



# **CASE WHITE: THE GOOD FIGHT**

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They were making up units on the fly. They were all from the Seventy-Ninth, but few of their units had landed whole, and not everyone had made it to Riga yet—assuming they were out there somewhere and still alive. So they matched people together as needed, new arrivals announcing their presence over the comm and listening to a scramble of voices tell them where they could go and which ad hoc unit they could fall into. It was a mess, but Sorrin Buell thought it also was a tribute to the order and discipline of the Com Guard. They had enough trust in each other and their abilities that they could adapt to the worst of conditions.

Surprisingly, what Buell had found in Riga was not, in fact, the worst.

The blitz that had met his landing, the unerring fire of rockets and shells at the landing troops, had fully lived up to the picture Buell had built up in his mind of Terra as an impregnable fortress swarming with Blakists. He had barely survived.

Then it had been quiet. He'd covered sixteen hundred kilometers and only once had to fire in anger at a Blakist—a Blakist, as it turned out, that had landed with his unit. The rest of the continent, as far as Buell had seen, was remarkably clear of hostile forces.

So too was Riga. It was a ragtag, decimated Com Guard force that descended on the city, only to find that they still outnumbered the defenders. Blakists seemed to be everywhere else in the Inner Sphere but here, on their supposed home base.

So the Com Guard advanced, spurred by overlapping directives streaming over the comm.

"Rybberson, take your units north. Repeat, north. Keep your eyes on the river."

"All units, we have group of assaults that just formed coming in from the southwest. Four assaults, repeat four assaults coming in. Let 'em know what you need them to level!"

"We have fire on all sides! It's a trap, it's a trap! Bring support, now!"



“Beta, beta, beta, look west! Dammit, look *west!*”

There was no real chain of command in Riga, so orders were issued by just about anyone who thought of one. Buell ignored most of them. He had plenty to take care of right in front of him.

He stepped backward, two, three, four steps. His lasers kept the street ahead of him clear while he angled his gauss rifle one way and his PPC the other in an effort to suppress the crossfire. It wasn't working. Shells and lasers were flying thicker and thicker, and somewhere the hidden Blakists were probably lining up missile shots. He couldn't stay put.

He backpedaled, relying mostly on his lasers to keep the Blakists from advancing, then ducked left behind a tan building. The exterior cladding on the right side of the building burst into powder as the Blakists' pursuing fire chewed into it. Ferroglass fragments littered the sidewalk.

The city was taking an awful pounding, and it was a shame. Buell had come to redeem Terra, not beat the holy hell out of it. But sometimes a good beating was the path to redemption, and as long as the Blakists were falling back, he and his mates would keep pushing.

First, though, they'd have to regroup.

Buell switched his comm to the channel of his new unit. “We'll have to find another way in. I ran into heavy crossfire, had to move back a little. If they press it I'll have to keep backpedaling.”

“All right, we've moved north,” said Cain. “Hold them there as long as you can but don't risk too much—you're more valuable retreating than dead.”

“Roger,” Buell said

Ursula Cain had assumed command of Buell's new Level II for two good reasons—she'd spent about fifteen years in the saddle of a 'Mech, and she had a *Longbow*. The other three members of the group immediately deferred to her experience and firepower, and she took to command like a bird to the air. She issued orders as a reflex.

The fire on his right side was heavier, so Buell kept edging left. That put him in the middle of a block, the very worst place to be in a street fight. Though having jump jets mitigated that somewhat by adding one more option.

While he had some shelter from the Blakist fire he lit up the jump jets, traveling in a high arc to clear the building behind him. It was a newer building, squat and metal, and when compared to its neighbors it looked like a cardboard box in the middle of a museum.

A few lasers beamed through the air but his move had been too sudden. The enemy fire wasn't able to catch up with him before he landed a block behind his launch point.

He turned the *Falconer* then leaned forward, urging the 'Mech ahead. He emerged into an intersection, only to have cannon rounds clatter into his leg.

He saw it, a little over a kilometer away—a Po, surging forward behind a stream of metal darting out of its autocannon.

He thought about wheeling on it, taking some time to teach it a lesson, but then a volley of missiles drifted over some nearby buildings. He turned again and sprinted east, but there was no way to outrun the missiles. A few of them landed astray but others hit, blowing away some rear armor.

The backwards jump hadn't bought him much space. He ran forward, then found just what he needed—a diagonal street that would get him away from his pursuers. It would also take him away from his mates, but he'd deal with that later. Stay alive first.



Most of the battle armor squad lay at his feet. It had been a foolish charge to make without support, but they must have thought they could surprise him and close on his legs before he could take care of them all. They were wrong. After watching most of their squad fall, the few stragglers had fled. Buell didn't bother giving pursuit.

He was alone. He had no idea where the citizens of Riga were, but he hadn't seen a single one of them since he marched into the city this morning. He'd seen plenty of soldiers, though, from both sides. The battle raged across the city and in the surrounding countryside, but not here. It was a drab neighborhood, filled with plain apartment buildings that were all straight lines and sharp corners. He wasn't surprised it was empty—who would fight for this?





He hadn't talked to Cain in a while—he'd been busy first shaking his pursuers, then dealing with the battlearmor squad. He hoped his II hadn't gotten too far away.

"Cain, this is Buell. I got busy for a while but I'm clear now. Where are you?"

"Buell, we have orders to converge on the Esplanade near the Old City. We are about five kilometers northeast of there with some interference in front of us. We could use some more help. Get over here."

Checking his scanners, Buell saw he wasn't far off—only three kilometers as the crow flies. But that path would take him straight through some of the Blakists he'd just been avoiding. He'd have to take the long way, north then west.

"Cain, I'm on my way."

"Hurry. We're moving ahead."

"Roger that." Buell had already started moving over the pock-marked streets.

So they were gathering. At least some of them were. They could group together, then the Blakists could group their own defense, and the two sides could pound the living hell out of each other and the city around them and see what was left when they were done.

Explosions and lasers lit the sky around him. Smoke in pillars and clouds climbed toward the sky. And his cockpit stank.

He should have asked Ingrid back in Bremen if they had a shower he could use. But he was so busy worrying about who they were and what they were doing with him that basic sanitation needs had slipped his mind. And since neither he nor his cockpit had been washed in days, the smell was quite ripe. The interior fans could only do so much.

To make matters worse, he suddenly felt tired. Sleep—that was another thing he should have done when he had the chance. He needed to find some Blakists soon. Nothing like a little firefight to chase away all thoughts of rest.

He ran through a business district, signs and ads flashing, selling their products to no one. The shops were as empty as the streets.

Suddenly his comm crackled to life. It was Cain.

"Broussard, El-amin, get closer to me. Close ranks, close ranks! They're closing from the east, closing hard."

"I'm pinned down!" That was Philippe Broussard, pilot of an *Avatar*. His nerves were obviously frayed—as soon as any fire came toward him, he complained about being pinned down. He'd wasted a lot of ammo firing at shadows.

Then the three other members of Buell's group were all talking at once. Cain was shouting at Broussard, Broussard was yelping for help, and El-amin was offering as much support and reassurance as he could, but his calmer tones were drowned out by the other two. Buell could only push ahead, watch the flares to his left, and listen to his mates as they attempted to hold off the chaos.

"It's not that bad! You can move! So *do* it!"

"I've got sensors flashing all over. I'm hit in the ... in the ... I'm hit again! I'm losing armor all over!"

"Dammit, Broussard, hold yourself together and *return fire*!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming. Behind you, on your right. I'll open up some room for you."

"Hurry. Hurry!"

"Now! Move!"

"They're shifting! Push 'em, push 'em!"

"There's too many! Where's Cain?"

"Just keep moving. She'll find us—there! There we go!"

"How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine, Broussard is—well, you know. Keep that fire coming."

"Their left is looking battered. Shift down, shift down. That will get us closer to the Esplanade."

"Okay, we'll—there's more of them! More of them coming down from the north!"

"We don't have time to be graceful. Full speed!"



Then they said nothing. When the fighting got really heavy, most pilots usually shut up.

He followed the battle as much as he could on his scanner. It looked like Cain and the others would make it, passing by the end of the Blakist lines to meet the troops at the Esplanade. That was the good news. The bad news was that the Blakist forces near the Esplanade now included four 'Mechs and assorted ground support. And there was more, another force coming in behind Buell. They looked smaller than the group in front of him but were moving faster. They could probably herd him right toward the larger group, which would then annihilate him.

He'd have to cross about four kilometers to rejoin his lance and the other troops massed on the Esplanade. That short distance now seemed a lot longer than the sixteen hundred kilometers he'd crossed to get here.

His mind wandered. He should focus, but he was very, very tired. Death was pressing down on him, and it brought exhaustion with it. Besides, he didn't know how much time he'd have left to think, so his mind could be indulged with at least a few moments of distraction.



*He hadn't had too many chances to speak with his father. It's not that his father was ashamed of him—for as long as he could remember, Buell's father was happy to admit his parentage. But his father was always in motion, and he seldom came to low-profile planets like Hamilton.*

*But the time eventually came when, thanks to Buell's enlistment in the Com Guard, the two of them were in the same place at the same time, and his father took a few hours to meet with him.*

*Buell didn't know what they would talk about, but his father had no such problem. He filled their entire time together speaking about his favorite subject. He could speak endlessly about Terra.*

*"It is the pattern. The template. It's what we have been trying to replicate for hundreds of years. It is the masterpiece of planets. You may hear, as you travel, some people say that one planet's climate may be more temperate than Terra's, or that another has richer soil, or that another has more mineral resources. But none of them have what Terra has—Terra has us. Most of us have never been there, of course, but that doesn't matter. It is*



*our mother. It is our history. That's why they took it. They wanted to claim our history for their own. They were trying to steal the heritage of the entire human race. Which makes what they did the most monstrous crime of all time—with the possible exception of Amaris' treachery, since the effect was much the same."*

*Buell left the conversation frustrated, upset that they had spent so much time talking about Terra that he never learned much about his father, about what made him tick.*

*As he got older, he finally understood that that was exactly what that meeting had taught him.*



The distraction served its purpose—it cleared his head. When his mind returned to his predicament, his course of action was clear. How could he have thought there was any other choice?

He let himself be herded. He spent some time being indecisive, going so far as to wander a block toward the group to the east, then headed back west. Once the first salvos from the eastern group fell in front of him, he started jogging west, staying ahead of one force while acting nervous about approaching the other.

Then, before the heavy fire started raining down from the west, he moved, angling southeast on a diagonal street, running at full speed, shaking the earth while pieces of stone and glass fell, torn loose by the shells raining down from both sides. Most of the shots fell behind him—they hadn't adjusted to his speed yet. They would soon.

The street ended after another short span—the Old City had no regular, square blocks—but that suited Buell fine. He reached the intersection, darted left, then jumped.

He landed, quite literally, right on top of a tank. The impact crushed the tank and sent him staggering. He pulled on the sticks, willing the gyros to do their work while he fired his lasers and PPC (he waited on the gauss—the recoil might put him on his ass). Infantry swarmed toward him, more tanks turned corners to close on him, and behind them came the 'Mechs, a *Hammer* on one side, *Blackjack* on the side.

He chose the *Hammer*.





Keep moving, keep moving. The secret was motion. Press ahead, let the armor do its work, scatter them with the lasers. Beams shot from the torso, the Blakists in front of him moved, but only so they could line up another shot. He let them move, let them tear armor away from his front and sides, and he focused on the *Hammer*. The LRMs on the shoulder would be useless—he was already too close. His four lasers crossed the *Hammer's* three, but then he fired the gauss. Then again. The *Hammer* reeled back, and Buell kept charging.

Then he was past. Into more infantry, more tanks. But they weren't ready for him. They must not have expected him to come through so fast. He relied on the gauss and PPC, flinging rounds ahead of him, keeping the back-line troops from getting set. Still, some of them got off shots. Klaxons sounded, but he didn't look. He knew things were wrong, and pretty soon he'd find out what. But as long as he was moving, the exact problem didn't matter.

He crashed by a disabled Galleon, kicking it and sending it into a spin as he ran past. The street filled with smoke and explosions, shouts and lasers. Buildings seemed to be disintegrating around him, he could barely see in front of him. He relied on his scanners to steer, to keep clear of obstacles except the ones he could step on. There was no sky above him, no space in front or in back. Only smoke and dust. The Blakists filled the clouded air with weapons fire, and some of it couldn't help but hit him. Buell was thirsty, hot and tired, and all he could do in this mess was move forward. But that, for the moment, was all he needed to do.

The streets were crooked, lying at odd angles. Buell kept running, making turns when he could, putting buildings between himself and the forces that were now behind him. He waited for the explosions to grow silent, for the dust to clear, but it didn't happen. They had units at least as fast as him, some faster, and they had no reason not to chase him down. There was no help on this side of the Blakists' line.

But he knew where the help was. Southeast of him now, instead of southwest. He just had to complete the vee he had planned—which meant running through their lines one more time.

"Buell?" It was Cain's voice. "Buell, did you make it through?"

Buell looked at the numerous warnings from his 'Mech's systems. Many of them were serious, but nothing had failed. Not yet.

"I'm here."

"I don't know what—I can't tell you what to do. I can't see how—" Cain couldn't finish the sentence.

"Don't worry about it. Just give me some support fire if I get close enough." *Whoops*, Buell thought. *I probably should have said "when."*

"Okay. Okay, Buell."

He found a good street. He turned, and ran. The fire paused as the Blakists adjusted to the one-man charge. Then it started up again.

Once he got on the other side of the Blakist lines, Buell had stopped firing—there was nothing in range. He'd taken some hits, but he'd still managed to cool his machine off a bit.

That meant he could move forward with guns blazing.

He didn't open fire right away, since there was no one in sight and he didn't have weapons that could turn corners. As soon as a Blakist appeared in front of him, though, he'd let loose with all he had.

It didn't take long. A *Falcon Hawk* appeared, running ahead of the other 'Mechs. The front of Buell's *Falconer* exploded with weapons fire. Lasers and shells flew, pummeling what must have been an already weakened 'Mech. The *Falcon Hawk* reeled, looking like it was about to fall over. It didn't, but it also didn't move again. It was out.

There was more where that came from. Tanks came after it, crowding the narrow streets. Even if he survived their firepower, would they leave him enough space to walk through?

He'd make room for himself if he had to. He'd either find a way through or he'd fall right on top of them. That would take out at least one more tank.

He charged. The heat, the noise, the motion were all too much. He couldn't keep up. His actions were random, his shots wild, everything incoherent except for the constant push forward. As long as his legs had life, he would keep moving.

He made one last scan of the warning alarms before he decided it would be better to ignore them all. Oddly enough, the healthiest part of his ride seemed to be his right leg—Ingrid's people had done a hell of a job.

Now it was just blindness. The smoke returned, lit by lightning flashes of lasers and explosions. There was no aiming, no strategy. Just shot after shot in both directions, blow after blow hammering into his *Falconer*, shaking it with each step. The machine stumbled beneath him, his cockpit lurched forward, he felt like he was going down. But the right leg recovered, held the balance, pushed forward. When the left came down again, Buell was ready for another major stumble, but all he got was a minor limp. He was probably missing a chunk of his foot. But he was still moving. And all the time firing, firing, firing.

He could close his eyes. Sight wasn't doing him any good. Even the scanner was a mess, showing a blur of buildings, battered machines, and active foes. It was too cramped to mean anything. All it told him was that enemies were all around—but he already knew that.

He wasn't sure he could keep a grip on the controls. Sweat ran down his arms onto his hands. He gripped hard, his hands shook, his knuckles ached. He didn't plan on letting go of those triggers. Ever.

He just hoped he'd avoid shutdown long enough to take a few more of them out.



There were two low rumbles. One was close and regular, the other was sporadic and more distant. He kept his eyes closed and focused on the sounds until he could figure out what they were.

The close one was his heart beating. The far one was the continued sounds of battle—but distant enough that, for the moment, he was not threatened.

He had an itch by his ear. He reached up to scratch it and touched a bandage instead of flesh. That's what was covering his ears, making his pulse so audible.

He opened his eyes and saw a dim gray ceiling. He could see the faint reflected glow of a flashing red light. Probably from the medical equipment he to which he was undoubtedly attached.

"Bloody hell! You shouldn't be awake!"

Buell turned his head to find the speaker. There was a short med near him—his face looked like he was in his early twenties, but he had the baldness of someone in his forties. The med smiled.



"I thought you'd sleep for days! Not just an hour or two."

"Esplanade?" Buell said. His throat felt dry, scorched. That cockpit must have gotten really hot.

"You made it. I don't know how. One of your machine's arms had fallen off. The other was disabled. Your 'Mech had even less on top of it than I do—you practically had a skylight. But those legs kept churning until you were in our range. Then Ursula Cain and a few friends laid down covering fire that held them back while you stumbled forward. From what I heard, everyone pretty much expected your 'Mech to crumble to dust the minute they took you out of it. You're bloody lucky."

Buell coughed a few times. It was supposed to be a laugh. Lucky? This whole mission had been star-crossed, a disaster from the beginning. No member of the Com Guard on Terra had been lucky.

But they were here, dammit. They were here. Who knew how much longer they would stay? Maybe they'd hold their line, maybe they'd even push the Blakists back. Maybe they'd even survive long enough to get reinforcements. Or maybe they'd be completely overrun and all be dead by morning.

All of that was in the future. But no one lived in the future. They lived here and now, and they all had the same idea. They were on Terra, and they would fight the good fight here as long as they had breath. That would be their victory, and that was something no Blakist could take.

