

BATTLECORPS

SLEIGHT OF HAND

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Free Worlds League
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Sergeant Julianne Pedersen slowed her *Wasp 3M* to a slow walk and double-checked her sensor readings.

"Bose, got a possible bogie inside a building at grid gamma-seven."

Harzburg was a trade and tourist city edging a bay where the mighty Vantassa entered the Southern Sea. It had been a major population center before it was decimated in the Fourth Succession War. Now intel said it was about two-thirds rebuilt and a possible stronghold for the planetary militia, perhaps the center of FedCom support.



Made sense; the FedCom was doing all the rebuilding. Had been.

The Silver Hawks Irregulars, Falcon Regiment, was here to make sure Callison returned to the Free Worlds League. Along with the First Free Worlds Guard, of course, who were somewhere on-planet doing something that didn't involve Jule's current mission, scouting the western fringe of Harzburg.

So far the four *Wasps* had encountered only empty warehouses and what looked like factories burned out since the last war, but they were approaching the populated areas. And the edge of the operations area Force Commander Gallagher had authorized for this first probe.

Jule's bogie, whatever it might be, was their first contact with anything that hadn't been rust for decades.

"Bates, converge," Staff Sergeant Bosarja ordered. "Details, Jule. What you got?"

"Metal frame building, hollow, common Callison construction. Fuzzing the sensors, but it looks like a heavy 'Mech inside."

That was news. Intel was the militia wasn't fielding anything larger than medium 'Mechs planetwide. Their biggest fear here in the

city was a reported lance of mediums, including an *UrbanMech*. *UrbanMechs* didn't always get a lot of respect from the pilots of larger machines, but an *Urbie's* AC-10 autocannon could pound a *Wasp* to scrap before the light 'Mech's medium laser even dented its armor.

"I've got it, too," Sergeant Bates' little-girl soprano joined the conversation. "Heavy metal. Eleven, twelve meters tall."

"Show me."

Jule tapped a contact, knowing Bates was doing the same. Their sensor readings would show up on Bosarja's auxiliary screens.

"An *Orion*?" the Staff Sergeant asked.

"Doubt it. No hard—" Jule caught herself. Bosarja was from Shiloh; he held his lance to strict standards on vulgarity. "No torso AC-10," she amended, hoping he'd overlook the stutter.

"I'm reading no energy at all," Bates put in.

"Confirmed," Jule seconded.

"Alright. Could be a statue," Bosarja said. "Or a relic from the big one. Jule, check it out. Bates, back her—"

"*Wyvern, Wyvern!*" Sergeant Jacobs' voice, sharp with excitement, cut across the airwaves. "Tally one *Wyvern*, grid gamma niner, coming in hot."

"Break back, Jake. Beta eight," Bosarja ordered the fourth member of the lance back into ground they knew. "Jule, Bates, on me. Box step."

Jule felt her pulse rate go up as she moved to comply. There'd been no action since they'd entered the city at daybreak. Her cooling vest was still chill through her tube top, the control surfaces cool to the touch. That was about to change.

How did a FedCom planetary militia get its hands on a top of the line ComStar design?

Jule filed the question under "ask later" as she pulled up the unfamiliar BattleMech's stats from her database.

The *Wyvern* read like the ultimate urban war machine. Superficially, it was laid out like a *Wasp*: the left arm of both machines ended in a hand actuator for dealing with debris and obstacles, both machines bore torso mounted missile launchers, and both had

right arm lasers; but there the resemblance ended. At forty-five tons a *Wyvern* packed a lot more punch than the twenty-ton *Wasp*. Where Jule's *3M* had one SRM2, the *Wyvern* boasted LRM10 and SRM6 launchers and answered her single medium pulse laser with a large laser and a brace of smalls. A one-on-one slug fest would definitely not be a good idea.

The only real advantage a *Wasp* had was speed—the smaller 'Mech was nearly twice as fast on the ground and had a fifty percent greater jump capacity. While that speed wouldn't help a single *Wasp* defeat a *Wyvern*, it would give a lance of *Wasps* working together the edge they needed to bring one down.

The "box step" was an urban strategy for bringing down larger 'Mechs. When the target was mid-block, one *Wasp* would run across the intersection ahead and another across the one behind. Whichever found itself in front of the 'Mech would keep moving, distracting the pilot, while the other pumped quick shots into the target's back. Other members of the lance would snipe from side streets and roof tops as opportunities presented themselves, firing one then moving. It wasn't a quick battle, but like hunting dogs harrying a bear, they'd eventually bring the beast down.

Through broken signals and sensor ghosts thrown out by the metal-heavy buildings, Jule tracked Jacobs and the pursuing *Wyvern* as she and Bates converged. She knew Bosarja was to her right, but the echo reflections blocked his telemetry.

On her screen the foe icon slowed and stopped. Evidently the *Wyvern*'s less sensitive sensors had picked up the converging pack of *Wasps*. After a moment's apparent thought, the big machine cut back and to her right, heading for the heart of the city.

"Bose!"

"I see it," the lance leader confirmed. "I've got the front door. Jake take the back. Jule and Bates snipe."

A thermal flare to her right revealed Bosarja jump-jetting to head off the fleeing *Wyvern*. Wouldn't do him much good if he got there before the rest of the lance. Slamming down her feet, she launched into the air after him. For the first time since this long patrol began, her cockpit started to heat up. The smell of centuries of sweat began to bake out of the ancient neo-leather command couch.

At the peak of her arc she saw an area of green up ahead. A park. If the *Wyvern* made a stand in the open, their box step wasn't go-

ing to cut it. He'd be able to target all four of them with his longer weapons at will.

"Park up ahead," she warned as she descended.

Bosarja grunted.

"Buildings on the other side look new," Bates reported from the top of her own leap, tension making her voice even squeakier than normal.

Jule nodded to herself. The park was beyond the epsilon grid, outside their operations area. Her heat read in the green and she jumped again. Just to her left was a factory that looked solid enough; the air scrubbers on the roof were more massive than her 'Mech. Taking a chance, she feathered her jets, fading left to land on the structure. With a few seconds at the top of a jump's arc,, she made a thorough scan of the field ahead.

"Bogie's going to make the park before we form up," she reported. "Buildings on the other side have power, look occupied."

"Round robin," Bosarja ordered an open-terrain attack that had less chance of success. "Meet up at ..." There was no grid coordinate, they were off the map. "Parking deck three clicks east of epsilon-seven."

Acknowledging the order, Jule leapt from the building. Seconds later she was making best speed down the center of a boulevard that seemed headed for the park. For a few moments the only sound was her own breathing and the whir and clank of her 'Mech around her. Jumping would have been faster, but the flare of her jets would have told the *Wyvern* exactly where she was going. She knew their attack wasn't going to be a surprise, but why give the enemy information she could conceal?

The *Wyvern* pilot evidently thought differently. Ahead of her a thermal flare arced high in the air. A moment after it dropped out of sight, it repeated.

"Bogie is crossing the park," Bosarja reported. Jule was close enough to see the flare as her lance leader jumped to the top of the parking deck. "Confirmed. Bogie has exited far side of park."

"Everybody stay low."

Jule nodded to herself. Bosarja had drawn a big arrow pointing to his position, no reason for anyone else to give themselves away

this close to engagement. She slowed to a walk, moving closer to the sensor-fuzzing buildings that lined the street.

"Bogie has gone to ground on a cross street two blocks in from the park," Bosarja's voice was hushed as though a loud sound might spook their prey. "Barely make out his heat signature. I'm reading no other 'Mechs and no armor, but lots of civilians."

The enemy wouldn't be using civilians for a shield; he was militia—there was a good chance he was from around here. More likely it was a ploy, meant to be a deterrent. He was betting they wouldn't follow him into a populated area.

Now the burden was on Bosarja. Did he go in after the *Wyvern*, putting innocent lives at risk, or did he withdraw and leave the deadly machine free to attack at will?

She could almost hear the cogs turning as Bose worked it out. There had been no intel on a *Wyvern* in western Harzburg. While a solo 'Mech was possible with the FedCom militia making its last stand all over the planet, it could just as easily be a vanguard for a larger force. It was Beta Company's job to find out before Alpha and Gamma committed to the assault.

"Lasers only," Bosarja said at last. "Make sure you have a hard lock. No collateral damage."

Falcon recon patrols were supposed to act individually, but Jule asked the question.

"What about back-up?"

"Able and Baker lance found a lance of medium bogies," Bosarja answered.

So. If the *Wyvern* was a solo, it may have withdrawn because he knew *his* back-up was engaged, Jule realized, and was hoping they'd do the same rather than carry the battle to the civilians. But their withdrawal would free up the *Wyvern* to bail out the militia lance. Which is why Bose was going to disappoint him.

"Same pattern," Bosarja was saying. "I've got south door, Jake has north, Bates and Jule cover sides and top."

Hiding behind a building, Jule knew the *Wyvern* pilot couldn't get a solid sensor reading of the park. But it was clear he read four jump jet flares headed his way because by their second jump, he was moving north, to Jule's left. She angled toward Jake, hoping

to back him up if the bogie made it out of the box before they had it shut.

He did.

Jule brought her *Wasp* down behind Jake's just as the *Wyvern* stepped out of the cross street. Part of her mind registered the retreating ground cars and the pedestrians running for the cover of the storefronts, but it was the monster bearing down on them that held her attention. Now her cockpit was hot, her hair plastered to her forehead and nape under the neurohelmet.

At ten meters, the militia pilot evidently didn't wait for a weapons lock. The triple blast of his large and small lasers caught Jake full in the chest. Liquid armor sprayed the street as Jake spun left, keeping the cutting rays from reaching his ammo bin.

Jule stepped right and fired as Jake struggled to keep his balance. The double tap of her medium pulse laser scored across the bigger machine's SRM6.

She didn't stop to assess the damage as the *Wyvern's* lasers swung towards her.

Outclassed by a factor of ten, standing toe-to-toe was suicide. The key to hit and run was running so you stayed alive long enough for the hits to add up to some good.

Jake was already running, heading down a narrow alley between stores to the left. Following him would only concentrate the *Wyvern's* targets, making them both easy to pick off.

The buildings on her left were all low—shops and restaurants. To her right was the building behind which the militia 'Mech had hidden. Immense, it seemed to cover the city block. And it was too high for a *Wyvern* to jump.

That was her way out.

Stomping hard on the pedals, she launched her *Wasp* into the air just as the other 'Mech fired. His shot went wide, scoring the masonry, as she rose above him. She had a half second to fear her machine wouldn't clear the parapet before she was over the roof. Five, ten meters above, she angled her jets to carry her far enough from the edge to keep the *Wyvern* from trying to get lucky with a head shot. Raising her arms for balance, she swung her legs into position to brace for a hard landing...

Skylight.

Dance floor?

Hallway.

Hallway.

Hallway.

Jule's *Wasp* came to rest four and five floors down inside what seemed to be, from what she could see through her debris-covered viewscreen, a pretty nice hotel. Maybe too much velvet in the wall covering. Top floor must have been a restaurant. That would explain the skylight and the dance floor.

What wasn't clear was what had stopped her, eleven and twelve stories above the street. Her arms, still extended in landing position, were held overhead by the hole her torso had made in the floor above. It was possible she could lower them, but until she had a better understanding of the situation, tearing chunks out of the structure supporting her wasn't the best idea.

Her legs, invisible beneath the floor, seemed to be swinging free. She tested this, moving them slowly back and forth. They scraped along whatever held her torso, but they didn't hit anything fore or aft. Best as she could figure, her *Wasp* was straddling some sort of cross beam. Must be a hell of a beam to hold a twenty-ton 'Mech dropping out of the sky.

"Good thing I had my cup," Jule muttered.

The fusion engine's status boards showed green. A combination of luck and a testimony to the *Wasp's* construction given the way she'd landed. However, half a dozen other systems showed yellow. Nothing life threatening, but being dropped through a building hadn't done her machine any good.

She turned the *Wasp's* head left, the rattle of crumbling plaster telling her she was gouging wall to do it. What she could see around her left arm was a broad hallway ending in a heavily curtained floor-to-ceiling window. Definitely too much velvet.

Jule cursed as a door opened a few meters down the hall. She hadn't thought about civilians. She hoped she hadn't hit anyone on her way down.

This civilian was a huge woman, not so much fat as immense, taller than most men, and she was gesturing urgently. She evidently wanted Jule to get out of the *Wasp* and into her room. Quickly.

Jule thought fast. She didn't dare use her weapons or fire her jump jets in an occupied building. Which meant until she figured a way to either get her 'Mech out of here or clear the building of people, her *Wasp* was useless. And unless she got away from it, she'd be as trapped as her 'Mech if militia troops found her before the Falcons did.

By the time Jule reached that point in her ruminations, she had her neurohelmet racked and the hatch undogged. Plaster dust fell on her, coating her with a thin layer of grit.

The woman was older than Jule had realized, grey hair blended through her blonde, and smelled of some herbal spice. Strong, too, as she hustled the shorter MechWarrior into the room. A sitting room, Jule saw, less ornate than the hallway, with a wet bar, two tall doors, and a gawking teenager.

"Cole, this is your cousin Lilith," the woman said to the gaping boy. "Get in the hall and make some noise about that thing falling through the ceiling with nobody inside it."

The boy shut his mouth and headed for the hall without a word.

"You, wash up," the woman continued, propelling Jule toward the sink. "Get your hair good and wet and scrub that helmet shape out of it."

Trusting there was a plan, Jule used the spray nozzle to rinse her face and soak her hair, combing it through with her fingers. When she came up for air, her host handed her a quilted robe.

"Cover up," she ordered. "You just got out of the shower. Let's get in the hall."

Jule all but disappeared inside the larger woman's robe. By the time she'd reached the door she'd figured out using a hand in the pocket to hold it slightly in front of her kept her boots concealed while walking. Watching her feet, she all but piled into the woman at the half-opened door.

"You are Lilith," the woman repeated. Jule decided the spice smell was a cologne of some sort. "We're visiting from New Rolso. Cole is your cousin. I'm his grandmother and you call me Auntie."

"Yes'm, Auntie," Jule answered. Then more loudly: "What is it Cole? What's happening?"

Less than a minute after she'd first seen "Auntie" open the door, Jule was back in the hall, gazing up at her 'Mech in stupefied wonder.

"It's an empty BattleMech," Cole called back over the voices of the gathering crowd in the hallway. "It fell out of the sky. Pilot must have ejected before it crashed."

From the general murmur of agreement, Jule could tell none of them had seen a 'Mech this close or understood much of their workings. A MechWarrior who tried to eject with the hatch sealed would have one hell of a headache. Actually, now that she was looking at it, there seemed to be some damage to the back of her *Wasp's* head, but with it turned in this direction it was impossible to tell.

There was about three minutes of general milling around before local authorities showed up in the form of a squad of militia with hotel security in tow. They, and apparently the elevators, were on the other side of the hall-blocking machine.

Jule stayed one row back on her side, in the middle of the small crowd, watching the militia through gaps between shoulders.

One of the guests on their side repeated Cole's theory about the pilot ejecting, but the corporal was having none of it. He ordered all of the guests to stand in the hall while his men searched the rooms. Splintering wood and curses announced the militia's solution to the 'Mech blocking the hall even before they came out of the room across from Auntie's.

On the far side Jule could hear the hotel security people questioning the guests, matching the people up with a guest registry. One of the security people in plain clothes was standing back a bit, scanning the crowd as a whole while the uniformed guards questioned individuals.

He must have felt Jule's eyes on him, because he suddenly glanced across the gap directly at her. She smiled weakly, clutching the robe more tightly at her throat and turned away. And found Cole staring at her from the edge of the crowd.

She decided gape must be the boy's natural expression. Perhaps he had trouble breathing through that aquiline nose. He was fourteen, maybe fifteen and as tall as his grandmother, but all knees

and elbows, as narrow as she was wide. He wouldn't have been bad looking without that vapid expression and if or when the war on acne finally turned his way. Right now his stare was a searchlight, pointing her out like a setter spotting quail.

"Don't moon at your cousin, lad."

Cole shut his mouth, doubling his apparent IQ, and began watching the militia like everyone else who wasn't staring at the 'Mech.

"Crushes," Auntie said to another woman, rolling her eyes.

The other woman smiled at Cole's flushing profile and shook her head in sympathy.

The militia had worked their way down one side of the corridor, searching each room, and were working their way back along the other.

"*He* might have climbed up one of the arms," Cole volunteered helpfully to the nearest militia man, emphasizing the pronoun.

"Got a squad on every floor," the corporal replied offhandedly. "We'll find him."

Hotel security was coming through the ruined suite. Apparently everyone in the other section of corridor was who they said they were. The plainclothes she'd noticed before stopped just in the hallway, moving aside so others could pass. He wasn't scanning the crowd now; he was looking directly at her.

Jule shifted closer to Auntie. Her laser was in its boot holster under the robe. Even if she could get to it, there was no way she was going to start a firefight in a hallway crowded with innocent civilians. Her only hope was sticking with Auntie and brassing it through. Right now, under the security man's unblinking regard, that didn't look like much hope at all.

"How safe is this?" Auntie asked loudly in worried tones. "All of us standing around with this big machine broken through our floor?"

Jule suspected it was very safe. Whatever had stopped her falling *Wasp* was continuing to hold its twenty tons along with everything else without sag or sound of strain. The behavior of the hotel staff pretty well confirmed they knew the support member holding the 'Mech would continue to do so; otherwise they would have evacuated the floor by now.

But of course, once the seed was planted...

Demands to be let down to the ground floor drowned out the corporal's demands for order and whatever assurances the hotel staff was trying to hand out. In minutes Jule and the hotel guests from Auntie's side of 'Mech were being led through the ruined rooms and down to the elevators.

The elevator was glass, which made sense as soon as it dropped through the floor. The interior of the hotel was an arboretum, hollow for eight stories up. A T-shaped mall that must have covered a city block, with shops and restaurants lining the sides while kiosks and fountains dotted the winding tile paths that wove among trees spread out below her.

More importantly, she saw her 'Mech's legs dangling on either side of a beam that looked as though it could hold an *Atlas*—one of a dozen spanning the roof nearly thirty meters above the mall. Directly below it was an area of trees, like an indoor forest, already cordoned off with wide red ropes and signs warning guests to stay clear of the wet floor. Apparently the hotel didn't stock custodial signs for falling BattleMechs.

If she could tilt her *Wasp* off the beam, there was a chance she'd get her jump jets under her in time for a controlled landing. Even if she didn't, the stand of trees and the earth they stood in would break her fall. From there it would be an easy exit through the two-story glass wall of the front entrance

"Thought you'd like that," said Auntie quietly.

Jule turned to smile at her. The plainclothes security guard standing at the back of the car caught the corner of her eye. She didn't look at him directly, but for the rest of the ride down she felt his eyes on the back of her head.

Once they were in the lobby, Auntie hustled Jule and Cole toward a bench by a flower garden, away from the press of guests demanding information or refunds from the hotel staff. The sweet smells emanating from the dessert restaurant did not sit well with the scents of the flowers and for an instant Jule's belly flip-flopped. Nerves.

"If I can get back to my 'Mech, I'm out of here," she said.

"I'll create a diversion," Cole began.

"Which might get you killed and definitely do us no good," his grandmother cut him off. "Sit."

Cole sat, then shifted away when his knee brushed Jule's. She glanced at him and saw the flush once again creeping over his features. Crushes indeed.

Auntie's sharp eyes clouded with worry and she looked vaguely about the huge lobby for a moment, her chin all but trembling. Apparently satisfied no one was observing them too closely, she leaned in close to Jule, her eyes again laser clear.

"Half these people would come out for you the moment they knew you were here," she said. "The trick is knowing which half. Right now I'm only betting on us."

"Half the people are pro-Lyran?"

"No, Sergeant, just half of them would wait to see if you were winning first," Auntie indicated the room with a nod. "They're just civilians trying to stay alive and make the best of things."

"And you're not?" Jule asked. "A civilian, I mean."

Auntie waved the question aside.

"Want you to get it straight before you start shooting up the place," she said. "Lyran's have done a lot of building here, a lot of cleaning up, *but*," she held up a finger for emphasis, "none of us has ever forgotten we're Silver Hawks, part of the Free Worlds."

"And Skye," put in Cole.

"And Skye," Auntie echoed with a sigh, rolling her eyes at her grandson. "About ten percent of the noise is made by the one percent who remember Skye once claimed us and forget we were traded away for a pittance.

"The point is, just 'cause you won't always be met by cheering, don't think you're not welcome. Folks are just cautious."

Jule nodded. This wasn't really news, but it was good to have confirmation.

"Have you heard anything about a strange 'Mech?" she asked. "Looks like an *Orion*."

"Militia's been looking high and low for it," Auntie glanced around again. "Supposed to be a secret, but scuttlebutt is it's some sort of prototype from the First Guards. Story is it got cut off and has been playing cat and mouse ever since."

Jule nodded again. Helpful as Auntie was, she wasn't about to tell the woman she had a pretty good idea where the mouse was hiding until she'd had a chance to report in.

"I've got to..."

"Get back to your mates?" Auntie finished for her. "Follow me."

The older woman was on her feet, moving toward the bank of elevators like a foregone conclusion. Jule scurried to catch up, careful to take short steps lest her boot tips show. Cole was at her heels.

"We must go back to our room," Auntie announced to the hotel security guard standing in front of the elevators.

"No one can go back upstairs, ma'am," the guard's voice was weary; this was not the first time he'd had this conversation. "The rooms are still being searched."

"Look at my niece," Auntie demanded. "Pulled from her shower and rushed down here with no chance to get her clothes."

The guard did glance at Jule—she did her best to look pitiful—but turned back to Auntie with a shake of his head.

"You may find it amusing to hold a naked young woman captive," Auntie preempted whatever he'd been about to say, her face purpling in outrage. "But to humiliate a child in this way is unspeakable!"

The guard was saved from answering the unnerving charge by a voice from behind Jule.

"I've got it, Jenkins."

"Yes sir, Mr. Marsh," the guard—Jenkins—relaxed visibly; almost grinning with relief as he stepped aside

Jule knew before she turned Mr. Marsh would be the security plainclothes who'd given her the hard eye upstairs. He was giving her the hard eye now. And, of course, he was getting on the elevator with them.

"Cole, wait in the lobby."

"But you might need my help ..."

"I'm sure your vid collection will be fine," Auntie said. "Order us some baklava and something cool to drink. We'll be back down in a moment."

Cole hesitated.

"Maybe I could—."

"Lilith will get her things and we will come down," Auntie cut him off. "You'll have to make do with the real world for a little while."

Reluctantly the boy stepped from the elevator.

Marsh tapped what was apparently an override code into the elevator's keypad which, among other things, turned off the sappy music. The floor dropped away as the glass car ascended its transparent tube.

Jule half listened to Auntie making small talk with Marsh behind her as she studied the layout of the sprawling lobby. Below her she could see a squad of militia at the main entrance and what looked like a general purpose truck mounting a machinegun turret at the curb outside. Perhaps two more squads of militia were circulating through the sparse crowds in the lobby. Not a heavy weapon in sight. The bakery kiosk Auntie had evidently sent Cole to was down the leg of the T-shaped mall, well out of her proposed flight path.

When the elevator doors opened, their escort held up a hand for a moment and leaned into the corridor.

"Anyone here?" he called in a loud voice. "This is hotel security. Is anyone here?"

Apparently satisfied the floor was empty, Marsh waved them ahead and turned his attention to the elevator's key pad.

Listening to the key taps, Jule pulled her hand from her pocket; no need to hide her boot toes with him behind her. She slid her hand inside her robe. Once they stepped into the suite to get around the 'Mech

"Hold it!"

Jule froze.

Sliding her eyes left to meet Auntie's, she saw the other woman was equally caught off guard by the order. Jule flexed her knees slightly, hoping the move was covered by the voluminous robe. Hand tight on the butt of her holstered laser, she turned her left shoulder toward the house detective.

Auntie turned full around to face him square.

Marsh was grinning, a slug gun leveled at them. Twelve millimeter, by the look of it—civilian grade, but more than enough gun for the situation. The radio in his left hand crackled with static as he thumbed it on.

Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, drawing against a leveled weapon was suicide. But letting him call the militia wasn't an option. Hoping this was the hundredth time, Jule—

Marsh smashed the radio against his face.

The cheap plastic case shattered, sharp edges slashing his cheekbone and earlobe.

Still grinning, Marsh swung his right hand savagely against the elevator doorframe. The slug gun went flying, gouging the paneling where it struck the wall and hitting the floor with a sledgehammer thud.

Marsh glanced down at his bleeding knuckles. At least one finger was clearly broken.

Looking back at the dumbfounded women, he jutted his chin slightly forward.

"The elevators are jammed," he explained. "And I have a glass jaw."

Realization dawned.

"Bless you, son," said Auntie.

Jule nodded her appreciation. Stepping close, she uncoiled a from-the-shoulder jab that dropped Marsh across the elevator threshold.

"He's a good one," Auntie pronounced.

"Wonder how he made me?"

"I'll be sure to ask," Auntie said. She closed the door of a suite near the elevators. "Shoot that laser of yours through the pocket of my robe. Scar the wall a bit and put a hole through that door."

"You're going to phone a warning from there when I fire up my *Wasp*."

"Got it in one."

"What are you, covert ops?"

"You think this is slick, try hiding a floating craps game from the MPs. The trick is showing them what they think they should see and keep things moving too fast for them to think." Auntie grinned and stuck out her hand. "Technical Sergeant Wilhelmina Currie, at your service."

"Sergeant Julianne Pedersen," Jule said, losing her hand in the giant grip.

Jule fired two quick shots, scorching the wall and charring a hole through the robe's pocket. Then she lined up on the door and fired through it. The hallway filled with the tang of singed fabric and smoldering plastic.

Surveying the damage, Auntie—Currie—nodded her approval.

"Stork still with the Falcons?" she asked as Jule pulled off the smoldering robe and carefully flung it aside.

"Stork?"

"Hell of a jockey, one eyebrow, nose like a beak, yea tall," Currie held her hand midway between Jule's crown and hers. "Should have at least made captain by now."

"Colonel Lorch," Jule answered, filing the 'Stork' nickname under *do not open*, "Is the Regimental Commander."

"CO, eh? Good on him," Currie nodded to herself. "Tell him his chief mechanic's putting in for twenty-seven years back pay. Not my damn fault I was home on furlough when the Steiners took this place."

"Will do," Jule grinned.

"Damn!"

"What?"

"Unless you guys have changed the design on these things," Currie pointed, "Your ride's lost its communications array."

From this side, behind the turned head, it was plain the *Wasp's* four spike antennae were missing. Well, three and a half. One meter-long stub had survived the fall through the skylight and four floors.

"Gonna have to hoof it to get word to HQ," Jule said, scrambling up the side of her 'Mech. "Tell Cole thanks for me."

"I'll tell him you said to kiss him on the cheek," Currie answered. "I predict you're gonna cause long-term damage to his eyesight."

Jule paused with the hatch half-closed, not sure she'd heard right.

Currie laughed at her expression. "You know every young lad dreams a beautiful MechWarrior princess will come and sweep him off his feet."

Jule snorted.

Hell of a grandmother. She wished Cole luck.

Neurohelmet in place, she toggled the reactor back up before hooking the vest connections and strapping in. No warm-up needed, it had been less than thirty minutes since the *Wasp* dropped through the skylight.

She gave Currie ten more seconds to call the lobby, then pulled her left arm down from the floor above. If Currie's call didn't alert the people in the lobby that things were about to come down on them, the first pound of her left arm against the floor did. It took three blows to clear away the wood and masonry. Jule could see why the hotel staff hadn't worried about the floor giving way. It took twenty seconds pulling and prying to clear a hole she was happy with in the steel support lattice. Looking down, she saw debris and dust were scattered across the ersatz forest below, but the people had apparently had enough sense to get out of the way.

If the next beam had been a little closer, she might have considered trying to hang from it long enough to swing both legs, and their jump jets, under her. As it was, she simply lifted her right leg and overbalanced.

Between her reflexes and the *Wasp's* gyro she managed, just, to get all three sets of jump jets pointed down and firing before she hit the ground. Not soon enough to stop her, but quick enough to make the landing bone-jarring instead of bone-breaking.

Small arms fire ticked and pinged off her *Wasp* as Jule strode toward the front entrance. She made her movements slow and deliberate, giving the panicking civilians plenty of time to get out of her way.

Of the squad at the main entrance, only one militia man held his position. Standing between her and the wall of glass, he methodically pumped single shots from his slug rifle at her cockpit. He hit every time, but the anti-personnel weapon was not designed to penetrate a reinforced viewscreen. Jule stepped around the lone gunman with exaggerated care before shouldering through the plate glass.

Machinegun fire burst from the turret as the GP pulled away from the curb, the gunner and driver apparently having a disagreement over whether to fight or flee. A short burst from her pulse laser solved the dilemma for them, slicing the lightly-armored vehicle in half.

As near as she could tell through the building echoes, hers was the only 'Mech on the street. In fact, there were few vehicles of any kind on the street. The possibility of 'Mechs trading fire had persuaded most folks to stay indoors.

She was standing where the *Wyvern* had hidden when her lance had crossed the park, which meant the street where she and Jake had traded shots with the 'Mech was to her left. The only signs of battle were the puddle of Jake's armor and the laser scorch up the side of the hotel tracking her flight.

From that point it seemed the militia 'Mech had made a run for the park. Made sense. The militia pilot had probably never intended to endanger the civilians with a firefight. His going to ground among them had been a ploy to throw off the Falcons. Once it had failed, he'd made a break for open ground.

With Jule down, the *Wyvern* had only three *Wasps* to face on open terrain. Its LRM10 and large laser would be able to keep them out of effective range of their own weapons despite the bigger machine's poor speed. It would have been a tough kill.

Or the battle could still be on. Without communications the only way she would find out was to go look.



Jule had expected to trace the course of the battle across the park by following scores of craters left by the *Wyvern* making use of its LRM advantage. But the only missile damage was a hillside torched and pocked, evidence of someone's ammo load cooking off. That there was no other debris from the stricken 'Mech indicated the

CASE had done its job. Judging from the scorched patches of turf and occasional charred trunk, the heavier 'Mech had again traversed the park without taking advantage of the open fields of fire.

Jule began to suspect there was something wrong with the *Wyvern's* missile launchers.

Three blocks into the abandoned industrial section, Jake's *Wasp* lay crumpled against a pocked wall. The cockpit was smashed. Jule couldn't tell if her lancemate had ejected in time, but the sight of the wreckage made her ashamed her machine was still running cool and unmarked.

Opposite the ruined 'Mech, in a narrow cross alley, was the smoking carcass of an old J-27 ordinance truck. Deciphering the smoking scrap metal, Jule deduced someone had mounted an AC-10 to the bed of the tracked vehicle, actually bracing it with concrete blocks. Apparently the militia had gotten creative in recycling the autocannon from a fallen *UrbanMech*.

Ambushing 'Mechs without armor.... They'd taken out one *Wasp*, more than they had any right to expect, but it was clear the other two had blasted them before they'd even had a chance to retarget. Whoever'd manned that gun had to have known it was suicide. Why make such a desperate attack against a lance of scout 'Mechs?

The prototype.

The militia had to know it was close. Whatever it was, it meant enough to them to throw away lives to keep the Falcons from finding it first.

Somewhere not far to the west, Jule knew Bose and Bates were playing tag with a *Wyvern*. But south and west of her was a prototype 'Mech the FedComs were willing to die to get their hands on, hiding in a hollow building. A hunted brother who needed a guide home.

One *Wasp* wasn't much escort, but it was all she had to offer.

Stomping her pedals, Jule leapt south.



Two, three, four jumps, not in a straight line. No need to draw too big an arrow. Jog for a half dozen blocks to let her heat sinks cycle, then a fifth jump, overshooting her target.

Hitting the ground, she altered course ninety degrees and moved slowly, finding what shadows she could to hasten her temperatures' drop back into the green. All the careful misdirection in the world wouldn't help if she showed up like a thermal beacon. Her sensors gave her nothing but building echo as she boxed the perimeter, scanning for observers.

As satisfied as she was going to be with so little time, Jule worked her way back to the hollow building where she'd seen the mystery 'Mech an hour before. Pausing in the mouth of an alley she took the lay of the land.

A large door, apparently a delivery bay, was about sixty meters away, directly across a parking area from her position. It seemed to be of light metal, designed to roll up like a window shade. There were large windows on either side, ten meters square and apparently made of frosted glass bricks.

She turned up the gain on her external microphones and listened. Wind. A rusty hinge complaining as it swung back and forth; twenty seconds of its erratic tempo convincing her it was random movement in the breeze. And birds. Apparently dozens of them cheerfully unconcerned about predators.

Satisfied she was alone and that she could enter the building at will, she scanned the structure.

The 'Mech was gone.

Recalibrating her sensors, she scanned again. No twelve-meter giant. But heavy metal, and movement, along the floor. If they'd knocked it down....

She fired mid-flight, her laser slicing across the door. It fell easily from its roller when she kicked, screaming as the last remnant tore free and sending out a great billow of dust as it fell.

A dozen technicians gaped in horror for a comic moment at the terrible apparition astride the threshold. Then as one they dropped whatever they'd been holding and raised their hands.

Jule let the tableau hold for a moment as she surveyed the interior of the building. From the stacks of concrete I-beams and piles of stone, Jule guessed the factory had manufactured concrete structural members. Building demolition, too, if the wall of crates labeled explosives was any indication. She made a note not to light a match.

More importantly, 'Mech parts, coated with the dust her entrance had kicked up, were strewn about the open space. The technicians had been loading armor panels and what looked like ruined heat sinks onto a pair of ordinance trucks and their trailers. A third trailer, already loaded with servo motors and various internal components, was parked against the far wall.

Jule keyed her external speakers.

"Care to explain?"

The technicians regarded her in silence.

Stepping up her magnification, Jule read lapel tabs until she found an officer. She leveled her pulse laser at his face, close enough for him to feel the residual heat of its recent discharge.

"Leftenant?"

"We –" he squeaked, then stopped, swallowing visibly before he tried again. "We were rebuilding the *Perseus*. Trying to. We didn't have the right parts."

Jule guessed *Perseus* was the prototype's name. And rebuilding? A hotel detective native to Callison helping the Falcons was one thing, but she was under the impression the planetary militia was made up of imports loyal to the Federated Commonwealth. Still, the evidence of a massive 'Mech repair operation was all around her. She wondered whether the leftenant had a glass jaw, too.

"How bad is it?" she asked instead.

"We replaced enough heat sinks for the engine to function safely," the officer said, arms still rigid above his head. "But the lasers are lost and we had no missiles to give."

"So it's unarmed?"

"The electronics," the way he emphasized the word told Jule they were important, "are, we think, intact. The pilot would not let us examine them."

So all this was about the electronics of the prototype. A new ECM suite? Sensors? Stealth technology? Jule pulled her mind back to the leftenant whose arms were no doubt going numb.

"And where did our *Perseus* go?"

"Our scouts have determined the approximate location of your command center," the leftenant almost lowered his arms as he

spoke, but caught himself and thrust them upward again. "We sent him in that direction."

"Why?"

"Please," the lieutenant glanced to either side, indicating his men. "Just tell your commanders what we have done."

Whether these rogue techs thought Callison belonged to the Free Worlds or were just betting their side would lose didn't matter. What mattered was a valuable piece of Free Worlds technology was wandering unarmed through enemy territory trying to find its way home. After asking what bearing they'd given the pilot, she headed out after the *Perseus*.



Jump, jog, change vector, jump, jog, jump; she kept her heat sinks as cool as possible as she bracketed the prototype's probable course. Thermals were the easiest trace for sensors among the ghosts and echoes of the metal-heavy buildings. She had little enough to offer with a single *Wasp*; there would be no point in offering even that if she led the planetary militia straight to the prototype in the bargain.

The continued silence from her radio told her she was either alone on the planet or her unit was still beyond the antenna stub's range. She was tempted to broadcast on the off chance they could hear her even though she was deaf, but had to admit that made no sense. All she would be doing is giving away her position. She wasn't about to gamble the rest of the militia would be as helpful as the rogue technicians.

Jump, jog, jump. As her arc carried her above the skyline, her sensors picked up a medium 'Mech rising ahead and to her right. Her computer pegged it as a *Wyvern*, headed roughly the same way she was.

Jule suspected she knew which *Wyvern* it was, and had a pretty good idea what its target was.

Normally a forty-five ton 'Mech would steer clear of a seventy-five ton *Orion—Perseus*, she corrected herself. But even if the *Wyvern* pilot didn't know the heavy 'Mech was unarmed, from what she'd seen of the FedCom militia's tenacity a one-on-one challenge wasn't out of the question.

Jule went to low jumps, not clearing the roof lines, picking up speed. The temperature inside her cockpit began to rise and her heat gauges moved to the bottom edge of the yellow band. If the militia were already closing in on the *Perseus*, her heat trace was no longer an issue.

She checked her status boards. The *Wasp's* SRM2 read green, its rack loaded, feed functional. Laser was hot, charge reading one hundred percent. Except for the radio, she was ready for anything.



The western edge of Harzburg ended abruptly at a hard salt flat that had probably been a shallow bay about the time men discovered fire. Just beyond the flat was a roll of foothills leading to a low plateau. The plateau had been the landing site for the Falcon's Second Battalion. The foothills the staging area from which Beta Company's recon sortie had deployed in the predawn hours. This evening Alpha Company would cross this same salt, coordinating its assault on the city with Gamma Company's thrust from the north.

But at this moment, near the center of the gritty yellow plane, the giant *Orion* shape of the *Perseus* trudged. Jule doubted it was making thirty kilometers an hour.

Ahead of her, vectoring in from her right, was the *Wyvern*. Not a fast machine, it was faster than its prey. And, out of position as she was, it would close with the unarmed 'Mech before she could engage.

"Second Falcon Beta Three Delta to Second Falcon," Jule shouted, hoping her radio stub transmitted the signal. "Incoming wounded, twelve o'clock, bogie hot pursuit."

And *Wasp* in hot pursuit of bogie, she added to herself.

The *Wyvern* fired its LRM, scoring direct hits across the left shoulder and back of the *Perseus*. The big machine staggered slightly, but kept moving.

She fired her laser at extreme range. No hope of hitting, but maybe it would distract the *Wyvern* before it fired another salvo. Should have saved the heat.

Suddenly the ground around her exploded, staggering her wildly to her left. Jule slammed against her harness, the copper taste of blood telling her she'd bit her lip as she struggled to keep her *Wasp* on its feet.

Belatedly her alarm sounded, telling her someone had a weapons lock.

She kicked down hard, jumping before her 'Mech was stable. The wild sideways leap got her clear of a second shot, but the barely controlled landing almost did her assailant's job for him. Between her desperate efforts and its autogyro, the *Wasp* stayed upright. Barely.

Her combat computer assigned a generic armor icon to a heat source just inside the city a half-click to the south. Tank or artillery, it couldn't tell through the building echo. Something with reach.

Then a fresh alarm sounded. Jule's computer tagged the shape emerging from the last rows of buildings to the north as a *Whitworth* and beeped its suspicion of a third 'Mech further under cover.

Jule shouted an update on the bogie count as she lined up for a jump after the *Wyvern*. Even as she planned her running attack, part of her brain boggled at the thought of taking on a tank and two medium 'Mechs in a *Wasp*. But it wasn't like she had a choice.

Heat spiked toward the red as she jumped. She held her laser back, saving it for when she could trade the heat with better effect, but she landed close enough for her SRM2 to lock. She fired. Two solid hits to the *Wyvern*'s left shoulder that bothered it not at all.

Weapons lock alarm. The generic armor again.

Jule ran right, toward the *Wyvern*, with a vague hope of confusing the tank's targeting computer into shooting the wrong 'Mech. Of course, the only time she'd seen this trick work was an Immortal Warrior trivid.

"Beta Three Delta," a voice crackled in her headphones. "This is Alpha One. Get clear, Pedersen. We've got it."

Jule whooped and turned her run at the *Wyvern* into a run past it.

Alpha Company, mediums and heavies, could clean up this mess.

The weapons lock alarm ceased abruptly. Whoever'd targeted her had been distracted.

She made a mental note to thank Captain D'Condi for thinking to drive a *Huron Warrior*. That was one 'Mech with the electronic chops to pick up her signal and get back to her.

Jule brought her *Wasp* up short. Something didn't track.

The *Whitworth* quit its statue impression when the lance of Falcon mediums broke cover. It launched a flight of LRMs at the grouped 'Mechs, then a second salvo at D'Condi.

The generic armor and another gun opened up, both targeting Lieutenant Tomlin's *Hunchback*.

A double flight of missiles, half of which fell short of the Falcon lance, confirmed her computer's suspicions about the third 'Mech. Weapons pattern now made it eighty three percent sure it was a *Dervish*.

The militia had certainly sent a lot of firepower to stop one prototype 'Mech from getting home. Except ...

None of them were targeting the prototype.

Jule focused her sensors on the *Perseus*, now within medium weapons' range of the Falcon lance. Nothing. No weapons systems, no electronics. As nearly as her sensors could tell there was a jointed skeleton supporting an engine and barely enough myomer to move its heavy frame. For the rest it was as solid and inert as a potato covered with armor. And such armor. She'd seen it take two salvos from the *Wyvern's* LRMs and it hardly showed a scratch.

For a moment Jule was back in the hotel corridor holding her robe at her throat as Marsh gave her the eye. At her gritty throat.

The *Wyvern* was backing away, firing its lasers at the advancing Falcon 'Mechs. Not its missiles. Its missiles were trained on the *Perseus*, their targeting lock plain to her sensors.

Jule was moving before she thought it through.

Standing at the fringe of the firefight, ignored by the heavier combatants, Jule was a lot closer to the *Wyvern* and the *Perseus* than she had a right to be. Close enough to run at the heavy 'Mech, and to jump upward into the flight of missiles when the *Wyvern* fired.

Her *Wasp* didn't stop all of them—only four. But it was enough. One struck her leg, two hit along the left side of her torso, just

below her arm, and one exploded against the left side of her cockpit's view screen.

The light 'Mech was engulfed in a ball of smoke and flame.

Jule hit the ground running.

"Target the *Perseus*," she shouted. "Omega!"

She saw the Gauss rifle arm of D'Condi's *Huron Warrior* swing from the distant *Whitworth* to a point just above her right shoulder and fire.

Then a giant hand picked up her *Wasp* and slammed it into the hillside.



"... when her *Wasp* dropped out of the fireball without a scratch I realized something was up," D'Condi was saying. "When she ordered an all-out strike I didn't hesitate."

"You with us, Sergeant?"

Colonel Lorch—*not* Stork—was looking at her. He was sideways. No. She was lying down. Hospital. There was something important...

"Technical Sergeant Wilhelmina Currie demands twenty-seven years back pay," Jule said quickly before she forgot. "Not her fault she's damn home on furlough."

"Met Hell Mina, did you?"

"Yes, stork sir."

"She's still looped on the dope." Captain D'Condi's voice again, but she couldn't see him.

He was either lying on the floor or standing on the other side of the bed, the side she wasn't looking at. She couldn't decide which.

"Actually, Keith, she's making perfect sense," Lorch was saying. "But in the interests of clarity I suppose we should give her another twenty-four hours."



Jule sat propped up in the infirmary bed, her neck rigid in a brace. She knew her lower lip was swollen to three times its natural size, her body ached in several unpleasant ways and whiplash was going to keep her out of the rest of the Callison campaign. Other than that, she felt fine.

When she didn't remember why she was here.

"So when did you put it all together?"

The Colonel debriefing her personally, at her hospital bedside. Novel. She tried to focus on the novelty.

"Sometime between jumping into the missiles and being slammed into the mountain, sir," she reported. "All the pieces were there, but it wasn't until Captain D'Condi spoke to me that they started to fall into place."

"The first we heard of the *Perseus* was the pilot's call for help shortly before you arrived," Colonel Lorch said. "But they'd already spread disinformation about it?"

"If I had to guess, I'd say they expected someone to tell us about it before they sprang it on us. They just didn't count on how cautious most folks are. Anyway, my lance—"

The details of the room blurred and swam.

"Take your time, Sergeant."

Jule nodded her thanks.

"We walked into the middle of their setup," she continued when she could trust her voice. "That *Wyvern* had to be there, firing missiles, to make the *Perseus'* break for freedom look real. That's why the militia did everything it could to get us off it. I don't think they realized we'd seen the dummy 'Mech."

"Which you thought was the real thing," Colonel Lorch said. "You made the right choice, going to secure the prototype. If you hadn't, most of us would be dead right now. You saved a lot of lives."

"Yes sir."

"What happened at the cement plant that tipped you off?"

"Actually, the first clue was before the plant. The *Orion's* AC-10 mounted on an ordinance truck and secured with concrete. At the cement plant everything was laid out, I just didn't *look* at what I was seeing."

"And what did you see?"

"Three ordinance trailers, but only two trucks, all loaded with worn parts taken from inside a 'Mech. Bose... Staff Sergeant Bosarja was right. They used a scrapped *Orion*, probably left over from the Fourth War. There was also a whole wall of boxes for munitions grade explosives. Boxes I'd assumed were full," Jule shook her head. "And, when they lied to me, I believed them. That people would really want to help our side, help us, made sense to me. I didn't question a thing they said.

"It wasn't until I realized I hadn't heard a peep out of what was supposed to be an electronic system so sophisticated people were dying over it, that I began to suspect something was up."

Jule sat, looking straight ahead, and tried not to think of Bose and Bates and Jake. She didn't do very well.

"There really is a prototype named *Perseus*," Colonel Lorch said quietly. "Though there's nothing remarkable about its electronics. They look like *Orions* minus the AC-10 and the First Free Worlds Guards have four of them. If I thought we'd retrieved a damaged *Perseus*, I would have gotten it off planet aboard our command DropShip as soon as humanly possible.

"Over fifty tons of high explosive..." he shook his head. "You saved a lot of people, Sergeant. Remember that."

Jule nodded. It would be difficult, but if she kept moving fast enough and didn't give herself a chance to think about it, she just might pull it off.

The End