

ANTS

by Jason M. Hardy

**Bune, Halfway
Bolan Provinve
Lyrans Alliance
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The Death's Head Mercenary Corps ceased to exist as a functioning unit when twin PPC blasts caught their flagship 'Mech, a custom-fitted *Cataphract*, in the head and chest. Gyros destroyed, human consciousness and control lost, the 'Mech fell like—well, like a big metal behemoth with no head.

It crashed backward onto the Corps' Lightning hovercar, which happened to be rushing to aid the 'Mech. The resulting pile of scrap metal contained the final remnants of Mackie Smythe's investment in his fledgling unit, including Smythe himself.

Pwyll Lankarr knew he should probably do something more than contemplate the wreckage. Bright beams and whining slugs darted over his head, ozone and smoke choked off most of the air wandering into his lungs. He was seated on a nice soft piece of grass, but other than that there was nothing to indicate that he was in a remotely safe location.

But the smoldering, twisted metal had a hypnotic effect on him. Smoke rose slowly from the wreckage, occasionally pulled into rapid spirals in the wake of darting shells that, a distant part of Pwyll's brain told him, were passing far too close.

This is it, Pwyll thought. *This is the end of the plan*. Everything had come together so fast—they were in the right place at the right time, Mackie pumped his ComStar friend so hard that they were hired before they had even registered anywhere as a unit. Mackie even got the guy to lend them the hovercar. Mackie's plan was to get in on a relatively easy battle, make a nice showing, impress Steiner-Davion, snag a few more recruits and, more importantly, a longer, fatter contract, and be well on the road to interstellar domination. The losses of the first day of battle, and that final damn PPC blast hadn't been factored into the plans, though, and these events proved stronger than anything Smythe had dreamed up. All his money, all his skill, all his anticipated glory, was now reduced to this.

"Pwyll! Good god, you're alive! We've got to get out of here. The front's coming our way, we've got to move!"

The voice didn't fit in with the rhythm of the shells and artillery shots. It was quieter but more insistent. He wanted it to go away, so he could concentrate on the tremor of explosions rumbling through the ground and traveling all the way to his fingertips. He wanted to be one with the battle, and the voice was interfering.

"Pwyll? *Pwyll?* Get on your feet! Come on, come on, *come on*. Are you hurt? I don't see any wounds, but are you hurt? Pwyll? Can you hear me?"

I can hear you. I just don't want to.

The voice, though, not only did not leave, but its owner became even more disruptive. Hands dug under his armpits, clasped across his chest, pulling. He was dragged backward a few feet.

"Bloody hell, Pwyll, you're dead weight! Come on, help me out—what happened, did you get your spine snapped? *Move your feet!*"

The voice wasn't going away. While the noise of battle seemed to be around him, outside him, this voice was directly in his skull. He couldn't shake it. Clearly he needed to take action if he wanted it gone.

"I'm fine here," he said calmly. "Don't worry about me."

"Fine?!? The 'Mech that got Mackie's coming right bloody for us! Squash you flat if you don't move! Come on, Pwyll, snap out of it."

Now that the voice mentioned it, the thudding on the ground did seem to be more regular. Not like occasional artillery fire. Like footsteps.

The hands locked around Pwyll again, gave him another yank. Pwyll's legs brushed over grass, his booted heels tearing up the damp ground they scraped across.

Then there were more voices. Pwyll thought this just might become more annoying, but they all talked so fast, so panicked, that their speech overlapped and blended and he couldn't make out any words so it was just another bit of background noise. That made it easier to ignore.

The ground still thudded. The impact on his spine was starting to become uncomfortable. Ahead, a little to his left, smoke was pulling away from him, divided into two streams. Something large was coming through.

The voices, despite their babbling, seemed to have communicated some concept to each other as Pwyll stared at the smoke. They had come up with a plan. Pwyll thought about pointing to the wreckage as a reminder of the danger of making plans, but the smoke ahead of him was parting further, and that absorbed his entire attention.

The smoke organized into two swirling eddies, opening like a curtain for fifty tons of walking metal. The humanoid head of the *Enforcer* gazed straight ahead while the laser-equipped left arm swept back and forth, looking for targets.

"Move. We gotta move. That's bad, that's bad, that's really bad."

Staring into the pulsing end of the laser did what the voices around Pwyll couldn't. Pwyll's legs reacted like he was a toddler, wobbling from side to side as he tried to urge them forward. The world veered beneath him, spinning to the right, so he leaned to the left to compensate, and he ran while pitched like a tree falling in the wind.

"God in heaven, the man's not brain dead! Let's go!"

There were three others with him, moving faster because the earth seemed to be more stable for them. They all still had their helmets, he couldn't tell who they were for sure. He was pretty sure the one who had been talking to him was Sera. She'd been in the hovercar with him. The other two, he couldn't identify. But whoever they were, they were likely the only other surviving members of the Death's Head Corps.

The pounding continued behind him, and one step finally made the earth tilt too far. The ground rose up and hit Pwyll solidly in the helmet. He dropped a rifle he didn't even realize he'd been carrying. He had no idea where it had come from.

Behind him the *Enforcer* drew closer, picking up its pace, trotting forward. Its left arm had found a target, and red beams burned holes in the sky above him. Pwyll scrambled for his rifle. Foolishness, really—all the weapon would do is explode in his hand when the 'Mech's laser hit him, maybe giving him a brief moment of burning pain before he was entirely annihilated—but he grabbed it anyway.

A defiant scream rose to his mouth as he rolled on his back and prepared to fire at the 'Mech. He was ready to fire right into the laser. Mainly for symbolic value.

But the *Enforcer* was moving even faster. Its arms, its head, were both looking ahead. Not down. It was passing.

Propped on one elbow, aiming his rifle with a trembling hand, Pwyll watched it go. He almost pulled the trigger once its back was to him, just for the satisfaction of shooting the giant machine in the posterior. But he held his finger, knowing fate should not be tempted. The smoke swirled again, and it was gone.

How far away from him had it passed? Thirty meters? Had it not seen him in the smoke, or had it just decided he wasn't worth the bother? He was like an ant on the sidewalk. You might step on it, you might not, but either way it didn't matter. What was the ant going to do to you?

He sat on the grass, contemplating his new understanding of the order of the universe, when Sera came back to him.

"You're down again," she said. His senses had come around enough that he remembered why her voice sounded so much different than the surrounding noise—she was speaking over the comm.

"The world got me," he said. "It's become a little wobbly."

"Yeah. Come on, we'll find a more stable place."

Pwyll stood. If the 'Mech hadn't shot him, hadn't stepped on him, he supposed that meant his destiny was to live a little longer, and living never meant just sitting around.



They spent the next half hour going the wrong way. They kept trying to move toward the people on their side, in particular to find one of their MASH units, but the tide of battle had other ideas, and no one came to track them down. Darting hovercars, marauding 'Mechs and, worst of all, infantrymen just their own size kept pushing them in directions other than the one in which they wanted to travel.

As he walked, Pwyll noticed something different in his head. Part of him was behaving as he should, scanning the territory in front of him, walking carefully, laying down cover fire when the situation demanded, dropping into prone position if he sensed any enemy

fire. Another part of his brain, though, seemed to have divorced itself from the moment-to-moment necessities of survival. It wandered free, under no particular urgency, watching Pwyll from the outside. His battle reflexes did not seem to be negatively affected, so the new divide in his brain didn't trouble him.

At the moment the detached part of his mind was particularly interested in the fact that the most dangerous weapons on the battlefield seemed to be the least dangerous to him. A gun that could take down a 'Mech at half a kilometer wasn't going to bother taking aim at a sole soldier like him. It gave him a brief sense of might, almost invulnerability, until he remembered that a stray shot from one of these weapons could eliminate every trace of his physical self—inflicting the indignity of accidental annihilation.

His ruminations were interrupted by voices once again carving into his skull.

"We're behind the lines."

"I'm not sure we are."

"We *are*."

"So what if we are?"

"So what if we are? *We're behind enemy lines!* You understand that this is not a good place to be?"

Another thing the disembodied part of Pwyll's mind had been doing was making lists. Actually, making one list over and over. The list was, if Pwyll could choose only four members of the Death's Head Corps to survive—three beside himself—who would they be? It seemed a grim and rather arrogant list to make, but it passed the time. Pwyll had made about ten lists based on various circumstances, and in none of them had he thought it would be good if Thurl and Vessla survived together. Separately, they each had useful skills—Thurl, for example, had salvaged the rifles the four of them were carrying—but together they tended to run as quickly as they could to the nearest argument.

"Look, we all know how this is going to end," That was Thurl, talking in even tones. Even when arguing, Thurl spoke like he was observing how nice the weather was. "The militia is a pain in the ass, but they don't have a chance. The Com boys will clear them out soon enough, probably before the Prince makes landfall, everything will be peaceful, then we can reconnect with the main body of the force. The militia isn't that big. They can't be every-

where. I'm sure we can find a place to wait them out. We keep sending messages, they'll come and find us."

"Wait them out? *Wait them out?*" The comm couldn't handle the volume of Vessla's voice, breaking into static as she hit her upper reaches. "Has anything the militia done convinced you that they'll let us just sit around? They *know* they're dead, they *know* they're going to lose, so they're going to kill as many of us as they can before they finally fall. And the first people they're going to kill are four stupid mercs sitting around trying to wait them out."

"We don't have to wait forever, just until the Prince's Men send some..."

"Have our supposed allies shown any indication that they want to help us? To take any sort of risk at all for four members of a destroyed mercenary group?"

As they argued, the detached part of Pwyll's brain performed its first truly useful task. It reviewed the hierarchy of the Death's Head Corps and came to an encouraging conclusion.

"All right, shut up you two," Pwyll said. As Thurl and Vessla drew breath to respond, he quickly added "And that's an order."

A brief silence reigned as they seemed to do their own mental evaluations. It didn't take long, since the Corps, at its recent peak, had contained twenty-four members. Apparently, their mutual silence confirmed that they had both come to the same conclusion—Pwyll was in charge of what remained of the unit.

"We're behind enemy territory in terrain they know better than us," Pwyll continued. "We're banged up. The militia's going to retreat sooner or later, and when they do they're going to retreat right over us. We have to be ready for that."

The other three took another moment to ponder that.

"There's no reason we have to be waiting here when they fall back," Thurl ventured. "We're out of the battle. If we just keep moving away from it, we'll stay out of the battle. It'll end, we can regroup then."

An appealing suggestion, Pwyll thought. Maybe even a wise suggestion. He wished he could give the order to make that happen.

"We're not leaving the battle," he said. "We're going to get back on the right side of the front, and we're going to help any way we can."

"Oh. Good," said Vessla. "I'm sure that's what they're waiting for. I'm sure the Com boys are sitting there thinking, 'What we could really use are four mercs without so much as a decent battle armor suit between them.'"

"I don't care what they're thinking," Pwyll said. "We're going to get where we're supposed to be, we're going to report for duty, and we're going to go where they ask us to go."

"When did you become such a Prince's Man?" Vessla snapped.

"We have a contract. I didn't see anything that voids it because we've had bad luck. We're going to do our job."

Mackie had known that you shouldn't start a new mercenary corps with people who don't understand duty. That had been his chief criterion when lining up new recruits—too bad he wasn't around to see it pay off. Sera, Thurl, and Vessla didn't need any more convincing.

"So. Where to, sir?" Thurl asked.

Ah, the downside of assuming command, right on the heels of the fun part of issuing orders. Okay. Time for a plan.

They were in woods. Most of the forests of Halfway had long been plowed under and used to grow crops more profitable than mere trees, but this stretch had been left as a buffer between Bune and the farmland. Bare trees, scattered here and there with a few puffy evergreens, dotted the muddy ground. No grass grew beneath the trees—farmers on Halfway seemed to save each and every such seed on the planet for themselves.

The trees weren't dense enough to provide much visual cover—the four mercs wouldn't be out of anyone's sight—but it would be tough to wind a shot through the woods. The longer they could stay in these trees, the better.

"Down the slope," Pwyll finally decided. "Then south."

"We won't be able to see anything down there," Vessla objected.

Pwyll responded before Thurl could jump headfirst into another argument. "Right. And hopefully no one will see us. With the weapons we've got, seeing our enemies first won't be any real advantage. At best, we might be able to wave hello to a 'Mech before it pounds us into pieces. We're better off staying as hidden as possible."

He didn't wait for a response. He walked and assumed the others would follow.

The mud outside the woods had dried somewhat in the day's sunlight, but in the shade it still squished underfoot. A good-sized tear in the flesh of Pwyll's calf made walking even trickier, and each limping step came with the threat of slipping in the mud. Which wouldn't matter much—he couldn't become any dirtier.

He heard three sets of wet footfalls behind him, and nothing else. No bird calls. No squirrels rustling. All other living creatures in these woods had the sense to leave when the slugs started flying.

Pwyll took the moment to attempt to make the detached part of his mind useful. *If you're going to stand a little outside my body, maybe you could look around a little. You know, let me know if you see something up where you are that I can't see down here?*

I don't work like that, his mind replied. *I can only see you.*

Great. He resolved to get himself into a blast concussion that would put his mind back to normal as soon as possible.

As he walked, he reached out with his ears, a trick he'd learned long ago. He strained to hear every noise around him, scanning the environment to place and identify each sound. 'Mechs and tanks, of course, would have a hard time sneaking up on him. As long as he could make sure no infantry got the jump on them, nothing should catch them by surprise. That was when the aerial bombardment started.

There was a whistle first, then a scream, then a thud, then a blast, and the orange flare of the explosion threw sharp shadows across the woods. Trees splintered and fell without a groan, cleanly shattered. The muddy ground, too wet to shake, merely jiggled.

Pwyll made a decision, questioned the wisdom of it, then decided to trust his own intuition. The detached part of his brain agreed that this was wise.

"Toward the blast!" he yelled. "Behind me!" He ran.

"Toward the..." Vessla started, but a second blast, two hundred meters in front of the first, cut off the rest of her comment.

The mud wiggled again, more insistent this time. Pwyll turned just as Sera fell.

"Sera!"

"Damn mud!" she replied. "I smell like a moldy washcloth."

"Are you..."

"Yeah, yeah, fine. I just slipped. I'm coming."

She was back on her feet and right behind Thurl in a matter of seconds.

Pwyll was almost at the first blast site when two bombs hit simultaneously, one in front of them, one to the right, nearly where they had been when the explosions started. The blast concussions threw them off balance, and the subsequent tremors finished them off. All four went down.

Vessla was up first, mud flying off her fist as she shook it at the sky.

"There's nothing here!" she screamed at the sky. "Four bloody mercs! You're wasting bombs on four mercs! Idiots."

"I don't think they can hear you, Vess," Thurl said, although without his normal dry mockery.

Two more bombs landed, but the sound of their explosions was lost in the ringing in Pwyll's ears. They were so far away—maybe half a kilometer—they seemed positively benign.

Pwyll quickly looked at the other three to make sure they were functioning well enough to walk. He took another second to glance at the smoldering trees, making sure fires weren't going to spread. But the trees were too wet, too far apart—each tree was fated to burn on its own. Then Pwyll looked at what was really important—the sky.

The sunlight had completely faded by now and the bombers weren't going out of their way to make themselves visible—any light normally visible from the ground was turned off. Their engine noise was faint, which meant they were bombing from high above.

A bombing run from at least two kilometers in the air. The detached part of Pwyll's mind went to work. They might have dropped the bombs based on a mere rumor that militia troops were hiding in the woods (he had quickly concluded that the bombs were friendly fire—the Halfway militia simply didn't have that much aerial support left). They might have had the woods designated

as a secondary target earlier in the morning and finally got around to dropping some bombs on it now. Or, given the height of the bombers, they might simply have missed their intended target by a kilometer or twenty.

Either the bombers didn't know there were friendlies in the woods or they didn't care. Neither option made Pwyll feel any better about his standing in the world.

While he'd been thinking and planning, two minutes had passed. No new thuds rattled the woods. Pwyll gave the order to move on again.

Sera took some quick strides toward him then pulled up her visor. Pwyll raised his as well.

"Quick question," she said. "That order to go to where the first bomb fell? Where did that come from?"

"Bombs never strike the same place twice."

"That's lightning."

Pwyll shrugged. "Whatever. They're both deadly things from the sky."

Sera frowned first, then decided she might as well smile. "Okay. I guess it kept us alive."

"Right." He closed his visor to end the conversation—he was pretty sure talking more would do nothing to increase Sera's faith in his orders.

They continued along near the base of the slope. Pwyll kept his eyes moving, left, right, left, right, left, right. Then left. Left again. Staying left.

He stopped. Took a step forward, then back. Glanced at the larger moon above, looked back left, and did his quick forward-and-back two-step again. Then he raised his hand. The other three stopped behind him, Sera and Vessla trying to follow Pwyll's eyes to see what he saw, Thurl steadfastly watching their rear.

There was a glint. A dull one, a light reflection of a pale moon, but it definitely was there. Something man-made sat on the slope above them, 300 meters ahead, maybe eight meters above them.

Pwyll motioned them to spread out, then they moved forward, guns leveled. A pause followed each step, as they waited for

someone near the glint, or the glint itself, to see them and react to their presence. But after each step, nothing moved. The temptation grew to just walk forward, but discipline won out and the pace remained slow.

An object emerged out of the darkness, surrounding the glint. It was maybe eight meters long, wheeled—three axles, two placed close together in the back. Boxy, blocky, basic military transportation, though he couldn't see any weapons on it from here.

But right now, transportation was all he wanted.

Step, step, step brought them closer. He could positively identify it now. An APC, wheeled, probably wandered off the nice paved city roads and got stuck out here. And then abandoned.

Or maybe not abandoned. Could have wounded soldiers inside. Or it could be a trap. Might be better to avoid it all together.

Don't outsmart yourself, the detached part of his mind told him, and Pwyll was happy it was finally giving some useful advice. *The thing could be useful and it's sitting right in front of you. Just be cautious, and you might not have to rely on your feet for a little while.*

The walk forward seemed to take forever. Pwyll was sure the battle would be over and the Prince's Men moved on to another planet before they even reached this vehicle.

The four Death's Head mercs spread out around the APC. Pwyll suddenly found himself wishing Mackie hadn't made them wear the skull logo on the stomach area of their uniforms. In the increasing darkness, the whiteness must have looked like an inviting target.

No one moved in or near the APC. No noise came from its engine.

The mercenaries surrounded the vehicle, poking and prodding with their rifle butts for a few moments, just to be sure they didn't have company.

"All right," Pwyll finally said. "Crack it open. Sera, Thurl, keep alert."

Vessla walked to the driver-side door while Pwyll made another tour around the exterior of the APC, this time looking at the condition of the vehicle instead of waiting for someone to jump out. There were no signs of a major weapons hit. The structure, to his

eyes, looked sound. He knew there must be something wrong with it or it wouldn't be sitting in the middle of the woods, but he couldn't tell what it was by inspecting the outside.

The APC bore markings of the Halfway militia. It also bore several signs of age on its homely exterior.

The door cracked open. Vessla's visor was raised, and she wore a satisfied smile.

"New personal record," she said when she noticed Pwyll looking at her. Behind her, Thurl had his weapon trained on the inside in case someone tried to jump out at the last minute.

But it was clean.



The wheels slurped in the mud. The gentle downhill slope allowed the APC to pick up some momentum, and soon Thurl, Sera, and Pwyll were running to keep up with the vehicle. Two doors stood open, making the already ungainly APC look like a box with broken flaps.

"I'm hitting it now!" Vessla called. She worked her magic inside the APC, and the engine sputtered, stammered, grumbled, and then reluctantly muttered to life. Vessla had been leaning on the fuel, and when the engine finally decided to run, it caught a sudden burst of acceleration, leaving the three pushers behind. For the fifteenth time that day, Pwyll found himself down in the mud.

Three hundred meters ahead, Vessla stopped. "Come on," she called through the comm. "I don't want to put this into reverse and I don't want it to idle long. Get your asses in!"

"You can consider that to be my order," Pwyll said, and the three of them ran to the APC.

Once he had settled into his seat, the bump of the wheels beneath Pwyll was as welcome as water in a desert. The vehicle was barely armored, there was no trace of the machine guns APCs normally carried, and all of its communications equipment was either damaged or gone. But it was dry and fast, and the metal around them at least *felt* safe, even though a PPC round or large laser would quickly end that illusion.

Vessla drove without lights, so she kept the pace of the APC slow (she had expressed doubts about the ability of the APC's engine to get it to its top speed anyway). Pwyll stared out the windows, willing himself to focus on the surroundings, trying to fight off the sleepiness created by sitting in a moving vehicle.

If he was feeling too weary, though, his detached mind could always remind him that his situation was still not good. He was in a vehicle with the enemy's markings. He had no good way of communicating with his side once he returned to the field of battle. He couldn't guarantee that the Halfway militia wouldn't take a few shots of their own at him once they saw him darting around and not responding to any orders. He'd be in a lightly armored car in the middle of heavy military giants, and any one of them might take him out at any time.

On the plus side, at least he'd get to the front quicker. The only thing worse than being killed by a huge artillery shell, he'd decided, was sitting around waiting to be killed by a huge artillery shell.

"We're coming out of the woods," Vessla said. "Bune is just east."

"Stay to the west," Pwyll said. "I don't think either side wants to be in the city if they can help it."

Confirmation of Pwyll's theory arrived shortly. Three quick flashes lit up the sky to the northwest, and echoing booms followed within seconds.

"About ten kilometers away," Vessla guessed. "We're going to see the militia's back lines soon."

"All right. Speed up to about fifty." Fast enough to get where they were going reasonably quickly, but slow enough to not look suspicious. "Sera, find a friendly frequency and get someone on the comm." With no communications equipment functioning in the car, they had to rely on what was in their helmets.

Flashes ahead grew more numerous, and reports followed closer on their heels. They passed a MASH unit, a few disabled vehicle hulks, some straggling infantry. Laser beams came into view, some moving laterally, some appearing as mere pinpoints as the APC looked at them from behind (or, worse, from the front).

Pwyll had one more chance to reconsider his approach. Maybe more subterfuge was called for. Maybe just turning the APC around and getting the hell out of here was the wiser course of

action. After all, the addition or loss of four mercs in a weaponless vehicle wasn't going to have any effect on the battle one way or the other.

If all he wanted to think about was his personal safety, though, there were a million other jobs in the universe he could have chosen. He was hired to fight, not just to stay alive. He should never have chosen this job if he wasn't willing to do it.

The battle grew closer. He saw battle-armored troops watch as the APC passed, and he knew they were wondering why the vehicle was moving toward the front. They may have tried to hail the APC, but the shattered comm equipment wasn't letting any messages through. Sera picked up a message or two on her helmet comm, responding each time with an artful combination of gibberish and static. That, combined with the APC's militia markings was enough. It passed unhindered.

Hell, even in a vehicle we're still no threat. He was beginning to take the militia's inattention to him personally.

Ahead, tanks and 'Mechs loomed, while bombs and energy beams continued to fall from the sky. That was no place for an APC, but it was going there anyway.

The APC bumped across the torn-up grass that, before today, had been a broad meadow. Infantry, the only creatures on the battlefield smaller than the vehicle, turned in surprise as they passed. The larger gods of the battlefield didn't show any sign that they noticed the APC existed.

The earth continued to shake, but gently. None of the crunching thuds of artillery or footfalls of a 'Mech came near Pwyll's car.

The front line was coming closer. Militia hovercars darted back and forth, laying down cover fire while avoiding enemy shots, while their few surviving 'Mechs pulled back in a more direct path. The Halfway militia was being pounded. They should be retreating faster than they were, but their stubbornness kept them from completely yielding.

"Neither side's gonna want us to cross over," Pwyll said, more to himself than to anyone else. "Once we're in no man's land, they'll notice us. Someone's going to fire."

The other three nodded.

He raised his voice a little. "Sera, do you have anyone yet?"

"Got someone from ComStar."

Relief poured over Pwyll.
"Great. What did he say?"

"‘Yeah, right. Get off this frequency.’ That’s a quote."

"He didn’t believe...? How did he think you got through the scrambler?"

"He said something about the militia breaking some encryption. I guess they’ve been hitting them with bogus messages all day."

"But didn’t you identify us?"

"He’d never heard of us."



Pwyll shook his head, wondering why he felt any loyalty to people who had no idea who he was. If it wasn’t for the damned contract...

Ahead and to the right, a tall *Hatchetman*, in the midst of backpedaling, suddenly planted its left foot and reversed itself, springing forward. A Kanga hover tank was approaching from the *Hatchetman*’s right, focusing on a target beyond the ‘Mech.

"Oh, crap," Pwyll said.

The hatchet came down. The Kanga had seen it coming, started to swerve away, but the ‘Mech had anticipated it, and it buried its right arm in the middle of the hover tank with a crumpling thud.

The tank lurched down, hit the ground, bounced up, and continued forward, turning laterally. The *Hatchetman* tried to pull its arm out, but the blow had been too strong. The hatchet was wedged in the hull of the tank. The tank pulled on the ‘Mech, abruptly losing most of its speed like it had hit an invisible brick wall. It pulled the *Hatchetman* to the left. The ‘Mech, which had been running forward to lower its blow, was caught off guard. It fell.

"Left left left left," Pwyll said, but Vessla was ahead of him, already leaning on the steering wheel, trying to urge it away from the wreckage without sacrificing any speed or going into a skid.

A scream of metal told Pwyll that the hatchet had finally pried loose from the Kanga. The hover tank had a little forward momentum left, and it spun toward Pwyll's APC. Meanwhile, 'Mechs and tanks from all directions converged on the fallen *Hatchetman*, hoping either to finish it off or, if they were militia, provide enough cover to let the pilot get the machine back on its feet.

"Okay. Gun it," Pwyll said. Vessla, clear of the Kanga, hit the accelerator and the APC pushed forward.

Lasers flashed overhead, closer now. Large metal legs loomed in front of them in every direction. Torsos swiveled, and Pwyll's eyes jumped back and forth, waiting for one of the pilots to focus on him.

One did. A *Raijin*, to the left. Pwyll saw its head lower as it concentrated on the car trying to dart past it. *Naturally*, he thought—*the pilot that's lowest to the ground sees us*.

"See that *Raijin*?" he said to Vessla. "We're in its sights."

"I see it."

"Good. Head straight toward it. Sera, try to get a message to him."

Vessla's head didn't move, her gaze remained fixed in front of her, but Pwyll almost heard her mind do a double take. She didn't say anything, though. Pwyll appreciated that and resolved, if he survived, to someday come up with a command strategy besides running headlong into trouble.

"Veer some," he said. "Irregularly. Keep him guessing."

"Roger," Vessla said, then immediately jerked the wheel right. The body of the *Raijin* swiveled to follow. A pulse of laser light fired.

"That'll be mainly for targeting," Vessla said.

Behind the *Raijin*'s head, a PPC fired.

"That'll be to kill us," Vessla said. She was already lunging the APC right again.

"Sera?" Pwyll yelled.

"Nothing. He can't hear us or he doesn't want to."

Pwyll gripped his seat as the vehicle seemingly tried to throw him. The safety harness dug into his waist. Behind him, Thurl grunted.

The PPC hammered the ground behind them. The *Raijin* had been expecting a move back to the left, and the second move right threw off his aim. As soon as the cannon stopped firing, Vessla lunged back left.

And into a pulse of energy. The *Raijin*'s laser was waiting for them.

The front of the car erupted. Engine smoke poured into the sky, and Pwyll could feel the heat from the impact.

"Everybody out!" he yelled. The four mercenaries scrambled out of the APC and ran. Either not seeing them or not caring, the *Raijin* moved ahead, taking care to stomp the APC into the ground as it chased its next target. Once again, Pwyll's force consisted of four people, no vehicles.

"Spread out a little," Pwyll said. "Don't give anyone a single concentrated target." They ran forward into the lane emptied by the passage of the *Raijin*.

Energy sizzled around them, Gauss rounds carved tunnels in the smoke, but they were distant (at least, distant compared to the fire from the *Raijin*). Pwyll was content to stay small and press forward. He knew enough ancient Terran mythology to know that in those stories, people only really got into trouble when they got uppity and challenged the gods. Those who kept a low profile stayed safe. On the battlefield, he'd let the deities that were the 'Mechs remain dominant without a peep from him.

Then the earth shook again. The thuds were closely spaced and becoming heavier. Pwyll glanced over his shoulder.

It was the *Raijin*. It had stumbled into more fire than it could handle and was retreating under combined fire from an *Enforcer* and a missile boat. The militia vehicles formed a vee with the *Raijin* at its point, and they were trying to close the gap. But the *Raijin* was faster and was getting away.

But then the smoke swirled, and the two points chasing the *Raijin* suddenly became three. Beams from a fast-moving *Falconer* pierced through the smoke on darkness, and Pwyll saw immediately that it was on an intercept course, hoping to catch the *Raijin* as it fled back.

Two plans came to Pwyll's mind. The first involved moving his team right, avoiding the *Falconer* entirely, and letting the *Raijin* deal with its three pursuers alone.

He rejected that plan immediately.

"We need to get the 'Mech's attention," he said.

"The *Raijin*?" Vessla asked. "The one that killed us?"

"No. The *Falconer*."

"Why?"

"Get the *Raijin* out of trouble."

"The same *Raijin* that blasted us?"

"Right. He's on our side."

"Somebody should've told him that."

"We've got to get in range. Pepper his legs."

"He'll never notice that," Thurl said. "He won't care."

"Okay. Right. Keep moving toward him. I'll come up with something."

To Pwyll's utter astonishment, the three other mercenaries followed what must be the stupidest order they'd ever heard without question.



All of Pwyll's instincts told him he was making a bad shot. His arm kept moving down without him even thinking about it; pointing his rifle at critical areas was a built-in reflex. His arm felt like lead as he tried to push it up.

He willed it steady and fired.

Too high. He'd over-compensated. Less than 150 meters from a 'Mech and he'd missed. Bloody hell.

Frustration improved his aim. The next shots hit their mark, catching the front of the *Falconer's* cockpit. The bullets bounced harmlessly off the ferroglass, doing absolutely nothing besides getting the pilot to notice the troopers running toward it. Which was all it was supposed to do.

If the pilot noticed the shots, he didn't care. The *Falconer* remained fixed on the *Raijin*. But Pwyll had already gone this far with the plan, so he might as well do the rest and see what happened. Despite what the detached part of his mind kept saying about how crazy it was.

The ground below him was soft and uneven, churned by feet much heavier than his. His eyes moved from the ground to the *Falconer* and back, making sure the earth didn't bring him down.

His three companions had fired at the same time as Pwyll, going for the gut, on the off chance they'd do enough damage to make the 'Mech care. They didn't.

Pwyll slowed to a jog. Everything was in the *Falconer's* hands now. If it did what Pwyll guessed it would, the plan—the insane, stupid, something-no-infantry-squad-should-ever-try plan—could move forward. If not, the *Falconer* would bound right past him, and the *Raijin* would probably be doomed.

Behind Pwyll, the *Raijin* started to turn away from the *Falconer*, hoping to get away from it without running into the sights of its other two pursuers. The *Falconer* saw its chance. It slowed to a crawl to line up a shot.

"Go!" Pwyll screamed, so loud that the other three would have heard him without the comm. And he didn't need to say it—they were moving in already.

The window of opportunity was brief. The *Falconer* would take a shot, then move again. But they were already close.

The *Falconer* had nice long feet, but they sloped up toward the leg, making them tough to settle on. This whole thing might make at least some sense, the detached part of Pwyll's mind told him, if he had any equipment, any at all, for this sort of attack. But, in his favor, he also didn't have any of the weapons that would make a leg attack effective, so he could spend all his might just hanging on rather than worrying about pesky things like damaging the enemy to which he was clinging.

Miraculously, all four Death's Head mercenaries managed to climb aboard and hold on. The *Falconer* fired a few gauss slugs toward the *Raijin*, but then it noticed the troopers on its legs. Hopefully, the darkness and smoke of the battlefield would conceal the fact that the attackers were holding on for dear life rather than preparing an attack.

The pilot reacted quickly, arms sweeping down fast. Pwyll watched the shiny barrel of a PPC descend on him as long as he dared.

“Move!”

The Death’s Head mercenaries dismounted and sprinted through the legs of the ‘Mech. The PPC barrel kept swinging, though, and it was moving fast. Pwyll leaned left and tried to duck, and it was almost enough. The ‘Mech’s arm only managed to deliver the lightest of blows—which dislodged Pwyll’s shoulder from his socket. He rolled on the ground, his entire universe reduced to agonizing pain.

Sera hesitated, started to turn. “Keep moving!” Pwyll screamed, and either the authority in his voice or the hopelessness of his situation convinced her to obey. Thurl and Vessla didn’t so much as look back.

The rest was up to the *Falconer* and the *Raijin*. All Pwyll had to do now was see if he could stay alive.

He tried to scramble to all fours, but his right shoulder was useless. Instead, he set himself in a tripod. He looked over his shoulder, part of him hoping the *Falconer* would take another swing at him, part of him just wanting to be left alone.

The *Falconer*’s pilot had seen him fall and couldn’t resist aiming another blow at him, the left arm swinging back at him like the return swing of a pendulum.

Pwyll’s day had come full circle. He dropped flat on the ground, returning to the sod, hoping the rough bumps of the ground would give him enough protection. The arm came at him too quickly.

Then it hit the ground three meters behind Pwyll and bumped in the air, skipping over him before dropping back down and carving a fresh scar in the moist earth.

That was it. The *Falconer* was straight again, pointed toward the battle. It wouldn’t waste any more time on a single soldier. All Pwyll had to do was run—and if he didn’t miss his guess, run fast.

As he got to his feet, the air caught fire behind him. He saw the glow first, then heard the crack. Then felt the heat.

A blast and a thud followed. Lasers first, PPC second, Pwyll guessed. The *Raijin* had used the few seconds Pwyll had given it, turning quickly and bombarding its would-be ambusher.

Pwyll's feet felt like they were simply skidding beneath them, skimming off the surface of the loose grass instead of actually propelling him forward. He looked backward again and saw the *Raijin* charging the now-crippled *Falconer*. More blasts, both laser and PPC kept the *Falconer* off balance. Its left arm was smoking, never to fire again.

A few shots passed wide of the target, and Pwyll turned right to make sure the *Falconer* stayed between him and the *Raijin*, keeping him as safe as he could be given his circumstances. Which, his detached mind informed him, wasn't safe at all.

The *Raijin* pressed forward and the *Falconer* fell. His mission accomplished, Pwyll decided it was time to fall back to earth for a minute.

Even though the *Falconer* was out of the way, the *Raijin* held its course, still dogged by two pursuers. Pain stabbed Pwyll's right arm, keeping time with every footfall of the rebel 'Mech.

It was going to step on him. It was at a full run, far more focused on continued survival than on what insignificant bugs might be lying ahead of it. Pwyll watched it approach and found himself wishing it were taller. He'd like to be stepped on by something big and majestic. An *Atlas* maybe. Not a *Raijin*, which was plenty big but lacked grandeur of the largest 'Mechs. Still, it was more than big enough to finish him.

Pwyll had one more task. "Sera? Are you away?"

Her words came between sharp breaths. "Yes. I think. Someone's. Seen us. Come on. We'll be. Waiting."

"Okay," Pwyll said, and turned to watch death run toward him.

Death, for no reason Pwyll could see, decided to turn a little to the left. Then it pivoted again, tracing a wide circle. It ran right around him, turning as sharply as it could.

Lasers beamed overhead. Pwyll assumed it must be the *Enforcer* finally getting a shot away after its long pursuit, but then he realized it was coming from the wrong direction. And it couldn't be the *Raijin*, because it hadn't wheeled around completely yet.

He rolled over on his belly, propped himself on his left forearm, and watched the reinforcements come in. A few 'Mechs, a Kangas, and a few things Pwyll couldn't see through the smoke, spotlights

dancing back and forth. On the other side, the militia attackers were already turning to flee.

Pwyll, rather than being dead, found he now had to get up and walk, which he found oddly disappointing. He stood awkwardly and strolled forward.

'Mechs walked by him on either side. A tank nearly ran him down but passed behind him instead. The whole time, Pwyll kept walking in a straight line toward his crew. He was protected either by destiny or by his insignificance, but either way he felt safe.

The End