

BATTLECORPS

ON THE SQUARE

by Jason Schmetzer

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The building on which David Talbot and his infantry maniple were hiding shook with each crash of the artillery firing. He ground his teeth and hunched closer to the brick-lined lip of the rooftop, ignoring the ringing in his ears and the searing taint of propellant burning his nose. Those were things he'd learned to deal with during training. David lifted his head just high enough to see over the lip, watching for the fall of the shots.

The plain was covered with enemy troops. Infantry swarmed closer to the city, pressing forward against the fire of the rest of the battalion. A quartet of bulky Scorpion tanks nosed forward, long-barreled cannon searching back and forth, spitting fire. In the distance, the rising sun outlined a single pirate BattleMech standing on a hillock. It cast a dagger-shaped shadow forward, toward Sawyer. A flash of laser light illuminated the gold insignia on its chest, dice in a jeweled goblet. Tortuga.



David saw the artillery stonk land. One round exploded amidst a squad of pirate infantry laboring to set up a mortar. The explosion tossed the pirates meters into the air before it dropped them, shredded and lifeless, to the soft loam of Charleston. Concussion shook the building again, letting David feel a fraction of the force unleashed, even though it was almost a kilometer away.

"That's what you get," Recruit Niko Koumalides shouted. The dark-skinned youth from Sawyer pumped his TK assault rifle in the air. "Get the hell off my planet, you bastards."

"Damp it, Niko," David said. "Stay down."

Niko looked at him and sneered. "What's it to you, Talbot? They got what they deserved, coming here." The dark camouflage paint on Niko's face didn't reflect light, but the sheen of sweat on his upper lip did. He was posturing, burning off his nervous energy. It was his first time in combat. It was David's, too.

David pointed to the filled-ring corporal's insignia on his collar, then to the empty-ring tag on Niko's. "This is all the reason I need, Recruit. Shut up and get down before someone sees you."

The Pirates of Tortuga—the Tortuga Fusiliers, to the Inner Sphere—came to Charleston at least once a year. It had been unlucky timing for them this year, as the whole militia was mustered for the Founder's Day festivities.

David snorted at the idea even as the thought crossed his mind. The whole militia—the whole battalion's worth of troops on this ball. The withdrawal of the regular Defense Force when the Calderon Protectorate loons went off left the planet to its own devices. And to its own protection, such as it was.

"Talbot!" The field radio by David's knee shouted at him, loud even in the noise-filled aftermath of the artillery, broadcasting Force Sergeant Homer's voice. He snatched it up and shoved the earpiece under the surplus Lyran clamshell helmet.

"Why aren't you shooting?" Homer demanded. David heard the heavy stutter of the platoon's heavy machine gun in the background of the transmission. The weapon was emplaced at the edge of the buildings, where it would bear across the plain on the highway paralleling the buildings. If Homer was near it, he was close enough to see the rooftop David's maniple was occupying.

"I've been asking that all night," Niko said.

David chanced another look over the lip of the roof. "They're still a good six hundred meters away, Sergeant." He didn't need to tell his platoon commander that the TK's effective range was just under five hundred meters, Niko's pride notwithstanding.

"Tell me what you see, son," Homer said.

"Infantry, a hell of a lot, battalion strength at least. A short maniple of armor, and a single 'Mech out on the plain." David closed his eyes as another artillery barrage screamed overhead. He hated that sound. "They're not slowing down, either."

"The 'Mech's coming closer," Doyle, another recruit in David's maniple, said. The hulking machine was striding toward the city, its legs eating the distance in multi-meter steps. Even outlined against the sky, David couldn't make out the model.

"Mech advancing, Sergeant," he reported.

"That does it." The next part of Homer's message was obscured by a roaring explosion as one of the artillery shells landed directly on one of the Tortugan Scorpions. When the cheering died down, he asked Homer to repeat.

"I said, get your maniple back here, Corporal. We'll make a stand on the Square." The stutter of the heavy gun died off as Homer finished speaking; David heard faint echoes of the final few rounds firing from between the building.

It was time to go.

"Grab your gear," David said after clipping the radio to his web harness. "We're going back to the Square." He felt like he was in a box with the lid closing over him. He wanted to run, to hide, to pull the lid closed until the trouble was past. He hated the pirates for making him feel like that, like less than a man.

"But we haven't fired a round!" Niko said.

David shifted his pack onto his shoulders, glancing over the lip as he did so. The first ranks of the pirate infantry were just crossing Dana Avenue. Dana Avenue was one of the maniple's pre-scouted positions. Four hundred meters from there to the rooftop. The small defile on the city-side gave the raiders cover from the defensive fire along the outer positions.

Four hundred meters. Of his land. Outrage ignited in his gut, burning at the cold weight of fear.

"One magazine," David said, raising himself to one knee and presenting the TK's barrel to the enemy. "Then we boogie, got it?" He looked down the line, making sure they'd heard him.

The ratcheting sound of slides being drawn answered him. Niko settled into the position directly to David's left, his fingers caressing the rifle's molded grips. His lips were moving, but the sound was carried away. David tightened his own grip and leaned in closer, trying to hear. He smiled when he made out the prayer, a soldier's prayer that he recognized, even though he heard only the last part.

"—cker in the valley."

Amen, David thought. "Fire."

The TK fired caseless ammunition, giving the rifle a dazzling rate of fire. The twenty rounds in the magazine fired in the span of two or so seconds, and David's was the last rifle of the maniple to empty. His thumb moved on its own, ejecting the spent magazine while his left hand reached down to replace it with a fresh one from his bandolier. Niko's rifle was already back on-target by the time David completed the motion.

"Move out," David said. While the rest of the maniple scurried for the recessed stairs, David tried to see if they'd managed to hit anything. His anger, ravenous, twisted his face into a fierce, hungry snarl.

Four of the advancing pirate infantry were down and thrashing in the defilade. The rest were busy trying to dig deeper into the shallow ditch, seeking cover. David smiled a wolf's grin. That would teach them to attack his city.

He almost didn't see the 'Mech rush forward and raise its arm. He caught the motion out of the corner of his eye, but by the time he looked there was only the white-hot flash of a laser.

The pulse struck the wall a meter or so beneath David's position. Only the fact that he was already leaning away saved David's life as the laser flash-boiled the moisture in the wall. The compacted steam exploded, shattering the ferrocrete and tossing David like a doll to land a meter or so from the stairs. He lay there, stunned, praying that the white blaze in his eyes would fade. His nose burned with the sharp sting of ozone and the coppery scent of blood. He was hit, he was sure of it. The fear in his stomach doubled. The rest of his body was tingling, numb. He was going to die.

"Corp!"

Hands grabbed his harness and dragged him down the stairs. His pack punched painfully into his side at each step, and whoever was dragging him didn't stop at the bottom. David rubbed at his eyes with the backs of his hands, blinking through hot tears. Gradually, his vision cleared and shapes began to take focus. Someone grabbed his ankles and he was carried the three flights of stairs to the ground floor. He could make out faces by the time they got down. They were blurry, even when he knuckled the tears out of his eyes, but he'd worry about that tomorrow. If there was a tomorrow.

There were only three men with him, not four. "Where's Doyle?" he asked.

"On the roof," Niko said. He poked his TK out the door, sliding from one side of the doorway to the other, trying to see both ways. The whipcord muscle of his arms stood out where his sleeves were rolled, revealing the tension there. *For his first firefight, he's doing well*, David thought. *They all are.*

"Why isn't he down here?" David asked.

“Cause a piece of the wall that knocked you over took his helmet off,” Niko said. “With his head in it.” He shook his head and spat. The spittle landed on the floor next to David. He stared at it, willing his eyes to focus. The spittle was gray. He couldn’t tell whether it was from dust or just the floor color.

David shook his head and stood. “He’s dead?” His faltering vision swam as he straightened, and sensation rushed back into his limbs in the form of searing pain. He fell back down.

Halverson, a farmer’s son from Faraday, laughed. “Unless you think he can just carry his head around, Corp, yeah, he’s dead.” The recruit’s massive shoulders shook, but his eyes didn’t leave the doorway.

“So are we if we don’t get moving,” Niko said. “There’s pirates in the street, Corp.”

Wiping his eyes one last time, David braced himself and stood, then moved to the door. His helmet was gone, he realized. The sling had kept his rifle across his chest, but the helmet was gone. He’d had two pieces of surplus Lyran gear an hour ago; one was left.

“How many?”

“I saw about a dozen,” Niko said. He pointed with his rifle barrel. “Moving south toward Bravo Platoon’s positions.” He didn’t take his eyes off of the sight picture over his rifle as he spoke. Niko’s intensity had sometimes bothered David in training, but now he was thankful for it.

“We’re only a half a klick from the Square,” David said, beckoning to the west. “Let’s get moving.” Strength in numbers—the rest of the platoon was there. If Homer had made that call, then the rest of the company was probably there, too. Maybe the whole battalion. *Maybe the whole TDF is there*, a dark part of David’s mind sneered. First, though, they had to make it to the Square.

Cities on Charleston were by necessity small and vertical; they rested on the few bedrock extrusions to be found on the soft plains that covered most of the southern continent. That explained the sharp delineations between city and plain, and also meant that the pirates had been forced to set their DropShips down a few kilometers away on the hardened ferrocrete of the spaceport. The areas between the buildings were narrow but clean. Sawyer was a pedestrian town, for the most part. The majority of the population lived in the skyscrapers.

Niko and Halverson ducked through the door, rifles leading, leaving David and the final member of the maniple, Recruit Bouzerant. Bouzerant carried a short-barreled riot gun instead of a rifle, so David left him to cover the rear. The riot gun wouldn't be much use at a range of more than a dozen or so meters .

The city was deserted. The crackle of weapons fire shimmied down every street and alley. David had been to Sawyer only twice before, once on vacation and once on the previous year's Founder's Day. It was very different from his home, Adelaide, on the coast near the Straits. There had been people filling the streets, though, on both previous occasions. There were none now.

"The shelters must be full," David murmured as he ran. He stayed a half dozen meters behind Halverson, who was twice that from Niko. No ambush would get the whole maniple, at least. Sergeant Homer would have been satisfied. David jerked, missed a step, and stumbled. Homer. The radio. He unclipped the battered handset as he ran.

"Charlie Six," he said, "Charlie Three-six." Static flared from the earpiece. He repeated the call. A voice scratched its way through the static.

"Talbot, get back here!" Sergeant Homer's voice. "I don't need one of my maniples getting cut off." David winced, slowing to a stop behind Niko and Halverson, who were crouched at an intersection.

"Too late," Niko said. He looked back at David. There was no uncertainty in his eyes or his voice. "Turn it off, Corp. We're close."

David raised the radio but Halverson reached back and pushed it down. He held a finger to his lips, and mouthed, "They're right around the corner."

David nodded to show he understood. He twisted the volume knob on top of the radio until it clicked off, then set it on the sidewalk beside him. He brought his TK up from where the sling held it against his chest and pulled the butt snug against his shoulder. "How many?"

Niko held up his right hand with four fingers raised. He looked back at David and shrugged. "At least," he mouthed.

Nodding shortly, David's mind raced for a moment. He looked up at the street sign—two blocks from the Square—and made up his mind. He beckoned to Niko with his rifle. *Take them.* Niko nodded. Taking up the slack in his sling, he nodded to Halverson.

As one the two men leaned around the corner of the building, Niko on one knee, his rifle a meter off the ground, with Halverson standing above him. A ripping cloth sound from the firing TKs cut the air, and then both men leaned back, spent magazines dropping from the rifle. David scooted forward, rifle at the ready.

Three pirates were down and not moving, their torsos shredded by the lead slivers the TK fired. The fourth man was flopping around, slipping in the morass of blood covering the sidewalk. His weapon, a TK like David's own, was lying a meter away. The pirate was more concerned with staunching the blood flowing from his right thigh.

"Let's go," David said, and stepped around the corner. He scurried toward the Tortugans in a crouch, the barrel of his rifle never leaving the surviving pirate's chest. The man looked up when the maniple approached. He looked at David.

"Please," he said, and dipped his head toward his leg. "Help me." David frowned. The sound of the firing was still echoing between the buildings. There'd be more pirates coming. They had to keep moving. David opened his mouth to deny the pirate's request.

A crashing blast cut off David's reply. The fire took the pirate in the face, flopping him backward in a misty spray of blood. David looked back at his men.

Bouzerant raised his riot gun. A wisp of smoke rose from the barrel, swirling away into the wind between the buildings. David's nose caught only a trace of the scent of burnt powder.

"There'll be more coming," Niko said. Bouzerant pumped his action, chambering another shell.

David stared at him. He looked back at the body on the ground. It shuddered, and a fresh stain appeared on the pirate's pants. David's nostrils flared, filled with the bittersweet fragrance of urine. He thought of Doyle. Disgust sent shivers through him. David glanced from the body to his maniple, then back at the body. He leaned forward, letting the sling take his rifle, hands on his knees.

He vomited.

Niko and Halverson said nothing as they moved past him, scavenging ammunition from the dead pirates. Halverson picked up one of the rifles and slung it over his shoulder. Bouzerant watched the street as if nothing had happened. *Maybe nothing had*, David thought.

"We need to make the Square," David said after he straightened up. "The platoon needs us." Wiping his mouth, David turned away from the mess and started deeper into the city. A part of his mind wondered if he'd be able to leave the memories behind as well.

The Square was the seat of government on Charleston. Like most such buildings, it was also a fortified building, heavily reinforced and capable of mounting its own defense. Since the withdrawal of the TDF, an intense effort had been made to turn it into a fortress in the heart of Sawyer. Several turrets had been constructed, each mounting the few weapons found on Charleston or since imported at great expense from the factories on Sterope. The buildings around it had been demolished in order to give it some small amount of kill zone.

David turned a corner and saw the Square, and stopped in his tracks. The rest of his maniple piled into him, all of them staring.

Pirate infantry and armor were hiding in the shadows of the buildings outside the kill zone, those with weapons capable of reaching the walls firing. Those not firing were cowering behind the tanks or whatever cover they could find, and it was not enough. It took David a few seconds to understand why.

The brigadier had raised the artillery platforms.

The artillery had been moved to the Square when the first indications of the pirates were noticed. Ordinarily the cannons would fire with a high enough arc to clear the surrounding buildings, but the ready-made revetments had been built on hydraulic platforms. If the need arose, each artillery piece could be raised above the low wall and bore-sighted as a direct-fire cannon. As David and his men watched, the need arose.

The stubby barrel of a Sniper artillery piece rose above the wall and fired. The blast was at least fifteen meters long, throwing a shell across the zone into a huddled group of pirates. The explosion tossed shattered bodies and light armor debris a dozen meters into the air. When the afterimages of the muzzle flare faded, the cannon was gone, lowered behind the wall to be reloaded.

"We're not getting in there," David whispered.

Halverson punched at his shoulder. "We can't stay out here, Corp. We need to get inside."

David turned and snarled at him. "You think they'll open the gate for us, Cecil?"

Halverson stiffened. "I meant inside this building here, Talbot. Don't call me Cecil." He jerked his head toward the building they here crouched next to. "The skyway is still up. We can get over there and help the battalion from out here."

A spark of an idea flashed in David's head. "You're right. Back into the building, then west toward Hadley. We can rain a little hurt down on them."

The first door was locked, but it surrendered to the butt plate of Niko's rifle after only two knocks. The maniple ran down the slick-floored hallway, the rubber soles of their boots squeaking on the polished stone. There were no lights, not even the emergency lamps. The power must have been shut off. No doubt the Square was using every watt.

The skyways connecting most of the buildings were built fifteen meters above the street and fully enclosed to protect the occupants from the torrential rains that sometimes blanketed Sawyer. As they crossed one, a massive shadow swept past beneath them.

"The 'Mech," David whispered. He halted the maniple inside the next building. "Get inside, away from the windows."

"I can't shoot through the walls," Niko said.

"That 'Mech just became the world's largest target for those cannons. You want to be near a sheet of glass when they start shooting at it?" The walls shook again, punctuating David's words. An explosion tore through the building, accompanied by the waterfall sound of breaking glass. David flashed the trio a quick grin and fished the radio from his harness.

"Charlie Six," he said, "be advised, the 'Mech is headed your way." There was no response.

"We need to find a firing position," Niko said. David saw his fingers rubbing at the receiver of his TK. The knuckles were white, where they weren't broken open and bleeding.

David slung the radio and sat down on a bench in the corridor. His mind was racing, trying to remember half-forgotten lectures about 'Mech tactics in an urban environment. There hadn't been 'Mechs on Charleston for months. No 'Mechs equaled no training. The brigadier liked to focus on what he had, not on what he didn't. There probably weren't two squads of actual anti-'Mech troops on the planet.

"He'll keep to the buildings," he murmured. "Use them for cover until he can get at the cannons."

"What are you talking about?" Halverson asked. "You're not thinking we're going to kill that 'Mech?"

"It's the biggest target out there," David said, distractedly. His brain was turning something over, peeling the layers of fog in his mind like an onion.

"You're nuts," Bouzerant blurted. "We don't have any missiles." He looked at the other members of the maniple. "Tell him, guys."

"He's right, Corp," Niko said. "We haven't got anything that will get through the armor, not even the cockpit armor."

A door snapped closed around the plan forming in David's mind. "You're right." He left the half-formed ideas where they were and changed his train of thought. "But we can surely kill the infantry," he said. "Come on."

David led them to the next skyway, the one that crossed Hadley. The glass in the skyway had been blasted out, and a scattering of corpses in pirate garb littered the glass-coated floor. All of them were shredded by broken glass. Shards of it covered the floor, mixing with the dead men's blood to form a slippery morass of razor-sharp debris. David crouched down and waddled a few steps out onto the skyway, looking back toward the Square. He was able to hide behind the meter-high ferrocrete wall that functioned as the skyway's railing.

The pirates had begun a push toward the walls with the 'Mech backing them. The slender machine stood well back, using the lasers built into its bulky forearms to probe at the walls. Wherever the beams touched, the ferrocrete flashed into a white, steam-tinged explosion. David's eyes began to water as he remembered his own experience with that laser. He blinked a few times to clear his eyes and then leaned forward to see over the edge.

Beneath them a platoon's worth of Tortugan infantry huddled behind the wrecked hulk of a Scorpion light tank. Several of the pirates were administering first aid to wounded comrades. None of them were looking at the buildings around them. Anyone paying attention was watching the show on the Square.

"Grenades," David whispered, pointing downward. "Two each, then sweep." He let the sling take the TK and pulled two fragmentation grenades from his webbing. The other troops did the same,

although Halverson held three, two in his right hand. David caught each of their eyes, then nodded. "Drop."

There was a shout when one of the grenades struck a pirate in the helmet, but by then the heavy clank of the others hitting the ferrocrete raised a general scream. Then the grenades went off. The explosions rattled the skyway, shaking loose more shards of glass. David's foot slipped as he tried to straighten, forcing him to one knee. He felt glass cut into his knee even as he shifted his weight forward, bringing his rifle up and over the lip of the railing. He squeezed off the whole magazine without looking, then dropped back to reload. Halverson and Niko did the same; Bouzerant was standing, pounding out aimed shots from his riot gun as fast as he could pump the action. When he exhausted the eight-round magazine he too dropped down and began transferring shells from his bandolier to the shotgun's receiver.

"I think that got their attention," Halverson said. He casually tossed his fourth and final grenade over the edge. The explosion of the single grenade was less intense than the previous rounds. No fire answered in return.

David grinned at him and climbed to his feet, still crouching behind the railing. Taking a deep breath, he stood and leaned over the railing, TK pointed almost straight down. He triggered a short burst and then paused, watching.

Only the wounded were moving, and none of them toward a weapon. David shook his head, trying to clear his nose of the burnt stench of cooked flesh and the harsher chemical taint of the grenades. His stomach quivered, but he held it down. There was nothing alive in the street below that posed a threat.

"Look at that," Bouzerant said, pointing.

The Tortugan 'Mech was flying through the air, propelled by silvery flames shooting from two massive jets on its back. Something clicked in



David's mind, and he saw the flashcard with this 'Mech's outline on it. "It's a *Phoenix Hawk*," he said.

The 'Mech landed with a ground-shaking thud barely five hundred meters away from the skyway on which they hid. David tracked the big machine with his rifle, knowing full well there weren't enough bullets in the world for his weapon to chew through the 'Mech's tough armor. It was something to do with his hands, while his mind locked onto the 'Mech.

Since their inception centuries ago, BattleMechs had been the symbol of warfare. Romantic attachments were formed between people and 'Mechs, until the common man saw the machine as an unstoppable avatar of warfare. Conventional wisdom held that the only thing capable of stopping a 'Mech was another 'Mech. Taurian military tradition upheld that maxim, for the most part. David had certainly subscribed to it since his first day of basic training, when the brigadier's 'Mech had paraded for them.

"It's amazing," David whispered.

"It's kicking our ass," Niko spat. "We need our own 'Mechs for this."

"Maybe not," Halverson said, squinting at something.

The *Phoenix Hawk* disappeared beneath a horrendous explosion. David jerked back in shock. A flicker of motion caught his eye, and he turned his head in time to see the snout of the Sniper cannon fall beneath the wall. David looked back at where the 'Mech had been, watching for the smoke to clear.

"Sometimes you just need a bigger gun," Halverson said triumphantly.

The *Phoenix Hawk* was sprawled on the ferrocrete a dozen meters from where it had been standing. Its left torso was blackened and bent. Sparks leapt from exposed myomers, and smoke belled from the cavity that had been the left shoulder. David saw the arm itself lying across the ferrocrete. Hope surged through him, the first glimmer of a belief that he might survive the day.

The 'Mech moved.

"You're kidding me," Niko said.

Halverson spat over the side of the skyway. "I hope they're watching in there. They need to hit it again."

David kept his silence. The *Phoenix Hawk* gathered itself and stood shakily. The 'Mech swayed, unbalanced by the loss of its arm. It raised its other arm and flashed a pulse of light into the wall, tearing a great section free. He ground his teeth as the 'Mech took a step forward. It was unstoppable.

A shoulder-fired missile spiraled out of the Square and took the 'Mech in the face. It toppled again, flattening against the ground just like the pirate Bouzerant had shot. Even from half a kilometer David heard the cheers of the Square's defenders. The small force of Tortugan armor that had been following the 'Mech faltered, slowing. David cheered along with his men.

The 'Mech moved.

Silence erupted across the zone. The crackle of weapons fire died out as everyone watched the fallen 'Mech. David heard the whine of its actuators as it rolled to its side and pushed itself up on its right arm. There was a pop as it levered itself to its feet, and a streamer of smoke began to pour from its left hip. It stood there as if it were a man and not a machine, gathering itself. No one breathed.

The *Phoenix Hawk* turned away from the Square and hobbled toward David's position. The cheers filled the manmade caverns between the buildings again, David's included. They lasted until a group of Tortugan infantry appeared on the opposite end of the skyway and opened fire.

The first shot took Halverson in the thigh, the bullet going clean through his leg to strike a divot from the wall behind him. The big man cried out and fell, dropping his rifle. He clamped both of his hands around his leg, but David saw blood spurt through his fingers.

"Back!" he shouted. He ran toward Halverson, grabbing the right shoulder strap of the wounded man's webbing as he passed. He dragged the man across the glass-strewn floor, inflicting new cuts on Halverson's legs and buttocks. David twisted to point his TK one-handed, burning off the clip to try and cover his movement. It worked. They made it around a section of collapsed ferrocrete, a meter or so out on the skyway.

"There's a lot of them," Niko said, leaning out to fire short, aimed bursts. Return fire snapped around him, kicking up tufts of dust and occasionally sparking off of metal.

"They have to come across the skyway to get us," David said, digging in his pack for his medkit. The bleeding wasn't the gush

he'd expect from a cut artery, but it was still a lot of blood. "Keep up the fire, and we can hold."

"Hold for what?" Bouzerant asked. He was pulling the magazines from Halverson's webbing and handing them to Niko. His eyes were wide, and bloodshot. The morning's stress was getting to him. David frowned. It was getting to all of them. He paused his ministrations long enough to reach for the radio, but a bullet had smashed it.

"Think of something," Niko said, quickly replacing another magazine. "They're getting ready to rush us."

"Help him," David told Bouzerant, jerking his chin at Niko. He unclipped his rifle and handed it to him. "Keep up the fire."

Halverson was hyperventilating. The white bandage on his leg was already soaking through with blood. David looked at it. Maybe he was wrong about the artery. He pulled another bandage from the kit and wrapped it around the other one. He had to pull the leg higher to get under it. The motion made Halverson scream. David grimaced and pulled it tighter, eliciting another scream. When he released his leg Halverson lapsed into panting, his eyes darting all around.

"Hold on, Cecil," David said. Behind him, Niko and Bouzerant were keeping up a constant stream of fire. Niko was firing aimed bursts; Bouzerant was just holding the trigger down. "Stop wasting your ammo," David called.

"Look," Halverson said. "The 'Mech."

David turned away from the firefight. The *Phoenix Hawk* was limping up Hadley, barely a hundred meters away. It would pass beneath them. He turned back to Halverson and tried to smile. "It won't bother us."

"No. Look at the cockpit."

David looked. Between the artillery and the missile, the armored canopy over the 'Mech's face had been shot away. With the sun coming from behind him like it was, David could see the MechWarrior controlling it. He had a hand raised to ward off the sunlight. The morning light showed David more of the machine's damage, half-repaired armor hanging loosely and exposed myomer bundles. There were several rust-encrusted rents on the 'Mech's legs. It was as battered as it looked, barely hanging together. The Charleston troops hadn't added that much, but it had been enough.

"We can stop it," Halverson gasped out.

The half-formed plan in David's mind snapped into focus. He reached behind him and touched Bouzerant. "Give me my rifle," he said. The weapon came flying at him, too fast for him to catch. He dropped it. The 'Mech limped closer. Fifty meters.

"Here they come!" Niko shouted. He grunted as he threw a grenade. He must have fumbled the throw. David saw the grenade explode harmlessly on the street below.

Or not so harmlessly. The *Phoenix Hawk's* remaining arm rose, unmasking the maw of the laser it carried like a giant pistol. David picked up his rifle and aimed, keeping the 'Mech's pilot between the sights. Tortured metal screamed in the alleyway as the laser rose, shrieking out damage to the 'Mech's shoulder.

"Get down!" A grenade clattered into the small alcove formed by the debris. David was aware of it, but ignored it. The 'Mech stumped closer; the arm continued to rise.

Bouzerant leapt past David to flop down on top of the grenade. He had time for a desperate curse before it went off, picking his body up and flinging it off the skyway. David rocked with the force of the explosion, bringing the rifle to bear again. He heard screams, human screams from the pirates Niko was cutting down and the screech of stressed metal from the 'Mech's shoulder.

He fired.

He saw the MechWarrior jerk back against his seat, saw the red mist splash on his chest as the caseless rounds tore into him. Then David saw white again, as the laser fired. He felt a buffeting explosion, and then falling. There was a sharp pain in his side, and a sharper one in his arm, and then the white faded to darkness.



He woke up on a stretcher in the street. It must have been hours later, maybe days. The shadows were longer, and going the other way. He realized he could see, and blinked a few times. It felt as though there were grains of dust beneath his eyelids, and he tried to wipe at them, but his arms were restrained.

"Easy, David," someone said. David looked around, trying to focus on the shapes around him.

"Sergeant Homer?"

The NCO nodded, stepping closer to the stretcher and dropping to one knee. He laid a bandaged hand on David's shoulder. "Take it easy, son. You're safe."

The street was filled with sounds, talking and the sound of motors. David heard a siren in the distance, but no gunfire. He looked at Homer. "Are they gone?"

"Last time I checked they were still headed for their DropShips. It'll be a while before they get back."

A great sense of relief washed through David. He felt as though he were ten kilos lighter. The world swam for a moment, and he realized he was drugged. "How long have I been out?"

"It took us a few hours to dig you out, boyo." The sergeant looked away for a moment, looked all around, then back at David. After a moment, David recognized the hulk of the *Phoenix Hawk* lying in the street behind Homer.

"We got it," he murmured. Niko would be pleased, he thought. Niko! "My men, sergeant! Where are my men?"

Homer stiffened. "Koumalides is on a stretcher behind you. The others..." He paused. "The others didn't make it."

David tried to crane his neck to see Niko, but couldn't. He tried to raise himself up on his right elbow, to twist around, but fell back as a dagger of pain shot up his arm. He gasped. He felt sweat on his forehead and upper lip.

"Don't move, Corporal," Homer barked. He placed both his hands on David's shoulders. "You were injured. You need to be still."

"My arm," David said. "It hurts."

"Your arm was amputated when the skyway collapsed, David." Homer's voice was rock hard. David had heard that tone before, when Homer'd given the platoon bad news.

"But I can still feel it."

Homer squeezed his eyes closed. "It's not there, David. Just lay still." A medic walked past and leaned over when Homer touched his leg. A short conversation took place, too quiet for David to understand. Then the medic knelt, and David felt a prick in his left arm.

"You need to rest, Corporal," the medic said. "This will help you sleep."

"My arm," David moaned. "My maniple." The drugged feeling increased. He couldn't focus on anything. His eyes closed against his will.

"This is the one," he heard Homer say. "He brought down the 'Mech with a rifle." There was pride in the older man's voice. David didn't know if he was imagining it.

"He should pull through," the medic said. "You know, in the old days, that would mean that the 'Mech was his." The medic laughed. "What do you think will happen to it?"

"The pirates, Tortugans or someone else, will be back," Homer said. "We've got one 'Mech. When he heals up, we can get more."

David knew he was imagining things now. He'd never once heard the tone Homer was using, not since the day he'd met the NCO on his first day of basic training. Homer didn't have a fatherly bone in his body.

The darkness crept at the edges of his mind, snipping off his consciousness bit by bit. Before he succumbed completely, he remembered Bouzerant's words. You're nuts, he'd said. David thought he might agree with him. *But I killed a 'Mech.*

The darkness closed in around him.

The End