

BATTLECORPS

A SOLDIER WITHOUT HOPE

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West Texas, North America

Terra

20 March 3068

Adept Epsilon III Mark Kovachev lived for the moment between darkness and light.

Daytime in west Texas was a mugging, just as brutal and shocking as a roundhouse to the kidneys. Water collected in the scars that dotted the puckered landscape, forming brackish pools good for nothing but breeding mosquitoes and biting flies.

In a land drenched with moisture, Mark was dying of thirst.

He walked beneath a blazing sun, skirting towns and highways. But the wounds inflicted on the earth by man's wicked hand were not so easily avoided. On the third day he found the wreckage of an aerospace fighter too mangled to identify. He followed the trail of debris for kilometers until he found a shard of fuselage with a logo painted on it.

The two-rayed starburst of ComStar.

That was the day, pushing you all the way down, and then somehow pushing you a centimeter more.

The night was worse.

Cold.

Cold and filled with cold things that yearned for a human's warmth: scorpions, tarantulas, Gila monsters.

Rattlers.

Every day at dawn and again at dusk, there was a moment when Mark traded one hell for another.

But, oh, that moment.

For a short time it wasn't too hot and it wasn't too cold. One insect shift was punching out and the other had yet to punch in. In that single moment there was hope.

And that was the only hope Mark had.

Because he was a soldier of Case White.

Mark Kovachev had been born on Terra and he had been looking forward to his homecoming for some time.

It hadn't worked out quite as planned.

It began with a terrifying drop on a wounded *Union* and ended with Word of Blake taking apart the 394th piece by piece. And Mark had a ringside seat for the whole bloody thing.

Planned by Anastasius Focht and led by Victor Steiner-Davion, there was no way Case White could fail.

And yet it did.

Cut off from the rest of Terra, the rest of *humanity*, the failure of Case White was Mark's whole universe. That and the promise of another dawn, another dusk.

And at least a single moment of peace.

West Texas, North America

Terra

21 March 3068

On the fourth day, Mark found salvation.

It was a town—a small collection of dirty, careworn buildings huddled together.

At first he didn't believe it. What would a town be doing out here in the middle of nowhere? How could anyone make a living from this godforsaken land?

He closed his eyes and opened them again. Still there. He moved to the left and the buildings changed perspective. Maybe it was real.

Maybe.

On the edge of this maybe town was a house by itself, a couple of klicks from the others. Through his binoculars, Mark saw a house, a small ranch-style, painted beige. The window screens were pocked with holes, the paint was starting to peel, and there was a gray primer spot on the banged-up pickup sitting in the front driveway.

It looked like heaven to Mark.

He was dying. He felt it in his swollen tongue, in the raspy dryness that clawed at his throat, in the tenderness of the red skin not covered by his cooling vest and shorts and, most ominously, in the light-headedness that left him staggering and senseless at the height of the day's heat. He only had a couple of days left in him.

Maybe less.

And yet he could not risk walking into a town. He would not surrender to Word of Blake.

Even if it meant his life.

But here was a house in the middle of nowhere. Here was a chance.



He worked his way over to the little ranch house just as carefully as an infantryman moving up on an enemy 'Mech's flank. He dropped to his belly and crawled around the back of the house, using the cacti and spiny bushes that hugged the dusty earth as cover. What he saw there filled his heart with joy.

Clothes.

Clothes hanging on a clothesline, fluttering and dancing in a gentle breeze. Mark cycled through a short list of tactical objectives: pants, a shirt, civilian shoes, a refill of his canteen.

Did the pickup mean someone was home? He had seen no movement in either the front or back of the house. Mark licked his dry lips.

There was a wooden picnic table in the backyard positioned in the shade of an overhang built over a concrete patio. A shovel leaned against the table, next to a wheelbarrow half-filled with potted flowers. Someone was planting sunflowers.

There were children's toys strewn across the patio: a blue plastic pail knocked over on its side, a red tricycle, a score of little 'Mechs small enough to fit in a child's fat hand. The 'Mechs were painted bone white.

Whether for ComStar or Word of Blake, Mark couldn't tell.

To the left of the table, next to sliding glass doors, was a dripping faucet. He licked his lips again. He could *taste* the water, clean and clear, and *cold*.

He started to shake.

Almost. He was almost there.

Mark closed his eyes. He could almost smell each crystalline drop of moisture.

A small sound jerked his attention left.

There was a little boy.

He was a preschooler, four or five, cheeks still round with baby fat, eyes a soft brown, head covered with a shock of raven hair. He wore bright primary colors, a red T-shirt and blue shorts. And he clutched a little squirt gun in his right hand. It was a translucent florescent green and it was empty.

Mark glanced back at the faucet. The siding on the house didn't quite reach the ground and there was a little gap a couple centimeters wide that hid a shadowed recess. Mark happened to glance into that little space of darkness.

And he saw something move.

"Alejandro," a woman called. "Come here."

The boy giggled and moved *faster*.

That's when Mark heard it: the dry, whispery sound of sand sliding over sand. Mark had grown up in Washington, and he'd spent enough time camping east of the Cascades to instantly know that sound.

"Alejandro," cried the woman, and now there was a little more urgency in her voice. Mark knew she was coming around the side of the house.

Mark lurched to his feet, pulling his slug-thrower free of its holster.

The little boy's fat hand reached for the faucet.

Now the whispery sound was replaced by the angry rasp of a rattle.

"No," Mark shouted.

The boy froze.

Just as the rattler struck.

It was a monster—two, three centimeters around, a meter-fifty long, beige speckled with black, moving impossibly fast, its jaws gaping open to reveal a pair of hooked fangs.

Mark's finger pulled the trigger and the world was filled with noise.

The snake jerked, collapsing in mid-strike, its head suddenly *gone*. The boy fell over backwards, screaming in terror or pain.

Mark's heart was hammering in his chest. All he could think was, *Did I get it in time?* It had all happened so fast he wasn't sure. He walked quickly forward to make sure the boy was all right.

And he heard a gasp.

(The mother.)

And then he heard the scrape of steel against concrete.

(The shovel.)

He started to turn. Saw a young woman out of the corner of his eye. "You don't understand—"

And then something hard and unyielding smashed into his head and darkness swept down upon him.

West Texas, North America

Terra

22 March 3068

The first thing Mark discovered upon waking was that his head hurt like hell. He gingerly touched the back of his head and his fingers came away sticky with half-dried blood. Great. Just what he needed after his injuries in the battle and then his walk through the desert.

He opened his eyes. He was laying on some sort of cot facing a pale white cinder block wall. He slowly rolled over. The lights were off, but enough sunlight filtered through a dirty window at the end of the aisle to let him see the bars on his cell and the empty cells across from him.

And the beautiful woman sitting in a chair in front of his cell door. She had wavy black hair that kissed her shoulders. Her skin was a delicate mocha, her eyes dark brown. She wore a navy blouse made of silk and khaki capris. A strand of white pearls accented the blouse. She wore a wedding ring on her left hand.

She might've been twenty-five.

"What were you doing in my backyard?" she asked.

He thought it was the same woman he'd seen before.

"The little boy," Mark croaked. "Okay?"

"Why were you in my backyard?" said the woman.

"The *boy*," Mark insisted. He thought a second. "Alejandro? Is he... okay?"

An impatient little sigh escaped the woman's body, but she frowned and said, "Yes. He is okay. He was scared and some of the snake's blood spattered on him, but he is okay."

Mark closed his eyes and sucked in a deep breath, saying a little prayer of thanks. Then he opened his eyes and looked at her. "What's your name?"

"Maria Rojas," said the woman reluctantly.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Maria. My name is Mark Kovachev."

"You're ComStar aren't you?"

Mark looked at her for a long moment. Finally, he shrugged.

"What were you going to do to us?" she whispered.

Mark frowned. "I was going to take some water from the faucet. And... steal some of your husband's clothes."

"I don't have a husband," the woman snapped.

"Okay," said Mark. "Look, I was in bad shape. I would've taken enough to survive and left you. I never would have hurt you or your son."

"You say you didn't want to hurt us, but—"

"No," said Mark sharply. "I did *not* say I didn't *want* to hurt you. I said I *wouldn't* have hurt you."

"Under no circumstances," she said, pressing.

"No."

"Because you're ComStar."

It was the second time she'd asked that question. He didn't want to lie to this young woman.

But he didn't dare tell her the truth, either.

"And what if I were? They are the good guys, you know."

She snorted. "The last thing I need is a self-righteous speech from a foreign invader."

"I'm not a foreign invader," Mark snapped. "I grew up on Terra. The Yakima Valley in Washington. I'm fighting for my home, just like you."

"I'm not fighting anyone," she said sharply.

Mark rubbed the bump on the back of his head. "Could've fooled me."

She scowled at him, turned on her heel, took a step toward the door. Something made her turn back. She drew herself up and fixed him with a flinty stare. "Thank you," she said stiffly. "For the life of my son."

Mark shrugged. "Sure," he said slowly. "Don't mention it."

She bowed her head, and then turned and stalked out.

West Texas, North America

Terra

23 March 3068

The next day two men came to see him. The first was a big bear of a man, dressed in scrub khakis. His hair was the color of ginger and thinning on top. He had a big bushy beard and he was pushing sixty with both hands. He was about the scruffiest looking person Mark had seen, but his blue eyes were sharp and intelligent. And there was something else there, too.

Compassion.

No such luck with the second man. He was tall and thin, his thick lips turned down with unconcealed disgust.

Somehow Mark got the idea he was looking at the defense and the prosecution.

But where was the judge?

The big, scruffy man took a step toward him. "Uh, *Adept Kovachev*, is it?"

"My name is Mark," he said, careful not to acknowledge his rank and therefore his identity.

The big man smiled. "Mark." He sat down in the chair in front of the cell. The tall man with the sour face remained standing.

"By the way, my name is Lou Garner," said the big man. He pointed at the man behind him with his thumb. "This ray of sunshine is Bill Sexton."

"Pleased to meet you."

"I wish I could say the same." Lou sighed and sat back. "Mark, you sure have landed one hell of a problem in our laps."

Mark shrugged. "I don't see how. I'm just a hiker who got lost in the desert and happened to save a young boy's life. If you want to give me some water and clothes and point me in the right direction, we'll call it even."

Sexton snorted. "Just a hiker. In MechWarrior togs."

"They're very comfortable," said Mark.

"And carrying a slug-thrower."

"Great for killing snakes."

Sexton made a disgusted noise.

"We can't let you go," said Lou softly. "If a Wobbie patrol picks you up, they're going to know you got help in this town." He shook his head. "We can't afford that."

"I don't know why we don't just turn him in," Sexton muttered.

Lou wheeled around. *"Dammit, Bill.* Because if it were not for this young fella, Maria Rojas' little boy would be lying in the morgue and she has more than enough troubles right now. Now I am *tired* of having this discussion with you."

Sexton pressed his full lips together into a thin line and said nothing more.

Lou turned and drew a deep breath. "Unfortunately, my rude friend is right. If we protect you we put the whole town in jeopardy." He shook his head. "I just can't do that."

"So if you're not going to turn me in and you're not going to let me go, then what do you—" He stopped. "No."

Lou sighed. "We were kind of hoping you would surrender."

"No," said Mark again. "Word of Blake will rip my mind apart to get at the secrets in my head."

Sexton snorted. "What secrets do *you* know? All about Case White? Case White is *over*. It ended when ComStar units nuked Riga."

"No," whispered Mark, "we wouldn't do that."

There was a beat of silence and then he realized he'd just given himself away.

"Look," said Lou gently, "the invasion's over. They'll interrogate you, maybe keep you locked up for awhile, but in the end they'll let you go. You live, we live. What's wrong with that?"

"He still wants to fight, that's wrong with that," snarled Sexton. "Look at his eyes, Lou. He's planning to go off on some mad suicide mission, get himself killed and us, too."

Mark closed his eyes. There was some truth to what Sexton was saying. He was one man against one of the most heavily fortified worlds in the Inner Sphere.

But somehow he could not give up the fight.

He drew a deep breath and met Lou Garner's eyes. "Lou, I can see you're a good man. Well, I'm a good man, too. I saved that little boy when I didn't have to. And now you're going to turn me in because of it." Mark shook his head. "Well, I can't stop you. But if you expect me to agree to it so you can ease your conscience, you can go to hell."

Lou Garner stared at him for a long moment an unhappy look on his face. Then, without a word, he got up and left, Sexton following him out.

West Texas, North America

Terra

24 March 3068

A cop came for him the next day. The guy was big and he was pointing a needler directly at Mark's chest, but he was dressed in a green trooper's shirt and khaki pants and he wore a five-pointed silver star. It wasn't a Word of Blake uniform, unless things had changed more than Mark thought since the last time he'd been on Terra.

The cop brought him into a small conference room down the hall from the jail. Inside, sitting around a crappy pressboard table, were Lou Garner and Bill Sexton.

And Maria Rojas.

"That's good, Jose," said Lou, nodding at the cop. "I don't think we'll have any problems with Mr. Kovachev."

The man glanced at Mark and then stepped out of the room, no doubt waiting just on the other side of the door.

"I thought maybe we could take another crack at this," said Lou.

Mark slowly settled into an empty seat. "What's changed?"

"I don't want to turn you in, boy," said Lou. "But I don't have many choices."

"Unless?"

Lou glanced from Maria to Sexton. "Unless you agree to stay with us here. We could find you some work. Wouldn't pay much, but it would be enough to rent a room, eat regular." He paused. "Maria tells us you're from Terra."

"What kind of work?" said Mark slowly.

"Odds and ends." Lou shrugged. "Anything needs fixin'."

Mark thought about that for a second. "What do most people do around here?"

None of them said anything.

And suddenly it occurred to Mark that there was nothing to support a little town out here. No industry, no farming. "What do you do?" he whispered.

And then Sexton laughed. "You don't even know, do you? Oh, that's wonderful."

"Bill," said Lou in a warning tone.

"There's a comm station twenty klicks north of here, *Adept* Kovachev. A little facility where Word of Blake backs up their planetary comm traffic."

"*What?*" said Mark, his voice heavy with skepticism. "Why here?"

"Because it's in the middle of nowhere," said Sexton. "If someone were to take out their facilities near the major cities, this one would survive." The tall, unpleasant man flashed him an evil smile. "Everyone here works for the Wobbies."

Mark felt like he'd been punched in the gut. He glanced at Maria. "You, too?"

She coolly met his look. "I'm a mechanical engineer. I manage the station's physical plant."

Mark opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

"You said you wouldn't hurt me or my boy under any circumstances," she said acidly. "Is that really true, *Adept*? Would you really have spared us if you knew I worked for Word of Blake?"

"Yes," snapped Mark. "And here's another one for you. Even if I'd known, I still would've saved your boy's life."

They exchanged a long, angry stare.

She looked away first.

Mark turned to look at Lou. "I don't understand. If you're all Wobbies, why all the song and dance about turning me in?"

"We're *not* Wobbies," said Lou, "we just work for them."

"Well then, that's different."

"That's enough," snapped Sexton. "Why are we even worried about this man's life? We owe him nothing. *These people nuked Riga.*"

"We did *not*," Mark snarled.

"But, Mark," asked Lou softly, "how can you be sure?"

Mark slowly sat back in his chair. "Because ComStar would never employ nuclear weapons. Not on Terra. Not anywhere. We just wouldn't."

Maria shook her head. "Not a very convincing argument."

These people really believed that ComStar had destroyed the ancient Terran city of Riga. Suddenly Mark's life didn't seem quite so important. Not next to slander of that magnitude.

He met Maria's hard gaze. "You could find out for sure."

She scowled. "What?"

"You have access to this facility, right?" Mark nodded. "You could tap into the tactical comm traffic from both sides from the battle for Riga." He turned to Sexton. "And then we'll have our answer once and for all," he said coldly.

"I can't," said Maria. "It's too dangerous."

"It's just a backup station," said Lou thoughtfully. "It's never been heavily guarded. And when the Case White fleet was detected, the Blakists moved most of their troops to higher-value targets. There can't be more than a skeleton crew there now."

"And if I'm right, if the Wobbies took down Riga, you give me clothes and some water and send me on my way."

"What if you're wrong?" Sexton snapped.

Mark slowly sat back in his chair. "Then turn me in." He met Sexton's eyes. "If ComStar destroyed Riga then I really am on the wrong side." He glanced at Lou. "What about it, Lou?"

Lou slowly stroked his beard. "An interesting idea," he said slowly.

"B-but I can't do it," said Maria quickly. "There must be hours and hours of tactical comms. I wouldn't know where to look, how to pull out what we'd need."

Mark felt a smile steal slowly across his face. "I would."



The rumpled coveralls and blue ball cap Lou had given Mark wasn't warm enough to keep out the night's chill, but it was sure

as hell better than shorts and a cooling vest. Mark felt better than he had in a long time.

And it wasn't just the clean clothes. He was finally doing something.

Maria strode to a black sedan with a gasoline engine. She pressed a button on her key and the trunk popped open. "Get in," she said coldly.

Mark snorted. "How do I know you won't turn me in once I'm in the trunk?"

"You don't."

She wheeled away from him and Mark grabbed her arm. "Why do you hate me so much? I saved your son's life."

"You wouldn't be here if you hadn't. Now. Get in."

She turned away from him again.

"Maria." Mark paused. "What happened to your husband?"

She froze. "What?" she asked in an unsteady voice.

"You wear a ring and yet you have no husband. Lou said something about you having troubles."

She turned to face him, shaking with anger. "He was killed by falling shrapnel. Last week."

Mark suddenly remembered the line of debris in the desert. *The aerospace fighter.* "I'm sorry," he said softly.

"You're sorry? You're *sorry*? What the hell good does that do? I don't care about your stupid war, Kovachev. I don't care about your stupid reasons." She was crying now. "Alejandro still asks when his father is coming home. Do you have any idea what that's like?"

Mark was silent for a long moment. "Yes, a little," he finally said. "Word of Blake's ROM murdered my father when I was sixteen. I know a little bit about losing a father to war."

Maria looked stricken. "I—" Then she fell silent. Shook her head.

"I know you hurt," he said. "But it's not just about you or your boy."

"You have no right," she hissed.

"No?" he said. "Well, that's what war is about."

He climbed into the trunk and lay down. He looked up at her, backlit by the soft, silvery light of the moon. "I'm going to trust you, Maria Rojas. You do what you have to do."

Then he pulled the trunk closed, sealing himself in darkness.



Mark sat in a sterile white room, his fingers flying over the keyboard, sifting through hundreds, *thousands*, of tactical transmissions.

All of them heartbreakng.

The final desperate calls of the Steel Snake Charmers.

Maria stood at the door, looking beautiful in a white silk blouse and navy slacks, her arms crossed over her pretty chest, right foot tapping furiously on the tile floor. "How much longer?" she hissed.

"Just a little longer," said Mark. "I think I've found the records for the East European campaign."

"The guards are twice as heavy as I expected. And they're suspicious. You don't want to know what I had to tell them to keep them from looking in the trunk."

"Be patient," said Mark, opening a digital file.

And then he heard a MechWarrior's voice say, "Holy God. Is that a mushroom cloud? Bird One, this is Bird One Five. I have a nuclear detonation range three zero klicks my posit, at zero three four."

Got it, Mark thought. And then he thought, was that a Wobbie or a ComStar soldier? Who will this record implicate? He closed his eyes. Didn't matter.

He had a duty to the truth.

And to Terra.

"OK," he said. "Found it." He clicked a small drive into the slot. "Recording everything from time index zero nine to one six."

"Just *hurry*," she snapped. "I'm going to check the hall."

Mark turned to look at her and he almost said something, but stopped himself. It was too late to give in to his suspicions now. Whatever would be, would be.



Maria was down the long hallway and around the corner when she heard the pair of Wobbie troopers checking doors. She peeked around the corner.

Two men, heavily built and heavily armed, moving down the hallway trying the doorknobs one at a time. They were going to find Mark.

She closed her eyes. Mark Kovachev wasn't going to talk his way out of this one.

She thought for a moment, then she ducked into an office, picked up the phone, and dialed zero.

"Security," a voice answered at once.

"This is Maria Rojas, clearance Beta One. I just saw a worker I didn't recognize. He is wearing gray coveralls and a blue ball cap. In the communications records center."

"Acknowledged," said the man's voice. "Where are you now, Rojas?"

"Room Two Sixteen."

"Stay put," said the voice. "We'll take care of it."



Something was wrong. It had been eight minutes and Maria hadn't come back. He slid the drive into the pocket of his coveralls and stepped into the hallway.

And right into the line of fire of two Wobbie thugs in fatigues, their rifles up and pointed at his head.

"*YOU. FREEZE.*"

Mark froze.

"Hands where we can see them."

Mark realized his right hand was still in the pocket of his coveralls. He pulled his hands out and raised them above his head. "What's this all about? I'm here to do some repair work."

"In the records room?" said a third man's voice. "I seriously doubt it."

Mark turned to see a demi-precentor in infantry fatigues.

And standing next to him was Maria.

"Is this the man, Engineer Rojas?"

She nodded. "Yes."

And then her eyebrows went up and for just a second she was imploring him.

And right then, Mark knew what had happened. She'd seen the guards, maybe checking rooms, and knew there was no way out. She must have called security to throw suspicions off her.

Too bad it was all for nothing.

When the Wobbies got done with him they'd know all his secrets, including who had smuggled him into the facility.

Unless.

Mark swallowed, his mouth dry.

He had saved the little boy from the snake. Not because it was the smart or safe thing to do, but because saving women and children from the snake was what he did.

"You *bitch*," he snarled and lunged at Maria.

The hallway was filled with the roar of the Wobbies' weapons going off and agony ripped through his chest and his gut as two slugs smashed into him.

He staggered into Maria, managed to get his hand into his right pocket and out again, before he went down.

And one more thing.

He felt her hand close around the little drive.

And then he was on the ground, his heart pumping his life out

on the gray tile, Maria and Alejandro's safety guaranteed by the red-black pool of blood slowly creeping across the floor.

He looked up at her.

She was standing over him sobbing, her pretty white blouse streaked crimson with his blood, the Blakist officer's arm draped across her shoulders.

Only Mark noticed the little object she held tight in her left fist. Only Mark saw her slip it into the pocket of her navy slacks.

He didn't know what was really on that drive. Couldn't know for sure what Maria would do with it. But sometimes, when there was no hope...

He closed his eyes.

You had to make do with faith.