

*BATTLECORPS*

# A DIFFERENT HOPE

*Kevin Killiany*

**Ahoskie Plains  
Black Earth  
Melissia Theater, Lyran Alliance  
01 January 3069**

Rasheeda's hands twitched on the inert controls.

Beyond the viewport that wrapped around three sides of her *Night Hawk* NTK-2S's cockpit was the dark of a moonless Black Earth night. Distant arc lights illuminating some repair effort formed an ersatz constellation by which she navigated—could have navigated, if she weren't standing motionless. Reflected in the ferrogalss itself, no matter which way she looked, was her own visage, cinnamon-copper beneath her neurohelmet, illuminated by the ghostly glow of her sensor screens.

And yet, no matter which way she looked, the mountain forests of Ballynure hung before her eyes—illuminated by their own ghostly glow. The Jade Falcon *Uller* sweeping its particle projection cannons like scythes, sand-blasting their way through the dense trunks of towering redwoods. The Clanner had tried to cripple her with falling timber when her Guardian ECM suite prevented a direct weapons lock. A cunning move that had almost brought her down. Her own lasers had borne true, the large burning through the cockpit of the lighter machine even as the ER severed the forward-thrust "neck."

But that victory had been early—before the loss of Jenson, DeCanda, Morris, Ngunyen...

She cut off the list of fallen comrades. Comrades who would have lived if she had been better, been faster.

Colonel Roman hadn't seen it that way. He'd given her deep recon work full credit for the Bar Hounds' long survival against the Jade Falcon's Lambda Galaxy. But he hadn't been there, didn't know the doubts and fears that had haunted her those weeks alone behind the Falcon lines—fears that made her a half-second too slow when...

Again she pulled her thoughts up short.

Colonel Roman would never pilot a BattleMech again. He'd ejected from his stricken *Cestus* just as the *Thor*'s final barrage reduced it to scrap metal. The flash burns from his cockpit exploding around him as he cleared the hatch had seared away layers of skin.

He was unconscious during the evac, unaware of her hand holding his. On Morges he'd joked it didn't hurt—he didn't have enough nerves left to feel anything. But the nerve damage also meant he couldn't interface with a neurohelmet. Without the instant feedback loop a neurohelmet provided a MechWarrior couldn't keep a war machine on its feet and fighting when hell was breaking loose around it.

*If I'd moved in time—*

Her hands clenched on the controls, but the alpha strike command didn't reach the secured weapons.

*I hate sentry duty.*

Colonel Roman had landed a training job with the local militia and she—helped by his glowing commendation—had landed this cushy job with the 11894th Light Horse of the Blue Star Irregulars. Scout, and now leader of a scout lance. Victory on hard won victory over the last four years—things she had done *right*—but it was Ballynure she remembered. Those final days she measured herself by.

Her chronometer beeped its reminder.

She keyed her mic on.

“By the numbers, kinder.”

“Charlie Three Delta,” Scion’s voice was crisply formal. “Clear.”

“Charlie Three Gamma,” Belarus identified in her usual growl—as though checking in was an unwelcome interruption. “Clear.”

“Charlie Three Beta,” Sula said. “Clear.”

Her left-hand man was one of the nicest human beings Rasheeda knew—a personality better suited to counseling or teaching than fighting—but his voice coming in over the comm always set her teeth on edge. She *knew* it had nothing to do with the man—it was her own reaction to the captured Jade Falcon *Cougar* he piloted—but knowing the cause did nothing to lessen the effect. So far her phobic reaction to his BattleMech had not interfered with her ability to work with the MechWarrior.

“Charlie Three Alpha,” she completed the ritual, triple checking her blank screens to be sure. “Clear.”

“Let’s step out, kinder. Patrol pattern ferret, half speed.”

Three double clicks acknowledged the command. Bringing her General Motors fusion reactor up to fifty percent, she stepped her *Night Hawk* out.

Scout lances didn't often pull picket work, but Black Earth was square in the center of the Jade Falcon incursion. With every back bent to building up Black Earth's defenses against the inevitable attack, her people were doing their part by freeing up heavier units.

Her cockpit chronometer read 0129. The new year had begun over an hour ago without her noticing.

*Happy New Year, she thought. New year, same old—*

She stopped herself.

Stuffing her self pity where it belonged, Rasheeda focused on her sensor screens. Watching the icons denoting her lancers move through their proscribed patterns, she felt a surge of satisfaction. She led a good team.

**Date Line:****Saturday, 02 January 3069****Augusta Base****Black Earth****INN**

Notable MechWarrior of the Week:

Leftenant Rasheeda "Sugarfoot" Hugie.

When I entered the Officers' Pub—MechWarrior territory at the 1894th's base between Augusta DropPort and the Ahoskie Plains—Leftenant Hugie rose from her table by the darkened fireplace to greet me. She did not fit my preconceived image of a Lyran MechWarrior. A slender but imposing one hundred and eighty centimeters, she was clearly of Afro-Terran descent, but there was a decided Asio-Terran cast to her features—particularly the high cheek bones and almond eyes. If I had met her in mufti without knowing her name or heritage, I would have unthinkingly pegged her as a citizen of the Draconis Combine.

The pilot of a *Night Hawk* 2-S, Leftenant Hugie joined the 1894th Light Horse in late 3064 after the remnants of her former unit—Roman's Bar Hounds—fled Ballynure. (The Bar Hounds had held out against the Jade Falcons' Lambda Galaxy for nearly half a year and been reduced to little more than two lances of heavily damaged 'Mechs before conceding the planet. Unable to rebuild, the unit disbanded.) Hugie's actions on Tharkad in 3067 earned her command of Gamma Lance, Charlie Company, 3rd Battalion. "Three Bat Charlie" is the scout company for the Light Horse.

As we worked our way through the usual introductions, I had the impression I was speaking with a civilian professional—a doctor or lawyer rather than a hardened warrior. Her back-story, provided by Major Vozka's office, had not mentioned noble birth, but I had no trouble imagining that had been an oversight. Leftenant Hugie was familiar with our series of human-interest sidebars. Though we both knew she had been ordered to cooperate—no Blue Star Irregular would discuss anything with a civilian newshound otherwise—she was thoroughly relaxed.

Falling into the mood of a purely social evening, I broke one of my own rules and offered to buy the leftenant a beer.

"I don't drink," she answered. Then ordered mineral water for both of us.

"Not drinking must have made serving with a unit like the Bar Hounds difficult."

Her eyes darkened and I thought I'd put my foot in it, but when she answered her tone was light.

"The bar hound is a canid; think Rhodesian ridgeback with three times the body mass and twice the intelligence," she arched an eyebrow. "Are all your questions going to be that probing?"

Which seemed as good a cue as any for dropping into interview mode.

**INN:** How did you come by the name "Sugarfoot"?

**Lt. Hugie:** A youth league soccer coach from the Rasalhague who spoke imperfect Deutsche. He liked the way I kicked and meant to say I had a sweet foot; called me a sugar foot instead. His misspeak branded me for life.

**INN:** You joined the 1894th Third Battalion just before the Second Battalion was stationed on Black Earth in 3064. What was the Third doing during that time?

**Lt. Hugie:** Beyond adjusting to me? Mostly supporting any Wolf units Khan Kell thought might enjoy our company.

**INN:** Immediately before joining the Blue Star Irregulars, you spent four months behind Jade falcon lines on Ballynure doing deep recon for the Bar Hounds. What would you say was your greatest danger during that time?

**Lt. Hugie:** The plumbing. Those waste tanks only hold about seventy percent of their rating. If you didn't purge them in time, they'd turn on you. Mucking out a cockpit without running water is no joke.

**INN:** We were told you earned command of your lance on Tharkad, but not given any details. What happened on Tharkad?

**Lt. Hugie:** We fought our own people over something both sides believed in. The First Royal and the Twentieth Arcturan are the finest outfits in the LAAF. That's all I remember about it.

**INN:** Of course. Being a MechWarrior requires tremendous physical reserves. What martial arts or physical training regimen to you follow to prepare yourself?

**Lt. Hugie:** I don't know where these legends about MechWarriors being buff superhuman fighters come from. Oh, wait, yes I do. It comes from guys like you writing things like that. I spend a third of my life sitting alone in a command couch with sports drinks, survival rations, and whatever junk food I've stashed in the equipment locker. The biggest thing I have to fight are my hips. Stop. *[She raised her hand as I was about to speak.]* You do *not* know me well enough to answer that right.

**INN:** People are always interested in what motivates the men and women defending our nation. Would you care to share your own philosophy?

**Lt. Hugie:** My philosophy? There's a saying—which I've heard attributed to Kerensky—that no one ever won by dying for their cause. You win by making the other guy die for his cause. I figure my still being here is the result of me doing my best to follow that rule.

**INN:** Well that covers the past and present. What are your hopes for the future?

**Lt. Hugie:** What I hope for? The Jade Falcons took my home world nearly two decades ago, and four years back they destroyed the Bar Hounds. My hope is to be standing dead square in their way the next time they try that shit again.

Lieutenant Hugie said these last words with a smile. But her eyes belied her relaxed demeanor. I had no doubt that with "Sugarfoot" on their trail, no Jade Falcon was safe.

**Columbia  
Black Earth  
Melissia Theater, Lyran Alliance  
05 January 3069**

“Back your ape up, Three Alpha,” Chalice ordered.

Rasheeda grinned and shuffled her *Night Hawk* 2S back a meter into perfect alignment with the rest of Charlie Company.

Hauptman Chalice, One Alpha, piloted a *Night Hawk* 2Q. With its large laser mounted amidships, the left arm of a 2Q was a medium pulse laser, perhaps half the size of the right arm’s ER large laser. The disproportional effect reminded Rasheeda of a fiddler crab.

Her own 2S didn’t have a medium pulse laser. The two-ton weapon and a double heat sink had been sacrificed to make room for her Beagle Active Probe and Guardian electronic counter measures suite. She considered it a good trade—the Beagle and ECM had done more to keep the Bar Hounds alive on Ballynure than a dozen medium pulse laser could have.

That the designers had nestled the systems in the *Night Hawk*’s armored torso and moved the large laser to the left arm was a filip as far as she was concerned. She liked the symmetry—even if purists denigrated the “bastardization of the pure design” at every opportunity.

With just over an hour until the review ceremony, she powered down her ‘Mech and loosened her straps. Propping a foot on the edge of the control panel, she laced her fingers around her knee and considered the view.

Columbia, the planetary capitol, filled the valley that fell away from the municipal playing fields and rose half way up the wooded ridge beyond. Sandy tan and yellow seemed to be the predominate color of buildings spaced far enough apart to allow wide malls of trees and fountains. Red tile roofs were popular. She supposed the overall effect was semi-Mediterranean.

Closer in, crowds of brightly-dressed locals mingled among equally bright tents and stages or found seats in the low tier of bleachers flanking a flag-draped reviewing stand. Rasheeda didn’t need to step up her magnification to know the tented booths displayed local craft work, award-winning school projects, patriotic flags, festive hats, and imported oddities.

The late morning sun was behind her, its golden light and the rich greens of the foliage under the cobalt sky gave the entire scene a storybook feel.

If you didn't know the uniformity of the buildings indicated the city had been rebuilt in the last few years—built on the ruins of buildings destroyed during the Jade Falcon's invasion or expulsion—the effect was quite pleasant.

Actually, it was still pleasant, she decided. The care and balance of the rebuilding spoke of hope in the future.

Just as today's Landing Day commemoration spoke of pride in the past.

She supposed, continuing her analogy, that only two companies—the 1894th's Three Charlie and the 21st Rim World's Two Able—represented the BattleMechs of both Blue Star Irregular regiments spoke of the needs of the present.

*Everybody talking at once.*

In the broad sward between the row of Blue Star tanks and the bleachers, a massive marching band was forming up. She could see four distinct uniforms with some variants. No doubt this was a fusion of every school band in the city.

On one of the stages a very young dance troupe labored valiantly through their routine for applauding parents. On another school-aged youths were having difficulty with a set evidently intended to represent a wooded wilderness.

Beside Rasheeda, visible at the corner of her canopy, the midnight blue of Sula's polished *Cougar* shone. The highlights reflecting from the 'Mech's silver piping triggered her canopy's polarizers. She knew her machine was equally resplendent. They'd been spared last night's sentry duty to give the techs time to buff every square millimeter with cotton swabs dipped in polymer polish.

*Well, maybe not, she admitted, reaching forward to pat the edge of the control panel. But old War Dog never looked so pretty. Did you girl?*

Rasheeda was a little surprised to find herself admiring the lines of Sula's OmniMech. He kept it in B config—its arms two particle projection cannons tapering forward—and it gave the machine a clean and efficient profile. She couldn't remember the last time

she'd appreciated the machine—or even looked at it without remembering it was Jade Falcon.

The bright tents of the vendors beyond the review stand and bleachers caught her eye. Reaching into the equipment cubby below the hatch release, Rasheeda pulled out one of Tech First Bolton's brownies and a bottle of electrolyte-infused fruit-flavored water.

Perhaps her sudden fondness for the *Cougar* was fueled by the blue-black *Daishi* looming above her. The Twenty-first painted their machines a blue that seemed to suck the light and warmth out of the world around them. But for the steel star on silver shield medallion, the assault-class BattleMechs of Twenty-one Two Abel looked like blots on the landscape.

The giant assault machines were arrayed behind the light 'Mechs of the scout company just as the representative tanks and infantry were formed up in front. The *Daishi* towered in the space between her BattleMech and Sula's, while a *Sagittaire* guarded the gap separating her from Scion's *Falcon Hawk*.

The "hawk" name was the only thing Rasheeda's *Night Hawk* shared with Scion's machine. Her BattleMech was of the more humanoid design—with the exposed cockpit mounted high above the torso to provide a clear target. She had to admit the other's 'Mech did mount a lot more firepower than hers—but the only trick she begrudged the *Falcon* was the rear-pointing gun. It used a smaller engine, meaning it needed a higher percentage of the reactor's output to function—requiring greater system stress and higher operating temps. And—inexcusable in a scout—it moved slower than half a dozen medium 'Mechs she could name.

The *Sagittaire* dwarfing Scion's ride was one of the smaller 'Mechs in the Twenty-first's lineup, which favored *Devastators* and *Pillagers* in addition to the *Daishi*. Their smallest machine was an eighty-five ton *Masakari* bristling with lasers and missiles that towered over Two Gamma's twenty-five ton *Nexus*.

None of these 'Mechs—and she suspected none of the MechWarriors save Hauptmann Chavez—had been at Tharkad.

"Look alive, Charlie," Chalice said quietly on the company channel.

Rasheeda secured the half-empty bottle and brushed the brownie crumbs from her cooling vest.

*Like they're going to see that.*

Cinchng her harness tight, she brought her fusion reactor up to half burn. Plenty of power for marching and posing for photo ops.

All around her she sensed BattleMechs shifting slightly as they came alive—assuming “ready” positions. Every ‘Mech jockey had a favorite stance they thought showed off their machine’s best feature. As long as the pose didn’t interfere with the overall unity of the formation, the practice was permitted—or at least overlooked—by the brass.

Her Beagle confirmed everyone was at forty to sixty percent cycle and no one had live weapons.

A short caravan of open limos swept around the village of tents. Rasheeda tried to remember who the local VIPs were and failed.

In due course, men and women in what was apparently formal attire had arrayed themselves on the reviewing stand. The massed marching band broke into a lively tune, only vaguely martial and with a driving beat. Rasheeda’s wrists twitched, phantom sticks finding drum heads as her harness stood in for the straps of her percussion rack.

To her surprise, the two-hundred-plus musicians actually marched. Not just back and forth, but in a intricate pattern with drum majors hurling batons and dancers tumbling through complex choreography and throwing each other in the air. Her high school band had never cooperated with another school at this level.

*Weeks of rehearsal.*

After the bands’ pyrotechnic display, the Black Earth Planetary Militia passing in review between the Blue Star Irregulars and the bleachers was almost anticlimactic. Until one noticed the ages of the troops, and the number with missing limbs or in wheel chairs.

These were the defenders of Black Earth. Sure, the Jade Falcons had rolled over them. Out-numbered twenty to one by forces armed with technology they could only dream about, the BEPM never stood a chance. But knowing they didn’t stand a chance, the militia had stood and delivered with everything they had.

“Ten-shut!” she ordered over her lance channel.

The shift was subtle, there really was little different between the “ready” positions and attention. First her lance, then the twenty-first assault ‘Mechs flanking them, then the rest of the Blue Star contingent pulled formally erect.

It wasn’t much of a change, but it was enough. The men and women of the Black Earth Militia held their heads a fraction higher as the applause of the crowd washed over them.

**Date Line:****Wednesday, 06 January 3069****Columbia, Black Earth****INN**

It's just past midnight, local time and Landing Day is officially over. The final bit of smoked *brilla* has been served, the last salute fired, the final toast given. By tradition, the formal gala ended at the stroke of twelve—though you couldn't tell from the dancers or the band. And of course parties continue all through the city.

Highlights for this reporter were the children's panorama's. Call me schmaltzy, but the hope and pride shining from the faces of the young make all things seem possible. And it was no surprise that same hope, that same pride, shown in the faces of the Black Earth Planetary Militia as they were recognized for their selfless defense of Black Earth at the noon Memorial Ceremony.

Arrayed to show their respect for the Militia were elements from both regiments of the Blue Star Irregulars, the mercenary command tasked by the Archon with keeping this world secure. Infantry, tanks, and of course BattleMechs stood at attention as the warriors of Black Earth passed in review.

Readers of last week's Notable MechWarrior column will be pleased to know that among those representing the Blue Stars was a *Night Hawk* variant that bore the image of a snarling hound running beside the galloping pinto of the 1894th Light Horse. Lieutenant Rasheeda Hugie stood with the rest of "Three Bat Charlie" as the highly decorated recon company showed their respect.

But the pride of the soldiers, the hope of the children, is made bittersweet by the knowledge the Jade Falcons are again on the move. The security the citizens of Black Earth now enjoy is fragile, their freedom exists under a shadow of war. Taking advantage the upheaval rocking the states of the Inner Sphere, the Crusader Clans probe the borders, looking for weaknesses to exploit.

And no one here forgets the Jade Falcons held Black Earth for fourteen years. There is no doubt that despite being kicked off—or perhaps because they were kicked off—they consider this world theirs. Or that given what they see as a chance, they will try to take it back.

The Blue Star Irregulars, and by extension the might of the LAAF and the Wolves of Arc Royal, are poised and ready to stop the Jade Falcons. But to what degree is that readiness compromised by the war with the Free Worlds League and the Blakist assaults on worlds of the inner provinces? This is a question that keeps the defenders sober through the revelry and keeps thinking citizens awake into the night.

But the people of Black Earth do not let fear govern them. Nor do they let it darken the joy of their proudest day. What preparations can be made have been made.

Come what may, the defenders are ready.

**Augusta Base  
Black Earth  
Melissia Theater, Lyran Alliance  
08 January 3069**

The Officers' Pub was quiet for a Friday. The tables closest to Rasheeda's corner position were empty. The few farther tables that were occupied held either single diners or couples uninterested in anyone else.

This suited Rasheeda just fine. With an oversized fatigue jacket worn over her MechWarrior gear for warmth, she was focused on the sizzling plate the waiter had just set before her.

The OP's steaks were good and the coffee strong and what she needed before the night's patrol was a good meal and dangerous levels of caffeine. Company would only be an unwanted distraction.

*Speaking of which.*

She kept her eyes on her plate, pretending she didn't see the earnest young man with the helmet of blonde curls winding his way between tables toward her. The INN newsman was nearly a decade younger than she was, but had clearly been interested in forming something of a relationship since their first meeting early in the week. He had managed to mention her in about a third of the pieces he'd posted since.

She told herself the fact she'd read every story he'd filed in the past week indicated nothing significant.

"May I join you?"

Rasheeda looked up in evident surprise. She noted his plastic mug—translucent to simulate frost—was full of beer. He wasn't facing a night of duty. More importantly, he hadn't picked up on why she didn't drink. Young.

"Why, it's Daffyd Porter, boy reporter," she liked word plays that worked in English and Deutsche. Puns were her favorite, but alliteration would do in a pinch. "What can I do for you, Davy?"

"I was wondering if I could join you?" David repeated. "Not for an interview. Just social."

Rasheeda indicated the chair opposite with a steak-laden fork.

“What’s on your mind?” she asked as he sat.

“Nothing, really,” he answered with a shrug and sipped his drink.

The scent of the beer clenched her jaw, but brew was easy to ignore. If he’d been drinking scotch...

“You could not have seen the bar hound on my ‘Mech from across the parade ground,” she said, forcing her mouth open to take in the steak. “So when did you see it?”

“High tech mercenaries are the only ones with field glasses?” Daffyd countered. “Didn’t know you read my work.”

“Long, boring hours in the cockpit, remember?”

They wandered through small talk, neither really saying anything, while some of the diners left and more drinkers arrived. Rasheeda’s steak and potatoes were gone and Daffyd’s mug was empty thirty-five minutes before she was due to report to the hangar.

“I was wondering about something you said,” he said when she raised her coffee mug to the waiter to signal for a refill. “When you said all you hoped for was a chance to stop the Jade Falcons.”

“What about it?”

“Well, is that really all you hope for?”

“I think it’s plenty,” she said, nodding her thanks to the waiter as he left the coffee pot on the table and took her plate.

“No it isn’t,” Daffyd shook his head. “First of all, it depends on the Jade Falcons attacking—not you doing anything. Second of all, it’s just a chance for one more fight; nothing about the future.”

“Passive and depressing, huh?” Rasheeda asked. “Well, what do you expect from someone who chooses to spend her life sitting alone on a couch eight meters in the air?”

“I’m being serious and you’re blowing me off.”

“Pretty much.”

He sat without moving, watching her taste her coffee and add sugar until she got it right. She realized he wasn’t going away.

"Look, you're a nice kid," she said. *Spinster aunt approach. Good choice.* "But you're from where?"

"Coventry."

"Oh," she said, reassessing. "Then you do know something about war."

"More than I'd like," Daffyd answered, looking older than he had before. "Enough to know using the hope of vengeance to get through each day is a dead end."

Rasheeda drowned the back snap that leapt to her tongue in a sip of coffee.

"The Jade Falcons of today are worse than they were even ten years ago," she said instead, keeping her voice reasonable. "They've taken their genetic cleansing program one step further and started purging people with defective genes from the populations they conquer."

"I've heard those rumors," Daffyd shook his head. "It doesn't really sound like them. Too much work; too much paying attention to peons. Not their style."

"Brass believes it."

Daffyd sighed and visibly decided to let the issue go.

"Eleven years ago my town was collateral damage," Daffyd said. "Not even a target. The Falcons just rolled over it on their way to the Academy."

"I was a kid—didn't even own a gun—and I wanted them all dead."

Part of Rasheeda's mind did the math, confirming her earlier estimate that Daffyd was ten years her junior. Another part listened to his words and the way he said them and decided they were both of an age.

"Two years ago, same thing—only this time we don't know who hit us," Daffyd was saying. "Most folks think Free Worlds, but now I'm not sure—and in the long run it doesn't matter."

"And with my bad heart, the LAAF wouldn't take me. I'd lost my home and my family and I couldn't fight back."

Rasheeda checked the wall chronometer. There wasn't anything she could say and she had to be at the controls in twenty-some minutes.

Daffyd followed her glance, and evidently her thoughts. He leaned forward and his voice took on a more urgent note.

"When I started writing, my goal was to make sure everyone knew what had happened, what kind of monsters these were," he said. "But what helped—what made a difference—was reminding people of what could be, what was possible."

Daffyd's mouth twisted in a half smile.

"Schmaltz, I know," he said. "Banal and predictable, I can't deny. But true."

"Two, maybe three differences, Davy—Daffyd," Rasheeda said. "I have a gun, a big one, and the monsters that destroyed my home and killed my friends aren't faceless invaders who disappeared into the void."

"The Jade Falcons are a beatable enemy; one that keeps coming back," she was aware her fist was clenched and relaxed her fingers. "Stopping them is hope enough for me right now."

Rising, she drained her coffee too quickly and wiped the dribble that escaped on her sleeve.

"But you are cute," she said, stopping whatever he'd been about to say. "When I'm ready for a different hope, I'll let you know."

**Ahoskie Plains  
Black Earth  
Lyran Alliance  
11 January 3069**

“Scramble, scramble, scramble,” the voice cut through Rasheeda’s headphones, overriding her volume settings.

She sat bolt upright, only to be snatched back by her couch harness. She cursed her spilled drink as she stuffed the bottle and the bag of candied popcorn back in the emergency medical compartment.

“Wu Sen Tang. Code Alpha, alpha, gamma, falcon, one-two-oh,” the voice on her headphones snapped each word off like glass. “Say again: Alpha. Alpha. Gamma. Falcon. One-twenty.”

Jade Falcons—Galaxy size force—at near pirate point. Operations Command was estimating two hours to contact.

*Must be inside lunar orbit.*

Rasheeda didn’t know much about jump navigation, but she knew enough to realize that was exceptional flying.

“Use your plumbing, kinder,” she broadcast, knowing her voice would sound clearly in her MechWarriors’ left ears even as the general call pierced their right. “We’ve got company. Eighty kph to rally point hector.”

Eighty would push Sula’s *Cougar* and Scion’s *Falcon Hawk* close to their limits, while hobbling Belarus’ *Talon*, but it would get her lance where into position before the off duty ‘Mechs were moving.

One Galaxy of Jade Falcons against two regiments of Blue Stars....

And no batchall. If the birds had negotiated forces, the brass would be telling off defensive units, not calling a general scramble. It was everything they had against everything the Clanners threw at them.

Thanks to nearly two years of rebuild, the Blue Stars were stronger than they had a right to be. But that meant a lot of new blood—the Twenty-first was almost *all* new blood—and a lot of troops who hadn’t taken fire together.

Odds were not good.

OpCom's voice continued in her right ear as she brought her weapons on line and ran an on-the-fly repeat of her pre-watch systems check. Half the Star Hunters were sent to low cover—the Twenty-first's Neutron Blues already had orbit defense, supporting *Kerensky's Blues*. Mulvihill's Cavalry was ordered to preset entrenchments west of Columbia—facing the Ahoskie Plains.

This didn't involve any great precognitive abilities on OpCom's part. The rolling hardpan of the Ahoskie was a natural landing zone, and in the center of the narrow triangle formed by Columbia, Augusta DropPort, and the mines that paid the bills for Black Earth.

Columbia would be a tertiary target for the invaders, after the DropPort and mining/refining operations to the southwest. Though the Falcons wouldn't know the industrial centers weren't going to be part of the battle until they'd wasted time hitting the abandoned complexes.

Planetary Defense plan was pull everyone back to Columbia and Augusta DropPort. The Blue Stars and the BEPM were going to hold the population center and 'Port until relief arrived.

How long that would be was up to Khan Kell.

In due course, OpCom's to do list got down to the light recon lances and the 1894th's Third Battalion Charlie Company Gamma Lance got ordered to rally point Hector.

Rasheeda matter-of-factly reported they were already in position.

**Date Line:**  
**Friday, 15 January 3069**  
**Columbia, Black Earth**  
**INN**

Ten days ago these children were celebrating the history of their world with their faces bright with the hope of the future. Now their faces are drawn and tense and their hope of the future has been replaced with fear for the present.

Word came through yesterday that there would be no relief of Black Earth. Too many battles on too many worlds.

With the Militia all but destroyed and the Blue Star Irregulars down to something just above fifty percent, there is no question Black Earth will fall to the Jade Falcons. The plan now is to withdraw in good order, evacuating as many civilians as possible in the process.

Obviously, no convoy of DropShips could transport the population of an entire world. But there are those who should be gotten away before the Jade Falcons seize the planet. The handicapped, who would be purged; the militia veterans who would be punished; the very young, who have a chance to live free.

In a measure of how bitterly the Jade Falcons hate having lost Black Earth before, they have rejected pleas from both civilian and military leaders to permit evacuees safe passage. The Falcons mean to own this world and to exterminate any who oppose them—or who try to escape.

Ironically, the high casualties suffered by the Irregulars created a chance to make this evacuation possible despite the Jade Falcons' threat. The *Overlord*-class DropShips *Loyal Son* and *Heritage*, until recently carriers for the Third Assault Avatars, have been tasked with getting refugees out of the system.

Also, against all odds, the Blue Stars' own WarShip, the corvette *Kerensky's Blues*, is still in the fight and will escort the civilian ships to safety.

A handful of BattleMechs of the 1894th will defend the evacuation against Jade Falcon forays, which have breached the DropPort and been repulsed on a number of occasions. The remaining 'Mechs, armor and infantry will hold the perimeter against the bulk of the

Falcon forces. Once the *Loyal Son* is free, they will make a fighting retreat to their own DropShips.

Because this reporter suffers from a hereditary heart condition, his request to remain on Black Earth has been denied. Nor will he be permitted to stay with the last defenders, but will be evacuated aboard the *Loyal Son* with other potential victims of Jade Falcon genetic cleansing.

There will be an interruption in the flow of INN reports from Black Earth. For how long, we can not say. But not forever. Because someday, perhaps someday soon, the forces of the LAAF, or the Wolves of Arc Royal, or some combination of allies, will be back.

You can be sure the Blue Star Irregulars will be in that number.

As will be this reporter.

From Black Earth, this is Daffyd Porter reporting for INN.

**Augusta DropPort  
Black Earth  
Melissia Theater, Lyran Alliance  
16 January 3069**

*Everything happens just after midnight.*

The last of the civilian transports were making their way to the *Loyal Son*—she had just started to think she could move out to support the perimeter—when a pair of Jade Falcon OmniMechs breached the ‘Port’s defensive line and made a run at the *Overlord*-class DropShip.

There was little two ‘Mechs could do to harm a DropShip, of course, but if they could keep it from launching an *Overlord* would be a prize worth almost any risk.

Her Beagle probe told Rasheeda a *Thor* and a *Black Hawk* were inside the warehouse line and moving rapidly up from the west. A heavy and a medium—both jumpers. Assuming they were fresh, either one alone might be more than a match for the three damaged ‘Mechs providing close defense.

Belarus and her *Talon* were supporting Baker Company, Scion was dead, and no one else was close. The naked *Night Hawk*, the stumbling *Coyote*, and the one-armed *Lynx* on loan from the Twenty-first were just going to have to do the best they could.

The Clanners were making no effort to conceal their approach. No doubt they were counting on their overpowering presence to panic the Blue Star ‘Mechs into flight.

*If it weren’t for the civilians, they’d be right.*

But the *Loyal Son*’s nose guns were focused outward, bolstering the perimeter as best they could. In theory the waist guns offered ground defense, but this close to the warehouses they could neither get a lock in their field of fire nor deflect far enough to be useful in the clear area. The after batteries couldn’t be fired without vaporizing the Blue Stars and the civilians in the process.

All of which made Rasheeda’s three-‘Mech command the last ditch in the civilians’ defense. And they weren’t yielding alive.

"Jen-kins," she'd almost said Jenson—a lancemate lost on Ballynure. "Fade right. You're on your own with the *Black Hawk* until Sula and I clear the *Thor*."

*Ha!*

"Be advised Beagle shows he's taken damage left side," she added. "It's going to be ten ER medium lasers on a six/four split to your ER PPC and large laser. Keep hitting him at range; don't let him close."

She did not add that if things got close enough for Jenkins to use his own medium lasers it would be all over.

"Aye, aye," Jenkins acknowledged. Identifying his target, he vectored right, angling for a position that would let him fire at the greatest possible distance.

"Don't suppose the *Thor* is out of missiles," Sula asked dryly.

"No—" Rasheeda broke off as her blood ran cold.

*It's the bastard!*

A half second later she realized her mistake. Though Jade Falcon closing on their position mounted the same laser-and-Ultra-AC configuration as the *Thor* that had burned the flesh from Colonel Roman, her Beagle Active Probe had never seen this particular BattleMech before.

"It's a C-fig," she said, hoping her glitch hadn't been too obvious. "Your PPCs are going to have the reach."

She checked the loading ramp of the *Loyal Son* on her three-sixty. Four of the heavy half-track buses to go. Armored buses, but armored to police specs—prisoner transport stuff. Nowhere near enough heavy metal to take fire.

"Pull away from the 'Ship," she said. "Angle into the base of that gantry; it's dense enough to fog the *Thor*'s scans."

"What are we doing?"

"I got the moves, you got the gun," Rasheeda said. "I'll keep him busy, you nail him."

"I'm not going to bring down a heavy with one shot—or even one alpha strike," Sula pointed out. "And you don't have the armor to take more than a couple of hits."

"You're right," Rasheeda said. "You shuffle around in a circle and I'll ask him nicely to go away."

"I didn't say I wasn't going," Sula said as his *Coyote* made its painful way into the shadow of the mobile gantry. "I was just assessing the situation."

Rasheeda didn't mention that the wounded 'Mech had taken so long to reach cover that the oncoming *Thor* could not possibly have missed the intended ambush being set up. Instead, she angled her machine to split the difference between the larger machines. If she could draw the fire of one or both of the Falcons so her comrades could get in a few telling shots, they stood a chance of delaying the Clanners long enough for the last civilian to get aboard.

Living long after that was too much to hope for.

Jenkins drew first blood, his ER PPC raking the *Black Hawk* as it cleared cover.

The Clanner announced he was a tyro by firing back, the beams of his lasers dissipating into harmless washes of heat before they reached the *Lynx*.

*There might be some hope after all.*

Then her Beagle came alive with thermal flare and she realized seventy tons of enemy BattleMech was airborne. A gutsy move—it made the *Thor* a hanging target, but only if the *Overlord*'s waist gunners were ready for it. And jumping out of the metal tangle of warehouses in the dark...

Rasheeda cut right—ninety degrees off its line of flight—and pushed her *Night Hawk* to full speed. She couldn't help noticing that being shy four tons of armor seemed to add a new level of nimbleness to her maneuvers.

The aiming beam of an extended range large laser lanced down out of the dark above the rising jet flares, tracking her as she ran, but not locking on. The *Thor* didn't mount a Beagle.

Lasers upraised, Rasheeda button-hooked as the jets faded at apogee. She let her Beagle Active Probe guide her double-barreled return shot. The beams vectored together just below the offset cockpit, gouging into the underside of the left shoulder actuator.

The twin ER PPC bolts of Sula's alpha strike crackled upward a tenth second later, targeting the heavy metal her lasers painted. The descending Falcon was haloed in a dancing St. Elmo's fire of secondary energy as the blue bolts buried themselves in the right arm and shoulder assemblies.

The heavy BattleMech tilted even as its jump jets fired to break its fall. Rasheeda saw its right arm separate to follow its own trajectory. The Falcon pilot spread his machine's legs, angling one set of jump jets to counterbalance the loss of mass.

Rasheeda fired again, but there were too many variables for the targeting computer to calculate in time and the twin beams went wide. Cycling fast enough to get two shots at a jumping 'Mech was remarkable enough. She guessed having no armor was an asset in heat dissipation.

The *Thor* landed hard, staggering to keep itself upright. Two PPC bolts from the shadow of the mobile gantry complicated the pilot's job.

The Falcon launched a spread of short range missiles at her before turning to face the more potent *Coyote*. There was enough range for her Guardian to respond; it's electronic pulses scrambled the incoming guidance systems, sending all six spiraling into harmless corkscrews.

A glance at her three-sixty confirmed the last of the armored civilian buses was at the foot of the ramp.

Above her head the *Overlord*'s bow batteries fired at the near horizon. The sea sound of radio chatter in her headphones told her the two BattleMechs her team faced were not an isolated incursion—the perimeter was collapsing. The Blue Stars were pulling back to their DropShips, doing their best to keep the withdrawal from becoming a rout.

Rasheeda pushed the larger battle out of her mind. The *Thor* had turned left profile toward her to target Sula—his PPCs a bigger threat than her lasers. The wounded *Coyote* wouldn't stand long against the heavy 'Mech's Ultra AC-20. Dialing both lasers under her main trigger, she targeted the big machine's left shoulder.

Red light smeared across a third of her three-sixty display.

The *Black Hawk* had fired across her rear quarter, the bolt passing between her and Jenkins's *Lynx*.

### *The bus?!*

Distracted from her shot, Rasheeda scanned behind her. The lasers could not have been at full power. Instead of the flaming hulk she expected, the civilian bus was intact. Then the thermals along the lower half registered and she saw the melted wheels and treads.

Of course. The Jade Falcon MechWarriors wanted to prevent the DropShip's launch. A ruined bus full of children keeping a loading ramp open was as effective as docking clamps for holding the ship to the ferroconcrete.

Rasheeda knew there were cargo drags capable of pulling the bus aboard, but those required stevedores run the cables out under fire. They needed cover.

Belatedly she fired her alpha strike into the *Thor*'s left shoulder—too late to stop its first salvo, but boiling armor. Hopefully it was enough to buy Sula time to get in a couple more shots.

Then she turned her *Night Hawk* and ran for the loading ramp.

For the first time in her life she regretted her *Night Hawk* didn't have hands. She stood for a second, evaluating the problem. There was no way to push, no way to pull the bus up the ramp.

Her diagnostic screen flared red as cannon fire carved armor from her back. For a moment she was surprised the *Thor* pilot had considered her worth a salvo of her own, but perhaps he only wanted to add to the wreckage fouling the loading ramp. Either way, she was drawing fire to the stranded civilians. With her thinly shielded back to the Falcons, her 'Mech couldn't protect them for long.

*So don't show your back. Use it.*

Stepping close to the bus, she spun about to face the oncoming *Thor*.

The heavy OmniMech was close enough to enable its targeting computer to cut through the Guardian's distortion. Another volley would reduce her *Night Hawk* to scrap.

Targeting the upper torso of the giant, Rasheeda fired both lasers.

The *Thor* flinched aside, the pilot reacting to the flash and flare as the beams of two large lasers converged just below his cockpit.

The Falcon's answering shot went wide, cannon shells caroming harmlessly along the heavily armored flank of the DropShip.

Before it could retarget, a single lance of flaring blue energy leapt from the shadow of the gantry. The PPC bolt tore into the gaping wound left by its severed arm. The *Thor* staggered as armor and coolant flowed, then turned to face its attacker.

*Thanks, Sula.*

Rasheeda flexed the knees of her *Night Hawk*, half stooping before thrusting her 'Mech back against the bus. The metal on metal clang pierced her headset and the wireframe announced she'd shattered the last shards of rear armor against the civilian vehicle. No doubt she'd crushed the bus's engine compartment as well, but that didn't matter at this point.

The feet of a *Night Hawk* were hinged, designed to keep the machine rock steady on uneven terrain. Now as she straightened the knee actuators, the horseshoe-shaped heels bent back, their armored spikes biting into the reinforced composite of the cargo ramp.

Metal scraped, her damage alarm hooted, stress warnings flashed up and down the wireframe image of her hip, knee, and ankle actuators. For a moment the tableau held—her 'Mech leaning back on a heavy bus glued to the loading ramp by its melted treads. Then the bus moved.

Eye on the status boards, she worked the sticks, flexing one knee, then the other. Shifting her feet one at a time, she shoved the bus up the ramp. Not far and not fast, but enough to give hope her bonehead move might work.

Until her Beagle hooted its warning that the *Thor* was once again closing.

Rasheeda didn't need to check her scans to know there would be no more rescuing bolts of blue from the base of the gantry.

This close, every edge went to the heavy. Even with the beagle, her ER laser was having trouble acquiring target lock. She slaved the ER to her large and cut loose with both barrels. A point-blank hit to the unshielded missile launcher. The detonating warheads blasted the six tube rack to ruin.

*The cockpit was too much to ask for?*

The *Thor*'s Ultra autocannon caught her *Night Hawk* square in the chest. The last precious shreds of her armor shattered.

A shrill, grinding rattle at the edge of hearing seemed to grow up around her. It took her a long second—time enough to fire both lasers at near contact range and take another hit in return—to identify the sound. Gyro bearing.

The three-ton flywheel assembly that kept the bipedal *Night Hawk* upright had taken damage. Not enough to destroy it outright, but the keening squeal vibrating through every plate and strut announced her BattleMech was dying. How long before hyper-sonic shrapnel tore it apart from the inside?

Ignoring the *Thor*, Rasheeda hacked into her control computer. Jockeys were told shutting down the gyro on a standing BattleMech was impossible, but it could be done. It just resulted in a fallen 'Mech with full system shut down.

Given a choice between lying inert before her enemies and filling a hold full of civilians with three tons of flying metal fragments, Rasheeda's fingers flew through the shutdown sequence.

Flashes of blood red and azure blue washed through the canopy as she worked, throwing the toggles into sharp relief and robbing the phosphor screens of color. Battle chatter from the retreating Blue Stars filled her ears with meaningless sound as lines of input code skipped and slithered across the readout.

At last the gyro icon went black. The squeal of the tortured bearing backed away from its tooth-shattering keen. Now it was in the hands of physics. The only question left was whether the assembly could hold together long enough for inertia and friction to slow the massive flywheel.

Keeping the 'Mech upright was problematical. And would have been impossible, if its mass weren't shoved hard against the bus. Switching from keyboard to sticks and pedals, Rasheeda flexed and thrust the legs again, pushing the bus another handful of meters up the ramp.

The BattleMech would have decreasing mobility until the gyro dropped below the safety threshold and triggered a shutdown. She could use her last spasm of power to throw her *Night Hawk* off the ramp.

Again her cockpit washed with blue lightning mixed with red.

Looking up, Rasheeda saw the *Thor* at the base of the ramp—farther away than she expected it to be.

And facing Jenkins's battered *Lynx*.

The medium machine was gouged and cratered. Rasheeda didn't need to check her Beagle to know it had lost its large torso laser and center-mounted medium. Keeping his PPC leveled at the Clan OmniMech, Jenkins shuffled the *Lynx* right, drawing the *Thor*'s autocannon farther away from the stricken *Night Hawk* and the bus as the pilot rotated to track him.

Her scanners outlined the Blue Star BattleMech with a white-hot nimbus. Jenkins didn't have a heat sink left. His next shot would force his *Lynx* into thermal shutdown.

The ravaged right side of the *Thor* was toward her. Rasheeda didn't waste time on a target lock. Leveling her weapons by eye, she unleashed both lasers.

The ER's beam went wide, skipping across the barrel of the autocannon to furrow the ferrocrete. But the large laser struck true, stabbing deep into the OmniMech's frame through the torn armor.

Rasheeda fell backwards. Impact slammed her back into the couch, kicking her breath from her lungs as the whiplash rattled her rattling her teeth.

The bus was gone.

The stevedores had run a line under the cover of—of her—and the powerful cargo winch had yanked the civilians to safety.

*Time to get off the ramp so they can shut the door.*

Again she regretted the *Night Hawk*'s lack of hands or articulated arms. A roll and shove would have solved the problem in an instant. As it was—still fighting to get air back into her lungs—she had to kick and thrash the *Night Hawk*'s legs, twisting its broad torso in an effort to lever a laser against the ramp for a thrust toward the edge.

Something clanged against the outer hull, just above her canopy.

Her Beagle probe showed nonsense, all of her screens filled with white noise. She had no idea what was happening around her. But if Jenkins could keep that *Thor* off the ramp long enough for her to roll clear, the *Loyal Son* would be free.

At last her kicking leg missed the ramp, swinging down through unresisting air. This far up the ramp it was going to be a twenty meter drop—not that that mattered. Even if she survived the fall, the backwash of the DropShip’s fusion engines would reduce her BattleMech to an oily smear on the ferroconcrete.

Flashing warning lights, and a new hoot cutting through the white noise snarl of her headset. Gyro wind-down—what the computer saw as a systems failure—was about to freeze her myomer net. Her BattleMech was seconds from becoming a thirty-five ton statue.

A final kick and twist and her *Night Hawk* upended. There was a giddy no-gravity moment at the top of its swing over the edge, then she was plummeting face first toward the shadowed ferroconcrete.

The jerk snapped her head forward. Blood spattered from her nose and bitten tongue, spraying across the scanner screen. The couch harness dug into her shoulders and gut, knocking the wind from her again.

It took her half a second to process she was swinging above the ground.

The clang; the scrambled sensors. The *Loyal Son*’s cargo handlers had nailed her with a magnetic grapple.

“Cut me loose, you idiots!” she shouted into a microphone rendered useless by the same electromagnet that had killed her Beagle.

She thrashed and kicked, trying to break the grapple’s grip. Useless against a drag designed to handle a hundred tons of dead weight.

The flashing idiot lights burned solid for a long three count. Then, with a final angry buzz of warning, the safety interlocks shut the myomer net down.

Shouting futile orders that she be left—that the *Loyal Son* lift the refugees to safety—Rasheeda was pulled back onto the ramp and into the DropShip.

Her last sight of Black Earth was the legless *Thor* on its back, trying to angle its autocannon to fire a final salvo through the closing doors of the cargo bay.

**Dateline:**  
**Tuesday 19 January 3069**  
**Zenith jump point**  
**Blue Hole, Lyran Alliance**  
**INN**

Everyone has seen the trids of the big space battles; massive ships passing by one another, close enough to make out gun ports and portholes. but in reality, space is big, ships are pinpoints of light, and the flash of explosions makes fireflies look like blimps. Most space combat is seen and recorded by radar and tactical computers. but for every maxim there is an exception. for this reporter, the death of the *Kerensky's Blues* was one such exception.

On the edge of oblivion, I was among hundreds to witness the fury of the Jade Falcons as they descended on Black Earth. The Blue Star Irregulars fought well, but could not halt the onslaught. They sounded a retreat, surrendering the world to the Falcons, hoping to give them this victory so the battle-worn mercenaries could fight another day. We rode to the jump point aboard the *Loyal Son*, an *Overlord*-class Dropship, under the escort of the *Kerensky's Blues*, the Stars' own captured Clan *Fredasa*-class corvette.

A small fleet of JumpShips and DropShips—Irregulars and civilian— was assembled at the nadir jump point, waiting for the final dockings to make their outbound leap.

Then the Falcons struck.

A *Congress* and a *Vincent Mark 42*, the names of which I did not know (though we were probably close enough to see them at one point), made a rare and dangerous in-system jump to cut us off. The *Blues* cut us loose, and valiantly interposed herself between the Falcons and the retreating DropShips.

Missiles and lasers flashed between both sides as the *Blues* burned forward, bearing on the *Vincent*. In a burst of autocannon fire, the *Vincent* faltered even as debris trailed from our champions' *Fredasa* like the guts from some high-tech piñata. The *Congress* ignored these combatants and came through swarms of fighters like a giant among gnats to shatter DropShips and JumpShips alike with her massive guns. Even under fire, we managed to dock with our JumpShip, just in time to see the *Congress* turn our way. She looked as big as my fist in the portholes...

But then the *Blues* came charging forward, maimed, guns blazing, risking her life to force the more massive *Congress* to veer off and deal with a greater danger. As we made the transition to K-F space, it struck us all that only we aboard the *Loyal Son* remained of the Irregulars' departing task force, aboard the only JumpShip the Falcons had yet to strike. We never saw the *Blues* or any other JumpShip emerge with us over Blue Hole.

But as long as we live, none of us will ever forget the brave souls who traded their lives for our own.

**DropShip Loyal Son  
Zenith jump point, Blue Hole  
Melissia Theater, Lyran Alliance  
20 January 3069**

“You’re a hero, you know.”

Rasheeda pulled her gaze down from the featureless ceiling to find Daffyd Porter at the foot of her bed—which was wrapped around her like a cocoon. Zero gravity was great for mending bones. Too bad they’d cut back on her pain meds—clear thinking was not something she appreciated.

Behind Daffyd the ship’s medicos were busily doing whatever it was they did that required them to flit back and forth across the narrow view her privacy portions allowed.

“I’m serious,” the reporter went on after she’d let the silence stretch. “There is going to be a whole generation of Black Earth girls named ‘Rasheeda.’ You are the stuff of legends.”

She considered telling him humor was the wrong tactic, but decided she didn’t care enough.

“Remember the part where I told you I don’t drink?” she asked instead.

“Yeah, well, the doctors filled me in on your half-dead liver,” Daffyd answered. “I take it the not drinking is the residual effect of trying to drink yourself to death.”

“The doctors filled you in?” Rasheeda echoed, ignoring the question. “What did you do, tell them you’re my next of kin?”

Daffyd lifted a medical noteputer tethered to the ring that anchored the foot of her floating bed.

“I didn’t say they knew they’d filled me in,” he said. “But hanging here watching you sleep has only limited fascination. Light reading helped pass the time.”

Rasheeda sucked her teeth and resumed her study of the ceiling.

“You know,” Daffyd said after a moment. “I’m pretty stupid.”

She didn't argue.

"I didn't realize you thought you'd failed on Ballynure until I read about your liver."

He pulled himself up until he was in her field of vision again.

She considered looking away again, forcing him to move. She could probably keep it up longer than he could. But, again, she didn't care. She looked at him, her eyes flat, as he floated between the lights that would be overhead whenever the *Loyal Son* ever landed again.

"You were a hero at Ballynure—doing more good and saving more lives than anyone else could have," Daffyd said. "And you were a hero on Black Earth."

Rasheeda closed her eyes, hoping he would go away.

"You are riding in an *Overlord* DropShip that's packed to the gunwales with people who owe you their lives," Daffyd said in the darkness. "Or would be if DropShips had gunwales."

"And back on Black Earth there are people who will be able to carry on under the Jade Falcons—able to resist—because they know their children are safe. Because of you."

She said nothing, did nothing.

Rasheeda hung in the darkness behind her closed lids and listened to the air flow in through her nostrils. Slow, shallow, the cracked ribs and punctured lung had not yet healed enough to allow deep breathing. Her air rushed in, cool, not as long as it should have been; then it rushed out again, expelled by lungs that didn't yet dare fill or push as they could. It was peaceful, hanging weightless in the dark, listening to the wind.

She opened her eyes.

Daffyd was still there.

"How's my 'Mech?" she asked.

She'd asked the doctors, but none of them had known. Or perhaps hadn't been willing to tell her.

"Gyro's gone," Daffyd said. He'd clearly been prepared for the question, ticking the items off in rapid succession. "Without armor to insulate—and you ended up with something like half a ton

of armor total—the Beagle and Guardian were fried by the electromagnet. And about a third of your myomer was vaporized. But everything else is solid.

“Do you know you didn’t lose a single heat sink?” he asked. “I’m told that’s just about unheard of.”

“Get me to Atocongo,” Rasheeda said. “We—the Blue Stars—had a contract with Skibinski’s Salvage. They can get *War Dog* back together.”

“You don’t need to worry about that.”

“If they won’t take my credit,” she pressed on. “I can work something out. Trade.”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Daffyd repeated. “You’re a hero. Anything you want, you’ve got it.”

“What I want are Jade Falcons in my sights,” Rasheeda snapped. “I’m no good here, no good without my ‘Mech.”

“Some debts require blood. And it’s their turn to pay.”

“Rasheeda—”

“Daffyd.”

Her tone stopped him.

Then Rasheeda surprised herself by smiling.

“But you are pretty, Davy boy,” she said. “When I have time for a different hope, I’ll let you know.”