

DEMON STAR

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BATTLECORPS

***Yamskaya Ulitsa, Between 61st and 62nd Avenues
Cord, Risku, Arescha
Capellan March, Federated Suns
9 December 3069***

Sheets of water slashed down out of a black sky, soaking Ross McKinnon to the bone and swallowing the feeble light provided by the block's one working streetlamp. He stood with his back against a brick wall that bordered a dark alley, taking it all in. There was no sound but the tattoo of falling rain. The storefronts were all secured behind roll-down cages.

Yamskaya Ulitsa was a dark and shadowy place.

Except for the dead drop, which was beneath the streetlamp. McKinnon's eyes flickered to the circle of pale light that marked the sidewalk. An attaché sat there, beads of moisture speckling its brown leather side. The briefcase would contain the designated target and the best intel MIIO could piece together. Still, he didn't cross the street to retrieve it.

This whole thing smelled like a trap.

Decades of battlefield experience had taught him there was some ground you just didn't occupy—not without a little recon, anyway.

McKinnon pulled the pack off his back and rummaged through it until he found a pair of night-vision goggles. He slipped them on and exchanged one view of blackness for another. There were no heat signatures save for the glow of the streetlamp.

McKinnon glanced into the alley. It was as cold and dark as the street. He slipped into the alley and pulled a slug thrower from the pack.

And waited.

He hated all the cloak-and-dagger crap, but that's the way the High Command wanted it. Blakist spies were everywhere, and the brass didn't want to tip the Wobbies to the Raiders' next target. So they'd decided on a covert drop to preserve OpSec. That's why his people were restricted to their DropShips while he stood in a dark alley, his civies glued to his skin by black rain.

When had he become a spy in his own land?

He would've felt better if he'd brought along Vorster or Waylen, but the message had instructed him to come alone.

It didn't feel right, but then, these days nothing felt right. New Avalon in enemy hands, Yvonne Davion in hiding, things so jacked up high command was delivering orders by hand rather than trusting the HPG network. They were living in bad times and every day managed to—

The sound of splashing boots cut through his reverie.

Someone was coming.

McKinnon's grip on the weapon tightened. He pressed himself flat against the wall. After a moment, he picked a shape out of the gloom, shoulders hunched against the rain. His friend was a big boy, two meters tall and *built*.

Walking toward the streetlamp.

McKinnon thumbed his safety off. If Bruiser made a move for the attaché they were going to have a little talk.

And then he felt something cold and metallic press into the skin at the base of his skull. A hand settled lightly on his back. The delicate perfume of rose petals and orange blossoms mingled with the crisp, clean smell of rain.

"Don't move, Captain," said a woman's voice in an accent he couldn't place, "or one of your officers is going to get an unexpected promotion."

McKinnon's mouth suddenly tasted dry. "A trap within a trap. Ingenious."

"Domo arigato, McKinnon-sama," she said.

"Snake," he hissed, furious.

"That is most impolite," she said and McKinnon felt a small flare of pain in his neck, like the sting of a bee. And then the world just went away.

The last thing he remembered was sagging into a woman's arms.

Time and Location Unknown

When he awoke, his mouth tasted like copper and his head felt like someone had sawed off the top of his skull and replaced his brain with a bag of broken glass. Still, he was immediately aware of three things. The first was that he was handcuffed to the arms of a heavy, steel chair. The second was that there was someone behind him, hiding in the shadows that filled the room except for the watery yellow light centered on the table in front of him.

The third was the woman.

She sat across the table from him, clothed in an elegant black kimono without ornament. She was beautiful, pale skin over angular bones that suggested Slavic genes, brown hair cropped short, and full, red lips. But what really caught his attention was her eyes: somewhere between gray and blue. Alert. Clever.

Piercing.

McKinnon's tongue felt like a piece of meat in his mouth, but he tried to speak anyway. "Who?" he croaked.

The woman looked at him for a moment. "You may call me Ella." There was that accent again. Sexy as hell and impossible to place.

"Alley," he said roughly "Clear."

She smiled. "We were on the rooftop." English with . . . a Russian accent and something else. Of course. *Japanese* "When you turned, I rappelled down."

"Quiet," said McKinnon.

She bowed her head. "I am honored."

McKinnon coughed; loud, liquid spasms that racked his chest with pain.

The woman looked concerned. "I have been rude. Would you like some water?"

A man's well-muscled arm reached out of the darkness and placed a glass of sparkling water in front of him. The ice cubes rattled as he set it down.

McKinnon closed his eyes His mouth tasted like filthy cotton. The water . . . He wanted it *so much*. He'd never wanted anything so bad in all his life. McKinnon drew a deep breath and nodded.

The woman's eyes flickered left and the man stepped forward. He was *huge*, no doubt the man McKinnon had seen from the alley. He felt a stab of worry. Had they managed to get the attaché open without blowing the failsafe?

"My master wishes to send his compliments on the execution of your Demeter mission."

The mountain of a man produced a set of keys.

"Who is master?" asked McKinnon.

The woman's lips curled into a faint smile. She shook her head.

The man unlocked his right wrist.

McKinnon reached for the water. The glass was slick with condensation. He could almost *taste* it. His hand trembled as he picked it up.

And hurled it at the woman.

She calmly ducked left. The glass missed her head by a centimeter, shattering on the concrete floor behind her.

She raised an eyebrow. "I see you're not thirsty after all."

McKinnon said nothing.

"Then let us speak of other things," she said.

"Don't know," croaked McKinnon.

Her eyebrows tightened into a question. "You don't know what?"

"Next mission."

She shook her head. "I don't care about your *next* mission I care about the one after that."

McKinnon snorted. "Don't know *that* either."

"Would you like me to tell you?"

McKinnon frowned. "What?"

"My master is putting together a . . . *coalition*. To crush Word of Blake."

"How?"

She smiled coldly. "Let's just say the Blakists are masters of striking from the shadows. We'll see how well they fight in the light of day."

"And?" McKinnon prompted, hoping she might tell him a little more about what Blakist secrets her master thought he'd uncovered.

"And my master is extending an invitation to McKinnon's Raiders to be part of this coalition."

McKinnon shook his head and she swam in his vision. He gritted his teeth. "Fox's Teeth *not* mercenaries. We serve First Prince."

"*Hai*," she snapped, "and where is your First Prince now?"

"*Serve legal authority*," he snarled.

"And just what legal authority would that be?" she shot back. "ComStar's Victor? The hidden Yvonne? Do your orders come from occupied New Avalon? Or do you follow the March Lords who even now pursue illegal wars of conquest rather than come to the aid of their capital?"

McKinnon winced.

She shook her head. "Your chain of command is broken. My master offers you a chance to strike at your enemy. At *humanity's* enemy"

"Follow orders of greenest subaltern before take word of *Snake*"

She shook her head. "The Suns and the Combine worked together to fight the Clans. Why not work together now? Why do you distrust us so?"

McKinnon clenched his jaws, clamping down on his fury.

"Is it racism? Do you just dislike Japanese culture or—"

"*You murdered my uncle*," McKinnon roared.

"*I did not, McKinnon-sama*," she said softly. "I am certain your pain is real, as certain as I am that both sides will have to put aside such injuries if we are to defeat the Blakists."

"No." The world tasted poisonous and sullen in his mouth.

She looked at him steadily for a long moment, those clever gray-blue eyes measuring him.

Finding him wanting.

"That is unfortunate, McKinnon-*sama*," she said grimly. "For, of all the advantages the Wobbies have, their greatest is our mutual distrust."

McKinnon opened his mouth to answer, but something bit him on the back of the neck and he swam into darkness.

* * *

When the world returned to McKinnon a second time, he found himself in a hospital. An IV snaked out of the crook of his right arm and he heard the hushed beep of medical equipment. The sharp, astringent smell of disinfectant filled his senses.

Then he noticed the lowered voices.

"And I'm telling you, you're jumping the gun."

McKinnon recognized that voice: It was Dan Waylen, Medium Lance's commander. Sounded like Dan was digging in his heels.

"All I'm saying is you're going." This voice he didn't recognize. It was deep and smooth, but also irritated.

"Sure we're going. *With* Captain McKinnon."

The other man sighed. "They gave him eight micrograms of a batrachotoxin analog. I think you have to face the possibility—"

"No, I think you—"

"*Leftenant*," snapped the man who was not Dan Waylen "One way or another McKinnon's Raiders are going to hit Algol. Is that clear?"

McKinnon propped himself up on an elbow. "Sounds good to me," he croaked.

"*Cap*," shouted Dan, a broad smile creasing his narrow face.

The other officer grimaced like he'd just been flanked.

Dan Waylen was tall and slim, his auburn hair streaked with silver, an ugly scar four centimeters long stretched above his left eye. He wore civvies: gray slacks and a green polo shirt. Dan smiled mischievously. "I thought you said no R&R, and here you snuck out and had yourself some fun."

The other man frowned at that. He had a good five centimeters on Dan's one meter eighty-five and was of African descent, skin the color of chocolate. He wore a dark blue suit and a yellow paisley tie. The man ran a hand over the short black hair that shadowed his skull. "Hello, Captain. My name is Lieutenant Colonel Douglas Kintebe. I'm here to brief you on your next mission"

"Compromised mission," McKinnon croaked. "They got briefcase."

The black man shook his head. "The message transmitted to *Blitzkrieg* was a fake. MIIIO didn't set up the meet. Whatever you saw, it was just a prop. The mission is still secure."

McKinnon closed his eyes and slowly exhaled.

"We're still not sure who they were. Did you get a sense of their intentions? Were they Blakists?"

"Snakes," said McKinnon.

Dan shook his head. "That doesn't make any sense. Are you sure that—"

"Snakes," McKinnon hissed.

Kintebe's eyes glittered. "Could some faction within the Combine be working with Word of Blake?" he asked in a low voice

McKinnon shook his head and sharp pain stabbed through his skull. "Wanted us to fight Wobbies."

"That's easy enough to say," said Kintebe.

"Don't believe me," said McKinnon irritably. "Talk to *them*. You'll see."

Dan and Kintebe shared a look.

"What?" asked McKinnon. "Didn't you take op down?"

Dan shook his head. "Cap, there was no one there when we found you. Place was cleaned out."

“They left me?” McKinnon whispered. “But that doesn’t make any. . .” He looked up at Kintebe. “How did you find me?”

“We got a tip. From a woman.” The senior officer shook his head. “Strangest accent I ever heard.”

**Blitzkrieg, Union-class DropShip
En Route to Algol, Capellan March
Federated Suns
22 December 3069**

Combat acceleration pushed McKinnon into his *Black Knight's* command couch, pinning his limbs and turning the simple act of breathing into a painful chore. He barely registered the force trying to crush him. A single word sang through his mind.

Exorcism.

No doubt the code word had been selected because Algol meant "Demon Star," a name that came down from ancient Terra itself. The system was an eclipsing binary, with one star much brighter than the other. Thousands of years before, Arab traders had looked up into the night sky and saw darkness devouring a bright star. They had named the star *Ras al Ghul* Algol. It was a fitting name. There was no doubt that Algol was being devoured by demons.

Even today.

A grim smile touched McKinnon's lips. The Fox's Teeth would drive them out.

Right now the Wobbie commander would be scrambling, trying to figure out the identity of the unmarked JumpShip that had appeared in a near pirate point, frantically assessing the size and intentions of the force running flat out for the planet.

The nature of their arrival would sow confusion, and confusion was a key ingredient of any McKinnon plan.

Blitzkrieg began to buck as she hit the planet's atmosphere. Wouldn't be long now.

"Major McKinnon." It was Javier Inesca, the ship's commander. As long as McKinnon was on Inesca's ship, he would hold the rank of brevet major.

"Go ahead, Captain." McKinnon commanded the mission, but Inesca was still *Blitzkrieg's* master and McKinnon was respectful of his prerogative.

"We've just detected an EMP. Whoever it is stuck the Algol-Hargrove L4. At least four DropShips inbound, combat acceleration."

The words sent a chill shivering through McKinnon. "ID?"

"They're not broadcasting. Telescopes show no markings. Your orders, Major McKinnon?"

Which was Inesca's way of asking if they were going to abort. McKinnon closed his eyes, thinking hard. Now he faced the same confusion he'd planned for the Wobbie's garrison. If those were Wobbie reinforcements his company would be smashed between hammer and anvil.

But High Command was counting on the Fox's Teeth to hurt Word of Blake. If McKinnon didn't do it now, someone else would have to do it later. And surprise would have been lost.

Someone would die because he hadn't done his job.

McKinnon gritted his teeth. "Proceed to first objective."

"Aye, aye, Major," said Inesca, his voice neutral.

Just then the *Knight* bucked under McKinnon as the DropShip hit a pocket of turbulence. He clutched his armrests.

Looked like the ride was going to be rougher than planned.

The Wildlands ***Outside WOBM Garrison Beta, Durant*** ***Algol***

Precentor Carmin Venh stalked her *Grand Crusader II* forward and watched multiple DropShips fall out of a blue sky. One was down already, so big it could only be an *Overlord*. She counted two more spheroids, probably *Unions*, and the squat aerodyne shape of a *Leopard*.

Call it two Level IIIs.

Unfortunately, the best she could do was guess. The attacker's aerospace fighters had taken down the planetary satellite network. She was going to have to fight this one blind. And the worst part was that she didn't even know who'd come to call.

Though she had an idea or two.

"Diamond, this is S-scout Three. Over."

Venh glanced down at her comm board in surprise. She'd ordered Henderson to maintain radio silence while probing the attackers' LZ. Why had he disobeyed orders? *And why was one of his subordinates reporting?*

"Report status, Three," she snapped, already knowing she wouldn't like it.

"Engaged four Lima Mikes." He hesitated. "We took heavy damage. Lost three."

Lost three? "What part of *probe* don't you understand?" she snapped.

"We didn't close the LZ, Precentor," he said defensively. "They were fifteen clicks off target and moving fast. They hit us from behind. Almost destroyed the whole unit."

Venh closed her eyes to contain her fury. Before you broke and ran, she didn't say. "So you didn't intel the LZ," she said coldly.

"Scout One attained a ridge and saw armor debarking."

"Armor?" she echoed. "Do you have *numbers*? Do you have *IDs*? Or is your full report that my enemy might be fielding *tanks*?"

She was answered by an uncomfortable silence. "I have stills of the attacking lance," he finally said.

"*Transmit.*" She bit the word out.

The picture that came up was of a *Fireball*, a squat 'Mech with an egg-shaped torso, machine guns mounted in its broad shoulders. The machine wore green over tan camo with red and blue highlights, Fed sunburst over the right leg. All standard. What was *not* standard was the logo painted over the machine's heart.

A pair of canines, tips stained red.

Fox's Teeth.

The breath caught in Venh's throat.

She brought up her command channel. "Ruby, this is Diamond."

McKinnon's Raiders had just finished handing Call to the Faithful their heads on Demeter. They'd lured Call into a foolish pursuit and then hit them from behind with a new power armor design.

"Ruby." Aaron Cambell's voice was calm, impassive.

"Redeploy the Algol City garrison. Leave a Two to hold the city, a Two to guard the munitions plant, and send the rest here."

She heard Cambell gasp over the link. "I'm sorry Precentor, I didn't quite—"

"Do it."

"There's a pair of Twos at the potassium plant," Cambell said, struggling to keep his composure. "Perhaps you could—"

"I know," said Venh "I'm taking them, too." She cut the connection.

Call of the Faithful had fenced with the Fox's Teeth and lost. Venh was not going to make that same mistake.

She was going to pin them in place and smash them.

The Wildlands, North of Schan

Durant

Algol

The voices that floated out of McKinnon's radio were calm, detached. Professional. Still, he listened with his whole body, head bent towards the comm panel, muscles tense.

Those were his people.

Jena Chipende's voice said: "Scouts falling back. Recommend Pursuit"

"*Negative, Three Four,*" snapped Mateo Alvarez. "Stick to the plan." He paused. "Load master, report status of debarkation."

"One three Edgars in position," the load master answered crisply.

McKinnon clenched his jaw, *willing* the plan to work.

And then he felt it, a deep rumble moving up through the frame of his *Knight* into the base of his couch.

BattleMechs on the move.

But where were they going? He dropped his reticle over the narrow ridge shielding his 'Mechs from view. He licked dry lips as his finger curled around his main trigger.

An excited voice cut across recon lance's chatter. "One One, this is Anglico. Target clearing at high speed. I say again, *target clearing.*"

The next ten minutes were excruciating as he waited for the enemy force to clear. As he did *nothing*.

While Recon Lance was out there fighting.

Somehow he held back until the timer clicked down to zero.

"*Initiate jamming,*" McKinnon roared.

"Jamming all freqs," answered Inesca from the bridge of McKinnon's third *Union*.

"*Forward,*" McKinnon shouted, sending his *Black Knight* lurching to its feet. He lumbered forward, reaching the top of the ridge and looking down.

At McCallister Industries' Schan facility. The factory was an unimaginative gray box. Its drab appearance belied its importance. All the potassium used in Algol's munitions factory first passed through this plant for refining.

And now it was vulnerable.

A *Red Shift* painted bone white came around the corner and McKinnon speared it with his PPC, followed by a flurry of laser fire. The angry chatter of Sara's autocannon joined in, punctuated by a quartet of Streaks rippling across the light 'Mech's left side.

"One One, Two One, moving left," said Dan as he took Medium Lance around the building's far corner.

"Acknowledged," answered McKinnon.

The *Shift* answered back with its pulse lasers, but there was no way it could stand up to the combined firepower of McKinnon's entire Command Lance. The light machine sagged to its knees just as its pilot punched out.

"Infantry in and set the charges," ordered McKinnon. "Clear the workers. Remember they're citizens just like us. Shoot anyone in a Wobbie uniform."

Before his infantry commander could answer up, Dan cut in. "I have a runner: *Blue Flame*. We damaged his legs. We might catch him before he clears the jamming field."

McKinnon glanced down at his clock. "Negative. I don't want your people strung out. Besides, this just might work to our advantage."

"Yessir," snapped Dan.

"*Blitzkrieg*, prepare to lift in one five mikes. Medium Lance, fall back and begin embarking. Command Lance will follow."

He was greeted by a chorus of yessirs.

"And hurry. We're on the clock, boys and girls."

The Wildlands
Fed Suns LZ
Durant

The Fox's Teeth had deployed their armor well forward of the protection offered by the *Overlord's* guns. A cruel smile tightened Venh's face. It was a mistake for which she'd make them pay. She'd crush the tanks first, then deploy her artillery, and rain shells down on the debarking 'Mechs. Her force was more than big enough to mop up whatever was left over.

"Diamond, Scout Three. Encountering fire."

Good, she thought.

"Acknowledged," she answered. She'd sent the remnant of the scout unit that had failed her up the middle to draw the tank's fire, while the bulk of her force went right and left. She stepped her *Crusader* over a narrow stream and pushed through a stand of white-barked aspen.

And saw a J. Edgar firing its twin lasers into the forest.

Something was wrong.

It wasn't maneuvering, the turret wasn't turning, in fact, the tank wasn't even hovering. Had one of her scouts managed to get in and cripple the tank?

She dropped her reticle over the body and pulled into her triggers, opening with LRMs to shatter armor and following with crimson lasers to cut into the vehicle's ammo bay.

The tank erupted in a very satisfying fireball.

She stalked forward, targeting the Edgar that had just become the Fed's new left flank.

It didn't move. It didn't turn to engage. It didn't retreat. *It didn't do anything.* Except fire blindly into the forest.

There was no one inside.

"All forces, Diamond," she roared. "Break off attack."

"Precentor—" began Cambell.

"They're decoys, Ruby," snapped Venh. "Hell, they look like 3039-surplus, probably one step from the scrap heap and set to fire automatically when we closed to within sensor range."

“But why would the Feds—”

Just then a titanic roar shook the earth. Instinctively, Venh looked up. In time to see the *Overlord* climbing into the blue sky, followed by her sisters. All of them heading south. And what was south? The potassium plant at Schan.

The plant whose defenses she’d just pulled.

It was only a hunch, but Venh had a dark feeling that it was right.

A moment later her hunch was confirmed by an emergency message from the panicked pilot of a *Blue Flame*.

West of Groffler's Toll

Shalom

Algol

McKinnon pushed his *Knight* down the road, the 'Mechs of his Command and Medium Lances following behind. The M14 wound its way through a dark forest, a two-lane ribbon of ferrocrete bordered by larch and spruce and pine tall enough to hide an *Atlas*, giving the Raiders the best of both worlds: speed and cover.

It was no mistake; the second objective was in the middle of nowhere. Industrial accidents at munitions plants tended to be very, very bad.

A fact McKinnon fully intended to exploit.

Sending the bulk of his DropShip's south had been a head fake and the Wobbies had bought it all the way. His people had set the charges to blow at the last possible second, so the Wobbies wouldn't realize they had already lost the potassium plant until after they'd begun debarking. The captain of his borrowed *Overlord* reported the Blakists were racing to reboard their DropShips.

Too late.

They would never get here fast enough to stop him from smashing the munitions plant. In one swift stroke he would transform this world from an exporter of ammo into a munitions-free zone. The Wobbie garrison could still hold Algol – but now they would have to be resupplied. That change would ripple across other worlds as the Blakists worked desperately to unsnarl their suddenly tangled supply lines.

And there was no way they could stop it.

McKinnon followed the road's broad arc, hooking around a peninsula of dark trees.

And coming face to face with a lance of BattleMechs, backed by armor.

All painted in an elegant black without ornament.

* * *

McKinnon's radio crackled and a familiar voice emerged. "A trap within a trap."

"Ella," McKinnon whispered.

A *No-Dachi* bowed from the waist. The machine wore the cruel face of a demon. It clutched a seven-meter katana in its right hand. It even had cleft toes. "McKinnon-*sama*."

"What are you doing?" he snapped.

"I wished to speak with you."

"There are other ways."

"I tried another way," she said. "And you would not listen. Now we shall try *this*." Shiguna MRMs exploded from the *No-Dachi's* twin shoulder racks and streaked toward him, trailing gray smoke.

McKinnon was a daring and clever battlefield commander, skilled in dreaming up crazy plans and somehow making them work.

But he was no fool.

If he tried to fight his way past the Snakes he'd take heavy casualties. Even if he won through there was one opponent he could not defeat.

Time.

He couldn't run the Wobbies around in circles forever. Every tick of the clock brought them inexorably closer. Operation Exorcism had ended the second he'd turned the corner and saw the *No-Dachi*. Now his duty was to get his people out alive.

All this he realized in the fraction of a second it took for Ella's first salvo of missiles to smash into his chest armor.

He toggled his unit frequency. "*Fighting withdrawal*," he roared. "*Blitzkrieg, prep emergency lift. We're coming in hot.*"

"Aye, aye, sir," Inesca snapped.

"Medium Lance," he heard Waylen shout. "Stand fast Covering fire *Now*."

A brace of fire stabbed into the Combine line. McKinnon walked backwards past Waylen, just as the lieutenant put a Gauss slug into a *Hatamoto-Mizo*.

As soon as all his people cleared Medium's line, he shouted. "Command Lance. *Stand fast*."

McKinnon splashed the *No-Dachi* with emerald fire, burning through the pretty black paint and into the Starshield A underneath. He followed up with the violet lightning.

“Running, Captain?” Ella asked as she cut into him with her own PPC, followed by SRMs.

“And you wondered why I don’t trust Snakes” McKinnon hit back with another volley of lasers.

“We’re not going to make it, boss,” said Waylen over the command channel.

He was right. The problem wasn’t firepower—the Fox’s Teeth were giving as good as they got. No, the problem was *time*.

McKinnon’s eyes flickered down. The Wobbies were due in tee minus eleven and Inesca was twenty-six clicks back. They weren’t going to cover that distance in time, not while they were using standard covering tactics to fall back.

McKinnon pulled up a map. “Through the woods,” he said. “Their armor can’t follow. They’ll either have to divide their force or—”

“Or let us go,” agreed Dan. “I like it, Cap.”

“We’ll come out on the south end of Groffler’s Toll, and fall back along the M23. Past the munitions depot.”

* * *

A flicker of motion caught McKinnon’s attention. Thick trees blocked the sun, but no motion meant no MAD and the battle had ignited enough small brush fires to blur the thermal picture. He would have to rely on visual detection.

He stopped, peering through the thicket of dark pines.

There.

A patch of ebony. He dropped his reticle over it just as the Kuritan pilot spooked, stepping his *Jenner* back. McKinnon stepped forward and fired. A pine tree next to the chickenoid exploded in a shower of glowing embers. Then the light machine faded away.

“They’re playing with us,” said McKinnon.

"We've got them, two to one," said Sergeant Vorster. "And the trees take away their speed." It was a sound tactical assessment.

Then why did it sound wrong?

"How close to the road?" McKinnon asked.

"Maybe two clicks," said Dan.

"Let's move out," said McKinnon. "Something's not right here."

His *Black Knight* plowed through the heavy underbrush until he at last stepped out onto ferrocrete. One by one his 'Mechs began to emerge from the trees.

The road curled south and McKinnon saw that forest had been cleared up ahead, giving way to a collection of prefab buildings ringed by a ragged barbed wire fence.

"What the hell is that?" McKinnon whispered.

"That, sir," said Sara, "is the way home."

"Looks like the depot," said Dan. "If I can still read a map."

"Let's take this slow," said McKinnon. "Command Lance in front, Medium takes rear guard."

"What's the matter, Cap?" asked Dan.

"We're on open road and the Snakes have good cover. Why aren't they firing at us?"

"Because—" Dan stopped. "Because they want us to go this way."

"But sir," said Kurt Lang, "I'm not reading anything up ahead"

"Nevertheless," said McKinnon, "we're going to be careful." *Because there was some ground you just didn't occupy* He expected to find a trap in that sad collection of buildings.

What he actually found was far worse.

* * *

The streets that ran between the prefab buildings were filled with rubble: slabs of ferrocrete, the rusting corpse of a fork-truck, a truck gutted by fire. The roads were striped with black scars.

Pocked with divots. There had been a fight here, only it hadn't been much of a fight.

McKinnon could tell that from the bodies.

They had been left in the road or nailed to the side of buildings, hung up like grotesque scarecrows. They were barely recognizable as human. Some were desiccated mummies, bones wrapped in a shriveled bag of skin. Others had been picked clean by scavengers, leaving behind only bleached skeletons. Some were missing limbs—or heads. But all had one thing in common.

They all wore AFFS uniforms.

No one spoke as they passed through that evil place.

And when Ross McKinnon stepped his *Knight* out the other side, he found the black *No-Dachi* waiting for him.

* * *

"Now," said Ella, "now we shall talk."

Dan stepped his *Enforcer* forward and lowered his right arm. A Gauss slug smashed into the *No-Dachi's* right leg, shattering armor and ripping through the machine's metallic skin to reveal the machine's silver-white bones underneath.

"Hold fire, hold fire," McKinnon roared.

"But she—"

"Didn't do this," McKinnon finished. "Think, Dan. How long ago was that camp destroyed?"

"But I don't—"

"Return to *Blitzkrieg*," said McKinnon. "Dan, you're in command. Your orders are to report what we've seen here to High Command."

"You're not staying *here*."

"For a few minutes."

"But the Wobbies are closing."

"All the more reason for you to move out, *Leftenant*," McKinnon snapped. His voice softened. "Go on, Dan. Get our people out. I'll be along shortly."

"Yessir," snapped Dan. "Alright, you heard the Captain. Time to move out."

For a moment McKinnon watched his people move down the road, picking up speed as they raced for their DropShip and safety. Then he turned to face the *No-Dachi* "What happened here?"

"The Wobbies used the depot as a makeshift POW camp. Until some of the POWs tried to escape. The Wobbies massacred them. All of them. And left their bodies here as a lesson to those who might oppose Blake's will."

"How do you know this?"

"My master has eyes and ears everywhere. Even in places ISF cannot go. Or MIIO."

McKinnon shook his head. "You should have let us hit the munitions plant. We would have crippled the Wobbies war fighting ability in this sector."

"Well, as it so happens—"

The ground rumbled and shook under McKinnon's 'Mech. To the north a gout of orange fire stabbed into the blue sky. He felt the rumble of secondary explosions rippling through the earth like aftershocks.

"The rest of my unit took care of the munitions plant for you."

"Why?" McKinnon whispered.

"You had to see," she said gently. "You have fought the Wobbies with honor and skill, McKinnon-*sama* But you are a practitioner of lightning war. You do not see what the Wobbies do to the worlds they occupy. And you *had* to see. So you would know why you must join with my master to defeat them."

"I will not betray my prince—"

"I am not asking you to betray your prince," Ella said. "I'm asking you to serve her in the truest way you can."

McKinnon was considering her words when a flight of missiles streaked in and smashed into his 'Mech's chest, followed by the hellish light of multiple lasers.

Venh's cockpit blazed with heat as she pushed her *Crusader*, using her triple-strength myomer to force her assault machine up to an earth-shaking 86 kph. Eighty tons of 'Mech just wasn't meant to move that fast.

But she had some place to be.

Once she realized where McKinnon's Raiders were going she had divided her force—sending her fleetest machines to protect the munitions plant. The orange pillar of flame burning into the sky showed how well that plan had worked.

The Fox's Teeth had made her look like a fool, and she had allowed them to cripple Algol's munitions production capability. If she was going to survive this day, she needed a big victory.

And that meant destroying Fox's Teeth.

She had dispersed her big machines throughout the forest to search for the enemy. When a VTOL had spotted the Raiders moving through the old depot, Venh had been closest. She sprinted toward the target. Her big machines were following as fast as they could. If she could just delay the Raiders long enough . . .

Her *Crusader* crested a high hill near the depot. She looked down and saw two 'Mechs facing each other: a black *No-Dachi* and a *Black Knight* wearing Raider colors. *Ross McKinnon's machine.*

As she dropped her reticle over the *Knight's* chest, a grim smile touched her lips.

* * *

McKinnon glanced at his wireframe schematic in time to see armor flicker from yellow to red. He looked up and saw a white GRN-D-03 skylined on a hill.

"*Grand Crusader II,*" he called out, but Ella was already turning. She cut into the Wobbie with her PPC, drawing an ugly black line across the Wobbie's clean white armor.

McKinnon targeted the same spot and hit the *Crusader* with his own PPC followed by his extended range lasers. The Wobbie machine trembled under the assault and for a moment, McKinnon thought they were going to win.

And then a blocky *Vanquisher* appeared atop the hill.

"The Wobbie heavies are coming," Ella shouted. "You must withdraw."

"We both need to withdraw," he shouted back. He dropped his reticle over the *Vanquisher* and pulled into his triggers.

"Only one will make it," she answered. "The other must stall that *Crusader*. It's the only machine with any speed."

For an instant, McKinnon flashed on the face of his uncle, murdered by Snake treachery. But that had been another generation's war.

This one was his.

"I don't care if you're a Snake," he roared. "We don't leave people behind."

"I am samurai," she said. "We do."

"I—"

She stepped forward, cutting into the *Crusader* with her PPC. A *Legacy* appeared on the hill beside the *Vanquisher*

"Go, McKinnon-sama. If you die here, my honor dies with you."

McKinnon shook his head. Honor before life. The samurai way. It was an alien idea and McKinnon would never understand it.

But maybe he could learn to accept it.

The *Crusader* charged forward, racing down the hill. McKinnon ripped into it with his weapons as he searched his memory for the ancient battle cry. "*Yamato-damashii*." The soul of Japan.

"You honor me, McKinnon-sama," Ella said softly. And then she threw her 'Mech in front of the charging *Crusader*.

For a second, McKinnon watched the titanic battle between the two great machines

Then he turned and made his way down the road.