

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

By Blaine L. Pardoe

Author's Introduction and Confession:

I like to think I'm funny at times. This probably isn't one of them. I have wanted for years to poke fun at our little universe. It's been tempting and finally I have simply stopped suppressing that urge to act like an adult.

I took a ton of liberties with this little bit of fun. If I insulted any authors or fans, you have my pity but not an apology. This was all in jest and fun—something different. I like to think I poked fun at myself as well. Naa, really I just picked on the work of others.

Now the disclaimer: None of these characters are real or based on anything that you can possibly prove in a court of law. None of the worlds are real. In fact, none of the 'Mechs exist except in the dark recesses of my mind.

Okay, now then, enjoy!

Chapter Fifteen

Penguin

Federated Commonwealth Department Stores

Xbox Sector

32 June 3052

The dropship hung in the air like a stinking radish on the vine. It was painted in a wide array of camouflage, a mix of swirled greens and browns. Despite its twelve-story height, the paint job would allow it to blend in with the surrounding flatlands the way Max Liao fit in at a Katrina Steiner slumber-party. Its engines flared as it landed on the ground, sinking a good four meters into the soil and pavement. The flames from its engines set fire to the fields and in the wind the flames spread quickly.

There went the element of surprise...

The invaders had arrived at one of the widely known 24,827 secret pirate points in the system. You could arrive at the two safe points at the Nadir and Zenith of the star, but no one did because it meant long hours of traveling to the planet—with the lower casetes complaining the whole way, asking, “are we there yet?” There were supposed to be deadly risks involved with using pirate points but nothing had happened to the Clan jumpship other than the espresso machine in the officer’s mess had shorted out. This left most of the Clan MechWarriors suffering from caffeine withdrawal as powerful as a cheap wine hangover, adding even more urgency to facing their threat.

The ‘Mechs deployed. It was obviously Clan hardware, each piece standing out as superior quality and craftsmanship, (Marked with the stamp: Made on Strana Mechty by Union Labor—Look for the Union Label). Clan ‘Mechs were better, stronger, and faster...yet they lost numerous battles to the Inner Sphere. This was not because of their superior hardware but because their genetically engineered MechWarriors had never been bred with the trait of cunning. Even when they had superior numbers, Clan leaders would bid down to a lower level of troop force using an archaic process known as “Texas Hold’em.” When they did go into battle they used tactics that were highly sophisticated, based on WWI trench warfare and WWII Russian human wave assaults—the kind of things that helped keep a grave digger in business.

These invading OmniMechs were menacing and these invaders painted their attack force with scary images of growling mouths, claws, wings, and in one case, a pink flamingo. They bristled with weapons. Whereas most militaries for centuries had standardized equipment to make maintenance and logistical support easier, the contemporary battlefield had over 414 classes of 'Mech, each one mostly incompatible with the other. They had threatening names for each model such as *Furburner*, *Wetnoodle*, *Dead Stallion*, and even the assault class 100-ton *Flame-Maggot*.

(Author's Note: What follows is the obligatory description of what a 'Mech is that is required for every book/novel/story:) BattleMechs were the key element of warfare. They towered over three stories tall and were equipped with enough firepower to level a city block—at least that's what the General Motors print ads for their line of 'Mechs said. They were powered by fusion reactors because it sounded cool to have fusion reactors powering them and everything, even toasters, in the 31st century had a fusion reactor. Most had an array of missiles, autocannon, particle projection cannons, lasers, multi-shot pulse lasers, extended range lasers (*you get the idea, lasers are big here*), and even machine guns. They moved fast, some as quick as 114 kph, which was scary because it meant that the metric system had survived despite years of denial by the U.S. and every sane country for generations. For 200 years they had remained the dominant force on the battlefield—and on some soccer fields (*Author's Note: In the Capellan Confederation where they smoked at lot of strange stuff*).

The Clans were the byproduct of Aleksandr Kerensky's Exodus—considered by the Clans as the best game of hide-and-seek ever played on the governments of the Inner Sphere. Kerensky convinced the majority of the Star League Defense Force (and Ice Cream Consortium) to sneak out of the Inner Sphere, leaving behind nothing more than chaos, anarchy, and a few dozen houses that were toilet papered when the army left. (*Historical Note: It was this toilet papering of the House Kurita Imperial Palace that led the Draconis Combine to launching its attack on the former Terran Hegemony starting the First Succession War.*) Kerensky promised he was taking the army "some place nice and fun," but after a year of jumping through space he grew tired of his wife complaining about the way he was driving and settled on a handful of desolate worlds. Historians have argued that if he had only stopped and asked directions he might have arrived months earlier—but I digress.

The SLDF was less than impressed with the worlds when they arrived, but since they had plugged up most of the toilets during the trip and were out of snack foods, they were happy to land and settle anywhere (even Alabama, which tells you how desperate they were). After a while they began to fight among themselves for trivial resources like food and water, of which Aleksandr had not packed enough during the Exodus.

Aleksandr's son Nicholas had been born brain-dead and had only gotten worse until the age of 14 when he was dropped on his head and accidentally achieved sentient consciousness. When his father died Nicholas took over and created the Clans—based mostly on an antique toy he owned called a “Mattel See and Say.” Some of the Clans (such as The Pig says Oink Clan) had been wiped out during the Clans period of “fighting-amongst-ourselves-for-no-good-reason.” The remaining Clans had a wealth of worlds and resources at their disposal...so naturally they planned an invasion of the Inner Sphere. They fought among themselves for the right to take part in the invasion, as well as ownership of the media rights, and what color the ilKahn's bathroom was going to be (known to historians as the great Pink-Refusal).

While Nicholas created the Clans, war had become a way of life back in the Inner Sphere. The SLDF's great toilet-papering incidents spawned the First Succession War and the Kentares massacre and mailbox smashing. It was a war that used horrific weapons of mass destruction on the populations of the Inner Sphere. Nuclear strikes, poison gas, nerve agents, and the playing of loud rap music all contributed to the holocaust. The horrific Second Succession war followed, referred to by historians as “The Slurpee War.” This fight had led to the destruction of all known copies of Michael Jackson's Thriller album and led to the creation of ComStar (Keepers of the Holy AOL Startup Disks). The Third Succession War (aka: The War That Wasn't Quite The War To End All Wars) was started when Lyran vandals did a doughnut on palace lawns of the Combine's Coordinator, which led to immediate mobilization and escalation of hostilities. (*Note: Doing a doughnut in a hovercar is no small or easy matter and obviously had to be sponsored by Lyran intelligence.*)

The Fourth Succession War was triggered by a wedding reception that got out of hand. Hanse Davion's marriage to Melissa Steiner turned quite ugly when he had his bouncers arrive on the doorsteps of House Liao in the form of 25 Regimental Combat Teams that no one knew existed. It was the only time in the history of mankind that someone purchased his new wife a wedding gift of over 24 million dead. What a romantic gesture...

The War of 3039 was really more of a hangover to the Fourth Succession War and was launched only because the 20 Year Update of the Master Rules and Ares Conventions would have lacked any military operations and the fans desperate needed something to fill that void.

And now came the Clans invading like a pack of hungry unemployed in-laws hitting your refrigerator and drinking your beer. You couldn't kick them out because your wife would strangle you and many were much (*much!*) larger than you. They were strange in behavior, appearance, and traditions (*see, like I said, your in-laws*). Armed with sophisticated weapons they represented a new menace, an old threat, and the capability to launch numerous supporting products and video games from the marketing department.

Now the Clans were on Penguin (named when the first settlers realized that they had run out of good names). They had come issuing a batchall, a battle challenge, to the defenders. The challenger, Dances with Ugly Chicks, had transmitted the batchall only a few minutes before landing. "I am Star Captain Dances with Ugly Chicks, spawn of Itchy-Crotch, grand-daughter of Iron Maiden, and third-cousin twice removed of Kahn Lady in Leather. I, of Clan Moose-and-Squirrel, have come to seize Penguin in the name of the ghost of Nicholas Kerensky. I've come with ten BattleMechs, including two discount Lightweight models we recently purchased at Walmart, a mere fifty tons of munitions, a limited food supply, two Warriors that are suffering from the runs, and one with a nasty nasal cold. I have black hair, green eyes and I have an aversion to confined spaces. My turn-ons include women in boots, biker-chicks, and holovids with the ancient star Lindsey Lohan in them. Tell me what forces you have and where you wish to fight and I will gladly blunder into any trap that you lay before me!"

"You want to fight, eh?" Colonel Boil Fester replied. "Great. I'll pick some simple neutral ground where the fight will be even. In fact, I choose a flat piece of ground for a perfect chess piece battle. It is the Happy Meal Plains."

"We shall face you across the Happy Meal's and devour your souls in battle. We will crush you under our heels," replied Star Captain Dances with Ugly Chicks. "We will grind your bones into dust and fire them out of our cannons. Your teeth will be sharpened and loaded into missile warheads for shrapnel. We will defile your women, destroy your infrastructure, burn your crops, and urinate leaving the toilet seat up when we are done as a reminder

of who has beaten you. Your children will be raised in our image and told that you were a whore."

"I see," Fester replied.

"Oh yes, one more thing," added the Star Captain. "Could you send out a case of Timbriki beer to us once we land? The boys really love that stuff."

"Cans or bottles?"

"Say neg to cans, you Visigoth! Do you take us for barbarians?" With those words the transmission ended.



Rolf Nutcrusher lay in his bunk and stared at the holographic image he had taped to the bed above his. It was a buxom blonde in a stunning dress that hinted at major cleavage. Under it was the name of the young college student—Katherine Steiner-Davion.

Private James Redshirt leaned in and stole a glimpse himself. "You really think she's hot, don't ya?" His bionic hand was testimony to a terrible accident as a child. A Draconis Combine raiding party had hit his world and a lucky shot had taken off his hand, leaving him forever with an ugly bionic stump that he had nicknamed "Darth."

"Oh yeah. Since she started college and became legal age, she's the only girl I think about."

"She's a princess."

"Yeah. But I'm feeling lucky. Besides, she's so hot and sweet looking."

"I'm not so sure," Redshirt said. "I read a report in the Federated Sun Globe that a bunch of fraternity guys led a panty raid on her sorority. All of them have died under mysterious circumstances."

"I heard that too. No proof that Katherine was involved."

"There were forty guys that died in two months. I mean seriously, Rolf, one of them had underwear that exploded...that sort of stuff just doesn't happen accidentally."

"The government said it was solar flare activity in the system."

"Right," he said unbelievably. "Then there was that little incident when she lost the election for homecoming queen."

Rolf defended his lustful image. "Geez, you're a conspiracy nut. You're telling me that she arranged for that steamroller to break away, roll down that hill, hit the grandstand and kill the entire homecoming court? Accidents will happen."

"And what about that guy that dumped her for her high school prom?"

Rolf disregarded the insinuation. "His testicles could have been cut off by anyone. I think the real strange part is her wearing them as earrings."

The door to the barracks flew open and the other infantry snapped to attention. Rolf didn't move or even bother to look up. He blew a kiss to the holographic image of Katherine and closed his eyes.

"Rolf!" beckoned Felicia Wannabe, a voluptuous and overly endowed sergeant in the Penguin militia boomed, storming over to his bunk. "We're under attack. It's the Clans." She was muscular, blonde-haired, and, other than the fact she was a tough military commander, downright sexy. She wore an eye patch, the painful reminder of a past military mission gone wrong when a House Marik SAFE had assaulted her forward base of operations. Rolf always assumed that it was her failure in that mission that drove her to be such a hard-ass—but then again it could be she just was born a hard-ass and deserved the wound. If he wasn't so apathetic, he'd care.

Rolf rolled out of his bunk slowly, uncaring. A life of laziness did that. He had been a MechWarrior a few years ago but had blown that career. Now he was PBI—poor bloody infantry. He still bore the scars from the fight that had cost him his family's BattleMech—an older model *Catapult* called "Bongwasher."

His father, Jules Nutcrusher, had left him Bongwasher when he had died. During the fighting on Scratchensniff III the *Catapult* had been knocked out. His father had attempted to flee (a well-known family trait in combat) but had been blasted by the raiding Periphery pirates he had been fighting. His body had been burned to a cinder, leaving his young boy with a handful of memories, the damaged BattleMech, and his collection of holographic pornography.

"So freakin' what if the Clans are here?" he replied, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes and dropping his NAIS teddy bear on the floor. It was just a reminder of one of the six academies that he had been kicked out of during his less-than-illustrious career.

"You're in first platoon," she said. "You need to get out there. We always send in the infantry first to soften up the 'Mechs—you know that!"

Rolf was aware of the tactic that had been dreamed up by his Colonel Fester. The concept was considered brilliant in some circles. Send in the infantry to have the enemy 'Mechs expend their consumable ammunition on them. By the time everyone in the infantry was dead, you could send in the 'Mechs and hopefully the enemy would be low on ammo. It was one of those ideas that sounded really good, if you weren't in the infantry.

"If you don't mind sarg," he said dryly, "I think I'll take a pass today."

"On your feet!" barked Sergeant Wannabe.

"You know you're cute when you're angry," he said giving her a wink and standing up. Ignoring her frustrated anger and repressed sexuality, Rolf walked towards the door.

"You're forgetting your helmet soldier!" she barked.

"The Clans are here, right?"

"Yes. Clan Moose and Squirrel. They are the meanest and most vicious of the Clans."

"Right," he said cockily. "And they've brought BattleMechs I imagine."

"Of course." The BattleMech was the epitome of warfare, the true queen of the battlefield for over two hundred years—demoting the tank to the role of rook (and sometimes bishop if they side-stepped) and the infantry to their traditional role of pawns (as opposed to their old role as bullet-catchers.) VTOLs had taken on the role of Knights but that was just because chicks dig pilots in their leather flight jackets—the ones with the neat paintings on the back. The playing board was a little weird...okay, it had nothing to do with chess. Just ignore the rest of this paragraph and stick with the "true queen of the battlefield" stuff. Oh, wait. Queen does not mean non-heterosexual either. Stop laughing, it's not that funny. (*Author's Note: Okay, it is. Sorry about that. I digress...*)

"And we're going to take them on, my squad?"

"Your *platoon*," she corrected. *(Author's Note: Squads had been banned generations ago for reasons best not explored in this story. Suffice it to say it involved shaving cream, an anti-tank rocket launcher, too many cheap beers, and a polar bear on Viagra—and we'll leave it at that.)*

"Okay. Got it. I'm going to take my platoon and attack a BattleMech."

"You betcha, soldier."

"What the hell good is a helmet going to do? I mean, it can't deflect an autocannon round...and if I'm hit by a PPC, it will only add two or three milliseconds to the brain-melting process that's bound to follow."

"Your helmet is standard gear, Private Nutcrusher," she barked, tossing him his helmet.

Lazily he put it on his head, not even bothering to hook the chin strap. "Oh, I feel safer already," he whined as if he were bored, and walked out of the barracks.



Rolf stared out at the battlefield and winced at the prospect of becoming a statistic. Colonel Fester had deployed here as a place where a fair fight could take place with his Clan opponent. This was the edge of a tundra that led to a lava field. The hard crust of brittle rock covered a raging torrent of molten lava underneath. Tornados dotted the edge of the plains, whipping at the thick almost impossible forests. There were geyser and mud pits dotting the edge of the forest. The entire region bore the name of "Happy Meal Plains," just south of the RomperRoom Sea and bordering the high passes of Dipstick Highlands. The sweet-smelling Toe Jam River, complete with its rapids and dangerous fords, zig-zagged through the field of battle. When the Clan commander heard the name "Happy Meal Plains," he assumed it was a good safe place to deploy. His technicians had warned him of their scans of the area and the handful of tactical disadvantages. Like most Clan officers he assumed that they were simply stupid and incorrect and moved his forces in despite the physical evidence.

Sergeant Felicia Wannabe sat with her squad behind a low rocky rise, only popping up from time to time to see the Clan forces mustered on the other side of the Toe Jam River. "Alright you disgusting maggot-eating, dirt-sucking scumbags...listen up."

"Way to motivate, Sarg," Rolf said just quietly enough so she couldn't hear it.

"We are going to move out when the first of the Clan 'Mechs crosses the river. Our orders are to draw enemy fire and swarm that first 'Mech."

Her platoon looked at each other with disbelief, fear, and in one case, insanity. "Uh sir, do you really think that's a good idea? I mean, well, some of us are bound to get killed and infantry has no chance against a moving BattleMech."

"Sure they do," she said, pulling out her copy of the *Ares Conventions—Master Compendium Rules with Max Tech Supplement (FANPRO Order Number 1020384-A)*. (Author's note: Thank goodness she didn't download the PDF, it would have taken forever to find the ruling...) "It says right here that an infantry platoon can swarm a BattleMech."

"Sir," Rolf jumped into the debate. "Those things can move at sixty kilometers per hour. If one is slow enough I could slide a satchel charge into its knee or ankle actuator and maybe cripple it—but there's no way we can swarm it."

"Rolf, always the troublemaker. Well, Mister I've-been-kicked-out-of-every-Academy-in-the-Inner-Sphere, I've got news for you. You can't stick a satchel charge in the knee or ankle actuator. It's impossible. You can swarm a 'Mech though."

"Sergeant, I heard a guy with the Light Mauve Death Legion say that you can do it."

"It's not in the Ares Conventions Compendium Master Rules. It can't be done. Case closed."

"But swarming is putting explosive charges on the legs of target 'Mechs," he insisted. "Calling it swarming is a technicality. It's the same thing."

Sergeant Wannabe winced in anger. "One more outburst from you and I'll pump a round in you myself." As she threatened him, he stared at her breasts, insuring he would not hear a word she said.

There were advantages to being right, but being shot was not one of them. Rolf wanted to push the point further if only to irritate his commander but remembered that his personal battle plan called for him to hide until he could run away like a bunny from the battlefield. The argument seemed like a waste of time. Just then a Clan 'Mech, a *Roadkill* class light Omni-Mech fired its jump jets on the far side of the river. It rose into the air and drifted forward, landing with a thud on the other side. Rolf marveled at the sight and wondered who had ever been drunk enough to come up with the idea of jump jets to begin with.

"What about the machine guns on that nearby *Chickenbone* Class 'Mech?" one of the troopers asked. "They'll mow us down as soon as we move."

Sergeant Wannabe was prepared for that. "Machine guns only have an effective range of 300 feet. They will never get close to us."

"Uh, sir," another trooper asked meekly. "Even during Terra's second world war, machine guns could kill at three or four times that range."

She rolled her eyes, which to Rolf made her look sexy. Heck, even if she farted he'd think she was looking sexy. "These are *special* machine guns. Anti-BattleMech machine guns."

"But sir, does it *really* make sense that their range is so short when—"

She cut him off. "That's our target," Sergeant Wannabe said. "That *Roadkill* out there. Rush at it, get in close, and swarm it!"

Rolf looked around and wondered how far he'd have to fake charging before he could turn, run, and hide with any degree of dignity. As the *Roadkill* fired its PPC at a nearby militia *CrashandBurn*, Rolf decided he'd figure out the best time when he got out there.

"This job sucks," he said as he slapped a clip into his rifle. He was going to leave it behind at first, figuring it would slow down his retreat and was worthless against a 'Mech (according to the Ares Conventions Master Rules). But he had to admit he looked damn good carrying it.

They charged forward like ants attempting to take out a Buick. Many screamed as they ran, as if the MechWarrior, three stories up, safe in his/her cockpit, could hear them and would be intimidated by the sound. Rolf ran and suppressed the urge to wet himself.

Mentally he cursed the recruiting posters that promised fun, excitement, and good pay. Well, this was technically exciting...



By the time they reached the foxhole near the *Roadkill*, the platoon had suffered a handful of casualties: twenty-five or so. They had died glorious deaths during the run to the Clan 'Mech. The *Roadkill* had fired a long laser burst, slicing five of them at around the waist region. One clump of troopers had jumped out firing their rifles at the *Roadkill*, which apparently was one of the things you did so that the enemy could acquire a target lock on you. It fired its PPC sending a brilliant white-blue burst of light smack dab into the cluster of troops. They were melted into slag instantly. One of them lost his helmet and it had rolled behind the tree where Rolf had been hiding. *See, I didn't have to wear mine, there's plenty of gear laying around...*

He glanced around. The surviving ground-pounders were nervous, shaky, and too stupid to retreat. It was an endearing quality. Sergeant Wannabe had made it, but had torn her tight fitting uniform top open to expose her pale, taunt, firm, supple, chestoral region, which heaved as she panted and excited the readers of this story more than the actual storyline had in four paragraphs.

Private James Redshirt used the cigarette lighter built into the index finger of his bionic hand to light a cigar. Another trooper, Corporal Dooty Humpbuster, was pelting sweat from their run under enemy fire. He opened his uniform shirt to cool off and Rolf saw that his tee-shirt had the words "Pedro for President" on it... obviously some sort of souvenir that Humpbuster had purchased at a ComStar Gift Shop or a Stucky's. He wiped the sweat from his brow, leaving a trail on the scar that ran down his forehead. Rolf remembered the story in that moment, how Humpbuster had been tried to save his sister's life when Liao Death Commandos had raided their village. The butt of a Liao rifle had left its mark on him forever.

Past Humpbuster was Private Artemis Fodder III—or Four-Fingered Fodder," as he was called by the troops. His trademark missing pinkies were said to be from a Davion torture session that had made him quite insane, crazy enough to undertake this mission in this story. He lay down, kept flat, and combed his hair so

that he would look good for his upcoming funeral (about five paragraphs down or so).

"Alright then," Sergeant Wannabe said. "We gotta take out that *Roadkill*. We will all charge out at the signal, hit it with small arms fire, try to scale it and take out the pilot."

"No can do," Rolf responded, digging into his light leather hip bag marked with the ancient military logo of "Coach." He pulled out his copy of The Compendium 20 Year Update of the Master Rules and Ares Conventions. Inside was tucked a copy of Playboy so that he could hold up the book, read the Playboy, and pretend to be studying. This time he actually referenced the Compendium page on swarming. "As you're so fond of pointing to the rules of warfare, let me point out that you need 15 people to swarm a 'Mech. We've lost a lot of guys just reaching this point."

"What else does it say?" Private Redshirt asked.

He glanced at the text. "It says that we can attack the legs—so no stray shots at the head or body because that won't work. Oh yes, there's more. It says that Twister is best played naked with a lot of women...and if you are playing Risk, Asia is a bitch to try and hold."

"We're all gonna die!" Humpbuster said almost in tears.

"Get a grip on yourself...no, not that way you moron!" Sergeant Wannabe snapped back. She sneered at Rolf for pointing out the Ares Conventions but all he saw was how she was pouting her lips in a semi-erotic manner.

"Alright then, on the count of three," she held up her hand. "One, two three," All of the troops minus Rolf stood up and ran forward. He cautiously poked his head up enough to see if they were going to die instantly, then started out himself.

The *Roadkill* appeared to be a cross between a Ford Thunderbird and a *Stinger*-Class BattleMech. It moved towards the advancing squad and leveled its deadly Amazon Technologies Incorporated Mark XXIV 2c J-11 Tornado Model 14 (with the chromed coolant housing unit) Particle Projection Cannon (*marked with the stamp: Made on Strana Mechty by Union Labor—Look for the Union Label*) at the squad. This was the 2c model, not the one that had those overheating problems that were recalled by Tornado Industries last year.

It was going to fire but couldn't. The troops were too close. It couldn't possibly miss and the discharge of man-made lightning

was more than enough, even if inaccurate, to kill them all, but it couldn't. It tried to fire its Holly Long Range missile rack as well but the troops were too close. The wave of missiles bore down on the infantry and hit them without exploding. It was similar to having an oak log fired out of a cannon at 1,521 feet per second, hitting you in the gut...except it didn't kill you because that was against the materials on Page 114 of The 20 Year Update of the Master Rules and Ares Conventions. He saw Redshirt's bionic hand flattened to the point that it looked like a skillet attached to his arm—a big skillet—but Redshirt was still alive. Sparks flew from some of the finger attachments, especially the mangled electronic drill. "This sucks!" he bellowed.

Four Finger Fodder caught one of the missiles with his face. His face and head remarkably did little to slow or alter the flight trajectory of the missile. It drove him back and into the ground, the back of his head first. The missile still was sticking up out of the ground, discharging its propellant into the air like a Roman candle. Still, somehow, Four Finger was giving the thumbs up, his head and neck buried about a half-meter into the sod. *(Author's Note: Okay, I said he'd be dead, but that was before I realized just how funny it was to actually apply the rules to him. This is much more fun. Forget that whole, "dead in five paragraphs" thing a while back. Oh, and I was way off with that count. What was I thinking? Where's that beer?)*

Sergeant Wannabe, her chest still heaving through her straining uniform top, dropped to one knee and opened up with a burst of rifle fire at the 'Mech that towered over her. She couldn't miss... but at the same time she could hardly hope to do damage. Sparks from the spray of ricochets danced upward.

"We're gonna die," Humpbuster moaned. Rolf considered killing him but a wave of pity stayed his hand. *It's a pity I can't kill all of the witnesses.*

"Fire damn it!" the Sergeant said in her most commanding and yet oddly sexy voice.

Rolf walked ahead as if the battle wasn't raging. The *Roadkill* stopped and he could hear the cranking and whirring as the missile reloads were transferred from the ammo storage compartment in the feet of the 'Mech, up through the actuators, past the hip joints, around the General Motors Northstar Model A Fusion Reactor, up through the armpits, and into the shoulder mounted missile racks. Calmly, almost nonchalantly, he moved right between the legs of the 'Mech. Reaching up with his rifle, he jammed it into the knee actuator as the leg flexed forward slightly. It wedged in tight.

"Are you insane?" the Sergeant yelled, swapping out her fifth clip of anti-personnel bullets to shoot at the three story war machine.

Rolf half-jogged away from the 'Mech. The *Roadkill* turned to track him and lifted its leg to angle the shot better. The wedged rifle prevented the knee joint from moving. It moaned, a sick audible moan, like the sound a car makes when it hits a Michigan pothole in spring and you know you've really hosed up something important. The *Roadkill* twisted and fell hard, unable to move the leg to adjust for the shift in position. It hit the ground with a dull thud, grinding armor as it fell. The only saving grace was that it fell on the pinned form of Private Private Artemis Fodder III.

He had to be dead, but a weak moan came from under the fallen 'Mech. Rolf looked at the Sergeant, taking time to notice how tight her t-shirt looked after the assault. "Don't make me get dig out the Ares Conventions. You know that you can't kill individual infantry troopers by falling on them."

"Every bone in his body has to be broken. Every organ squashed to a pulp."

"Technically, he is," the Sergeant paused, "combat ready." As if to emphasize his state, Four Finger Fodder moaned a little louder.

Rolf ran up to the head of the cockpit and opened it up. The dazed form of a MechWarrior half-crawled, half-fell out of the cockpit. He was wearing a black Speedo swimsuit that revealed that indeed the Clans were bred for more than just war; a coolant vest that was some sort of radiator with the word "Dodge" stamped on the front of it. Coolant vests of the Clans were sophisticated—they kept the chest of the wearer cool while the rest of the MechWarrior roasted slowly, painfully, in the cockpit. Rolf caught wind of a chocolate and marshmallow smell and realized that this MechWarrior had been so skilled he had been making smoares in his cockpit. His foe's neurohelmet was off already.

"You have taken down my 'Mech with superior skills, bravery, cunning, and a cheap trick," he said, "you son-of-a-surat. But I am a Warrior of Clan Moose-and-Squirrel. I am Earl, spawn of Billy-Bob the eater of worms, and Armpit-the-Unshaven. We are the chosen of Kerensky's people and have traveled down the Exodus Turnpike and through the Stellar Big Dig to be here. If you want to defeat me we shall do it in a circle of equals, *quiaff?*" He rose proudly and discarded his coolant vest.

Rolf Nutcrusher looked at him and pulled out his pistol, firing a snap shot at the man hitting him between the eyes. He flew back at the 'Mech and slumped dead near the cockpit hatch.

"Oopsie. My bad," he said with a little chuckle.

Sergeant Wannabe stared at him incredulously. "You have no honor, Private Nutcrusher. I see why you were kicked out of every military academy in the Inner Sphere."

"I personally think I should have graduated with honors," he retorted holstering his pistol. Suddenly a shadow fell over the gathered group. Rolf looked up as the others turned. They could see the massive form of a Clan *Star Mink* BattleMech towering over them, its weapons trained and ready for firing. The whirr and hum of laser capacitors charging, ready to cut them to shreds, was not comforting.

"How did we miss it approaching?" Private Redshirt asked, assuming of course he was about to die.

"Simple, it was painted with camouflage," the Sergeant replied. "It allows 'Mechs to blend in with the background. Hell, they are almost invisible." Redshirt opened his mouth as if to launch a rebuttal – Rolf assumed it was the ages old debate about how a 90 kph three-story building-sized 'Mech could blend in anywhere. The Sergeant cut him off. "See, look, they have put a handful of twigs on the arms. We probably thought it was a tree." Rolf was about to jump in when the hiss and pop of static came over the speakers.

"You killed that Warrior," a voice said over the external speakers. It was a female voice but sounded pretty butch.

I'm screwed, Rolf thought. "Yes. I did. I would have run away but he looked pretty fast."

"Who would dare attack a Moose-and-Squirrel Warrior?"

Rolf was nervous but still sarcastic. "Um, well, my name is Dooty Humpbuster," Best to lie when you can't run, he'd learned that from his old man.

"Hey, you bastard," howled the real Corporal Humpbuster. "That's a lie. I'm Dooty. This guy is RolfRolf Nutcrusher." He pointed at Rolf, who gave him the Terran New Jersey salute with his lone finger, a gesture of respect among warriors in arms. (*Author's note: And also the same gesture used to signal a lane-change on the New Jersey Turnpike.*)

There was a pause. "Rolf Nutcrusher?"

"Yes," he said nervously. *Just my luck, someone I owe money to. I really am screwed.*

The cockpit swung open and a muscular woman stepped out of the *Star Mink*. She removed her neurohelmet and her long hair dropped down. The face seemed familiar, but in a weird way.

"Rolf," the woman said with a voice that sounded like she'd been smoking Camels (unfiltered) for years.

"Do I know you?"

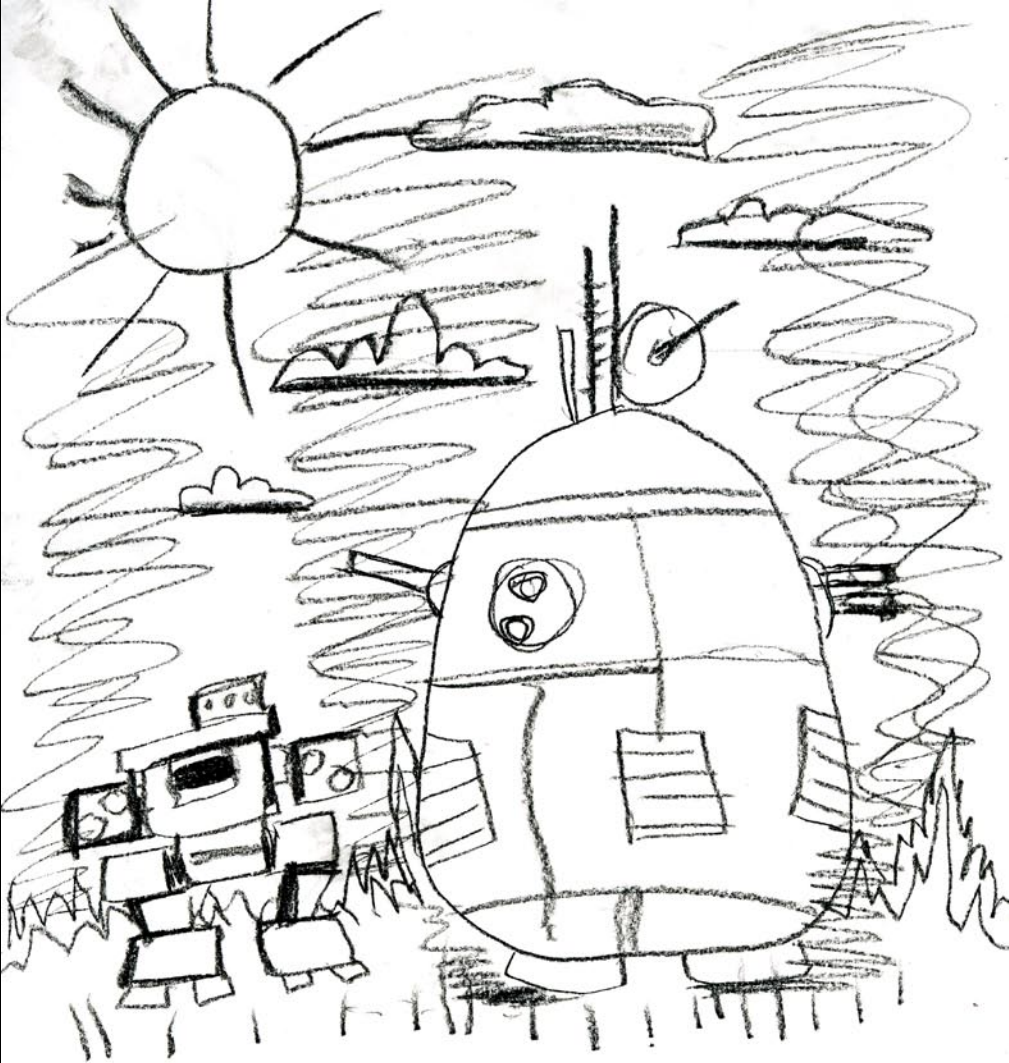
"It's me. I am your father, Rolf."

This MechWarrior was clearly not male—the Speedo he, er, she wore, revealed much—and yet nothing at all. "My father is dead."

The butch woman smiled. "You must learn that no one ever really dies in this universe son. I am Julie, now of Clan Moose and Squirrel. Before that I was your father, Jules Nutcrusher.

"We have much to discuss son..."

BATTLECORPS



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