She bent Ralph back from the waist, looking straight up. Took care to reverse directions in her head. "Easy right."

Fans mounted under the zeppelin's gondola pivoted slightly, and the airship drifted left a meter. The captain's touch was so soft that the angel never picked up a swing.

"Alignment good," Jessica said.

"Dropping mainline," the man said. His voice was deep, with just a hint of a Russian accent. And there was something in that soft voice: a thread of steel. Like he knew his business.

Good.

Jessica stepped back as a steel cable unspooled from the zep-pelin.

She glanced back. The foreman had cleared a space five meters behind her and blocked it off with sawhorses. Workers crowded up against the makeshift barrier. It wasn't everyday you saw a show like this.

The angel's perch sat thirty meters above the ground, far beyond the reach of an ordinary crane, and the sculpture's mass would make her difficult to steady. So the airship was the crane and Jessica's 'Mech was the rigger.

She would keep a constant tension on the mainline looped around the angel's left foot, holding the beauty steady while Lukin gently lowered her down. It would require a delicate touch—too little tension and the angel would swing, too much and the 'Mech pilot would pull her right out of the sky. That's why they'd called Jessica. She was damn near a magician in a 'Mech.

"Take up slack," ordered Lukin.

"Take up slack, aye." Jessica looped the mainline in Ralph's right hand and pulled until she felt the cable pulling back ever so slightly.

After a moment: "Very good, 'Mech." She heard the approval in his voice. "Descending."

The angel started to drift down.

Jessica made Ralph pull the line hand-over-hand, maintaining a steady tension. She glanced up, saw the riggers five meters back from the angel on either side, waiting for her and the Russian to get her close so they could walk the girl in the rest of the way.

She watched the angel descend, each centimeter paid for with one of her heartbeats. Jessica wondered if all miracles were like this, composed of equal parts awe and terror.

Then everything happened at once.

A whip crack. The sound of someone swearing in Russian. The angel swinging free, smashing into something human. A *scream*.

All in the second it took Jessica to realize what she was seeing.

One of the cables had parted.

Two more swings and angry momentum snapped the other one.

Then the angel was tumbling to earth, beautiful white marble slick with crimson blood.

*It'll shatter when it hits, Jessica realized. Shatter like a mortar round.*

Without thinking she stepped left, crouched, and leapt.

Somehow, she timed it right. She hit the angel at the top of her jump. Forty tons of Ralph colliding with eighteen tons of perfection. She and the angel crashed through the cathedral wall and then the floor.

Perfection shattered on the cathedral's foundation.

But at least her momentum carried the deadly shards away from the bystanders.

There was a long moment of darkness, of electric *agony* flaring through her left arm. And then reality was a haze of people pressing against her, checking her, prying her out of Ralph's cockpit. Reality was gray and grainy right up until they wheeled her out of the cathedral and she looked up into Breed's perfect robin's egg sky.

Five golden lines slashed across that sky, perfectly spaced, like the bloody mark of a predator's claw.

*DropShips.*

Burning in.

***The Starlight Lounge***  
***Tonston, Talicar***  
***Breed***  
***Federated Suns***  
***8 June 3029***

The building was an octagon, walls and ceiling fashioned from double-paned glass and held in place by spidery filaments of construction steel. If you pulled your gaze up from Tonston's shimmering skyline, you could see the spill of stars across the dark sky.

But not this night.

This night the bar's owners had polarized the glass, hiding from their customers the hideous scars the Snakes had inflicted on the city.

The break in Jessica's arm had been clean, and the hospital had released her after a single night of observation. Alicia and the crew had brought her here for a kind of celebration. A celebration for the hurt rigger who was going to pull through and for Jessica, whose quick thinking had saved many lives. But looking at the dark walls, Jessica didn't feel much like celebrating.

She heard the muffled thump of artillery in the distance. It sounded far away.

For now.

Halfway down the table a fat welder—Dawson she thought, though it was hard to tell in the darkness—leaned forward and said, "Heard the Rangers aren't doing so well."

No one said anything. The Second Robinson Rangers were responsible for Breed's defense, but they'd been surprised by the Eleventh Benjamin Regulars. There were rumors that the Rangers were giving ground.

And everyone knew how Snakes treated occupied worlds.

"Maybe we can help," someone said half-heartedly.

Probably more to change the subject than anything else, the foreman, Terry Keynes said, "Heard the accident report came out. Blamed a defect in the cable."

Alicia snorted. “Was that *damn* pilot’s fault.” She dragged a coffee-colored hand through the short, curly black hair that shadowed her skull.

“Report said *manufacturing* defect, Leash,” Terry said, “internal to the wire.”

“He could’ve checked,” Dawson said. There was a general muttering of assent around the table.

“Why’re you so angry?” asked Jessica, peering at Alicia. “You don’t even know him.”

“He was thrown out of the Knights of the Void.” Alicia tossed back a shot of vodka and set the glass down with a *crack*. “That’s all I need to know.”

“Doesn’t seem fair,” said Jessica.

“Look,” said Alicia, pointing at her. “*He’s* the captain. Is his responsibility.”

“But—”

“She is right,” said a new voice, a man’s voice, deep.

With just a hint of a Russian accent.

Silence fell across the table.

Jessica looked up and saw a short, neat man standing on Alicia’s side of the table. He had a strong, handsome face. Dark brown hair tied up in a short ponytail and blue eyes. He wore a gold crucifix over his white cotton shirt. “I have come to offer apology for those who would hear it,” he said stiffly.

No one said anything.

“And to offer my gratitude to Ms. Porter for making certain no one died.”

Jessica nodded.

For a moment Lukin stood there amidst the awkward silence, the grief and agony written into the lines on his face, and no one would offer him a single word of kindness.

“Listen—” Jessica began, but she was cut off by the screech of a PPC blast.

Much closer than the artillery.

"Damn Snakes," someone muttered.

"Why blame Combine," said Lukin, "when it was Hanse Davion that started war?"

There were gasps around the table. If they were cold to him before, now their anger flared into something darker. Uglier.

"*That's treason,*" Dawson sputtered.

Lukin leaned towards the big man. "My views are just as protected by the Six Liberties as yours, or we are no different than Combine."

Dawson stood up.

*This was going to end badly,* Jessica thought. She saw the disaster coming the same way she'd seen the angel falling. Dawson had twenty kilos and ten centimeters on the little pilot, not to mention a lifetime of working with his hands.

"So you won't fight then?" It was a growl deep in Dawson's throat.

Lukin's hand went to his cross. "I am Christian. *My God* doesn't ask me to kill my fellow man."

"I think you're a *damn* coward," Dawson snarled.

"*Really?*" Jessica heard the contempt in Lukin's voice. "And how many wars have *you* fought?"

Dawson shouted something incoherent, stepped forward and smashed his fist into Lukin's face.

The pilot went down, but only to one knee. He came up in an instant, danced away from a second blow. His nose was a bloody mess, but he darted away from Dawson with ease.

Jessica realized he could've avoided the first blow, probably could take Dawson right now, and not just because the welder was half in the bag.

But he wouldn't.

"I will pray for you," Lukin said. "All of you." He stalked out.

A moment of silence held and then Jessica was on her feet. "*Wait. Captain Lukin.*"

She caught up with him outside. “Wait.”

He turned to look at her, his face blank.

“I-I’m sorry about them.”

Lukin’s hover jeep was parked on the side away from the battle, so they couldn’t see the fighting, but they could hear it and more than that, smell it: diesel fumes, the chemical stink of spent explosives, the wild smell of fire. Jessica tasted soot in the wind.

“But you think I’m wrong.”

“The Snakes are ruthless. They will destroy anything or anyone to get what they want. Tell me that’s not evil.”

“Tell *me* we’re any different.”

Jessica opened her mouth, but Lukin cut her off with a raised hand. “Stop. I know we’re not. At least, I’m not.”

And suddenly Jessica understood. “You weren’t court-martialed for cowardice.”

“I-I—” His voice wavered, almost broke. “I just couldn’t kill any more.”

Jessica reached up to touch his face, but he grabbed her wrist.

“I owe you a debt. For saving me from responsibility for any more deaths. Let’s leave it at that, *da?*”

He climbed into his jeep. Jessica watched him drive away.

When she went back into the club, Alicia caught her eyes. “Listen up, Jess. We got an idea.”

**Tonston Aerodrome**  
**Tonston, Talicar**  
**Breed**  
**Federated Suns**  
**9 June 3029**

The sun's failing light wrapped the aerodrome in shadow. Jessica folded her arms across her chest as she watched a worker in blue coveralls slide into a sleek silver hovercar and start the lift fans. Brilliant white beams from the vehicle's headlights slashed into the darkness. The hovercar glided up the ramp and into the zepelin's cargo hold.

*Rats, she thought. Leaving a sinking ship.*

Why'd she come here? Why'd she ever think Lukin would help? She almost left right then, but he saw her.

He was dressed in the same coveralls as his people. (With the same wear patterns at the knees and elbows, so apparently Lukin knew how to work.) He glanced her way and his eyes widened.

He turned to say something to the woman standing next to him, handing her a clipboard, then stepped away from the line of luxury vehicles waiting their turn to load.

He crossed the field towards her. Jessica shifted from foot to foot, unable to think of a graceful way to leave.

He reached her and pulled his white hard hat off. "Jessica."

She nodded, but her lips tightened into a thin line.

His eyes narrowed. "You are planning something foolish."

She snorted. "No."

He nodded. "*Da*. I can see it in the straightness of your back. You are determined. And you want me to help."

Jessica licked her lips. How could he read her so easily? "Will you?"

Lukin frowned, shook his head.

"I thought you owed me."

"I will pay you back by persuading you not to do this thing."

“Sounds like poor payment to me,” she snarled.

“I cannot fight, Jessica. It would violate my conscience, change who I am.”

She jerked her head at an Avanti limo driving up the ramp. “But you can help the rich save their toys.”

He shrugged helplessly. “I have a business to run.”

She nodded. “Fine. So the nobles and the intellectuals run and hide and leave the fighting and dying to people like me.”

He winced. “I don’t want you to die, Jessica. Please. Come with me.”

Jessica clenched her jaw so tight it hurt. “Thank you, no, *Captain*. I wouldn’t trade places with you for the world and everything in it.”

And then she turned and stalked off, but not before she saw the hurt sketched into the lines of his face.

**M6 Motorway  
Outside Tonston, Talicar  
Breed  
Federated Suns  
10 June 3029**

Jessica crouched her 'Mech behind the ferrocrete base of the ex-highway overpass that had once arched over the M6. Now the overpass was a blasted pile of rubble, more or less cleared away for traffic by the work crew strung along the road.

The machine felt creaky and *wrong*. Unfortunately, Ralph was still in the shop after her run in with the angel, so this was a loaner. The broken arm didn't help much, either.

*Doesn't matter*, she told herself.

She wouldn't be doing any fancy construction moves in this beast, and she sure as hell wouldn't be fighting. She glanced down at the half-rusted barrels lined up before her and nervously pulled her left-arm, the one with the flamer attachment, into her chest.

This'll be easy she told herself. *Easy*.

For awhile she watched tri-wheeled minivans crammed with belongings darting down the south-bound lanes, families fleeing the city. The fighting had raged around the capital for the last few days, but now the Snakes were moving in and lots of people were moving out.

Jessica's stomach twisted. This was the part of combat she hadn't expected to be so hard—the waiting.

She opened her eyes and looked up into the sky.

Saw Lukin's zeppelin drifting silently across the vault of heaven with its load of luxury cars for rich owners who couldn't bear to leave their babies behind. Yeah, well, whatever paid.

She wiped sweat out of her eyes with the back of her arm, sucked down a shuddery breath.

Jessica watched the airship slowly approaching. It would pass almost directly overhead. Somehow watching its slow progress calmed her, soothed her jangled nerves.

Her radio crackled. There were no words—just a single click.

*Rangers coming.*

The first one to pass was a *Valkyrie* running flat out. Jessica recognized the spikes behind the head. Then an *Ostscout*. Both 'Mechs were painted deep red with black trim—Ranger colors. They were moving as fast as any of the minivans racing down the road.

A Fed Suns *Hunchback* followed, ahead of a lumbering 65-ton *JagerMech*.

Two clicks, then.

*Snakes.*

Jessica's mouth tasted bone dry.

OK. Pour the barrels out onto the road. Light the spill. Bail out of the 'Mech. Dawson pulls the ground tug across the highway. Stalls it and escapes on his motorcycle. I get away in the hover jeep. Don't even have to fight, just slow 'em down while our guys get out of Dodge.

Easy.

She looked up at Lukin's zeppelin, now only a few hundred meters away, and said a silent prayer, her first.

Three clicks.

*Go.*

Jessica stalked her *IndustrialMech* forward, picked up one of the barrels of gasoline, puncturing the top with her right claw, but somehow getting a grip. She moved to dump it on the ground.

Just as a 35-ton *Panther*, painted the off-white of the Eleventh Benjamin Regulars, passed though the overpass. It batted the barrel out of her hand, sent it flying.

Jessica just had time to see a massive *Banshee* step past the *Panther* and send autocannon shells smashing into the ground tug's cabin, and then the light 'Mech was on her.

Violet lightning sliced into her chest, burning away yellow paint and slagging steel. Her 'Mech couldn't take another shot like that. It was unarmed and unarmored. The next shot would melt right through her engine block, probably set off her store of diesel.

She glimpsed the airship passing over the shattered overpass. "Lukin," she called desperately. "Help me."

"Jessica, I won't fight."

"You owe me."

She backed quickly away, stumbled over something and went over, *hard*, hard enough to smack her head against steel bracing.

She shook her head, but made no effort to get up.

The Snakes were after the Rangers, right? Why waste time on an IndustrialMech?

The *Panther's* shadow fell over her cockpit.

Unless the Rangers had already escaped and they meant to make someone *pay*.

The *Panther* raised its right arm, leveled it at her cockpit.

"No," she whispered. "Please don't."

It was a prayer for mercy—to who she didn't know, maybe to the Snake pilot, maybe to a God she didn't really believe in.

But someone answered.

She looked up at the *Panther* as the pilot prepared for his kill shot. So she was watching when the electric blue hover racer smashed into its head, crushing the cockpit before bouncing into the road.

Jessica gasped.

She managed to pull herself out of her cockpit.

Lukin had opened his cargo hatch and luxury vehicles rained from the sky. The *Banshee* staggered as an Avanti limo missed it by less than five meters. A *Trebuchet* shook off a hoverbike-impact.

Lukin had stopped the Snake advance cold.

She glanced at the *Panther's* smashed cockpit. But victory came at a high price.

The *Banshee* looked up at the airship.

Lukin must've seen the threat, because the airship started to climb.

But the 'Mech easily tracked the ponderous zeppelin. *Fired.*

The airship's envelope caught fire and shriveled like a deflating balloon as its helium leaked away. Jessica watched men and women bail out of the dying airship, watched white chutes open against the blue, blue sky. Somehow, she knew Lukin wasn't one of them.

Behind her, she heard the crackle of her somehow still-working radio. "You rescued my soul for me, Jessica," said Lukin. "And so now I give it back for you."

And then the burning airship plummeted to earth.



And so it was that Jessica Porter entered the fight between darkness and light. She'd helped save a lance of Ranger 'Mechs, the same Rangers who would push the Snakes off Breed nine days later. And yet—

She'd told Lukin that the Combine was evil because the Snakes would destroy anything or anyone to get what they wanted.

Wasn't that what she'd done to him?

Yes, she had entered the fight between darkness and light. But sometimes she wondered if she'd enlisted with the wrong side.