

FOR WANT OF A NAIL

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Defoe eased the truck to a stop and set the brake. An early spring storm filled the sky with black clouds and thunder rumbled back and forth between the hills and mountains surrounding the site.

The roadway ran straight up the side of the hill, from the Regimental Base at Danforth, and straight down the other, toward the next stop of his circuit. The Pegasus Scout Hover Tank was grounded into a cut made into the side of the hill, just below the crest where he had parked the truck.

He jumped down, walked to the back of the truck, and pulled his handcart from behind the cover that shrouded the bed of the truck. He loaded the two big containers of spare components onto the cart and rolled it down the paved path to where the Pegasus sat.

The old scout tank had survived several battles, as evidenced by the streaks of rust that ran down from the weapon scorings on its armored side. Its engines had not been replaced at the last refit. To fund military expansion, President Avellar exported everything that would generate hard cash or needed goods, such as replacement engines. So now the old hover tank had become a picket outpost, its engine compartment converted to hold tiny living quarters for its crew, and for the additional cabinets of electronics and optics that controlled the sensors scattered across the valley hilltops.

Active hover tanks smelled of lubricants, half-burnt fuel, and the stale air from under the skirts; this unit smelled of grass, old earth, and maybe a malfunctioning sewage collection unit.

Defoe placed his access key on the pad next to the scout's hatch and typed in his clearance code. The hatch sank back into the hull with a hiss and swung inwards. He stepped through the opening and dragged his heavy cart into the darkness within.

As he turned, a voice said, "Jump, rook."

Defoe automatically caught the object tossed at him and it took him a moment to notice that it was a grenade.

He flung it way from him and it rattled around on the floor of the scout's cabin, banged unseen into one component cabinet after another.

Benny, the senior sergeant assigned this week, said, "Don't be such an ass, Hutchins."

"It was just a dummy. Not about to toss a live one to this rook. He might camp on it and try to hatch it." Neither of the two crewmen could be seen through the backs of their command chairs, but Defoe knew them both, had seen them every other day, every other week, for months now. Benny big, graying, and going to fat; Hutchins tiny, skinny, and seemingly putting more and more of his mass into the long, hooked nose that gave him a rat-face.

Nothing Defoe could do about it. It was bad enough that, despite the desires that sent him to enlist in the Alliance Borderers Regiment, he had ended up in the Third Battalion, the sole infantry unit in the armored regiment. Even worse, his performance in his early training had relegated him to support functions, rather than the line units.

The first time he had handled a live grenade, he had activated the grenade and then fumbled the live round onto the ground. When the Drill Instructor shouted at him, he bent over, picked up the arming lever, and threw it over the safety wall.

If it had ended there, it might have been alright, but then Defoe had ducked, squatting right over the hissing, smoking grenade, and the DI practically had to throw him out of the way to flip the weapon over the wall before it detonated.

And the next time they gave him a grenade, he just froze.

The result was no Line, no armor, just spare parts and supply runs. Pure, boring grunt work.

The cab of the scout consisted of the two command chairs forward, behind a wide belt of thick, armored ferroglass, both seats surrounded by consoles for movement, armament, and the many sensors. Immediately behind them, a small section of the decking had an engineering panel on one side and a fold-down jumpseat on the other, into which the outer hatch swung when it opened.

Aft of that, where Defoe stood, was the combination bunkroom-kitchen-commode-dining hall—this entire section would fit into his locker back at Danforth. Defoe had never liked this arrangement, where the commode acted as the base of the fold-down dining table. It would all be stripped out when—and if—the tank received a new engine sometime in the future.

The two operators spent a five-day tour in this box, never leaving it until relieved by the next crew.

Defoe flipped down the jumpseat and entered his clearance code on the engineering panel opposite. After the readouts lit up, he started a basic diagnostic of the sensor systems. One module lit up as requiring replacement and he powered down the sensor system, the consoles in the fore-cabin going blank.

Defoe confirmed the power-down on the engineering panel and popped open the indicated cabinet, revealing rows of components. He fingered the labels until he found the indicated component and pulled it from the slot. He tossed it on top of his cart and opened the front of the lower box, pulling a new unit from its slot. He placed it into the guides where the old component had been and jammed it tightly into the backplane. He swung the access panel back into place.

"Re-powering the sensor system," he called, receiving not even a grunt. Hutchins appeared to be reading some sort of book on one of his consoles. The initialization diagnostic started automatically, just as it was supposed to and Defoe stood up. "I'll go get your supply box while the diag is running."

He stood and tapped the hatch control and the hatch swung inward, Defoe stepping back to let it by.

He lifted his foot to step over the threshold when the consoles in front of the command chair lit up and klaxons blared in the confines of the tiny cabin.

Startled, the hatch swung shut for the emergency lockdown and bashed him full in the chest, flinging him back into the commode and on top of his handcart of spares.

Hutchins was shouting, "What the hell did you do, rook?" while Benny slapped at his consoles, shutting down alarms and starting the data dump to Regiment.

Benny smacked Hutchins with one hand, said, "Shut up." Then he shifted to the calm communication voice expected when talking to Regiment. "HQ, this is Burn 3. Showing ten, eleven, twelve targets—repeat, twelve targets—descending Placecard Six. Altitude scattered from 50K to 65K, hot descent. Data stream is active and remoted."

Hutchins turned in his seat. He waved a hand vaguely toward the aft end of the cabin and said, "Crawl into the bunk. Grab onto

anything you can. If we get a near miss, everything will shake and rattle and I don't want you landing on my head."

Defoe stumbled backward and almost fell over his cart. He stepped clumsily around it and fell onto the bunk, pulling his cart toward him and setting its feeble little wheel brake. Forward of him, he could see Benny and Hutchins pulling their chair straps tight, Benny maintaining a running commentary on the targets shown on the console displays.

The earth trembled underneath him and Defoe saw, through the ferroglass windows, the plasma plumes of descending 'Mechs, out in the distance, before the world in front of him exploded into light, heat, and screeching metal.



It seemed like a long time that he floated in the darkness, with no sound to disturb him, until a high-pitched keening started, far away, but still annoying. He let himself drift toward it, to see what it was but it was just more annoying there and he tried to drift away again, but the smell of smoke burned at him and the keening grew ever louder.

He opened his eyes on hell.

The ferroglass had disappeared entirely on Benny's side of the Pegasus, with chunks still hanging in the edges on Hutchins' side. The upper half of Benny's command chair was gone and blood pooled underneath it. A smaller pool collected beneath Hutchins. The keening was coming from there.

The forward view was empty of 'Mechs, and a fresh shower of rain obscured visibility into the valley. Still, Defoe could think of nothing but getting out. He didn't seem to hurt anywhere so he pushed his legs over the handcart and almost dropped into the hole where the commode used to be, along with half of the communications panel in the floor.

He reached for the far side of the hole with his toe and then pushed himself upright, teetering for a moment astride the hole before he got his balance again. He slapped the hatch access pad. He heard the bolts release and saw the hatch start to swing inward, but it jammed, with just barely enough space to squeeze through.

He had put his shoulder into the crack when he heard Hutchins' keening turn into a howling speechlike sound, nothing that a human being should be able to make.

"ROOK! You crap! You Clan-hump. You don't leave me here. You come get me. You shit, you come get me."

Defoe froze. Hutchins. Hutchins was dead. The 'Mechs wouldn't ignore the Pegasus forever. In fact, the 'Mech that had blasted the Pegasus might be out securing the factory at the far end of the valley, but it would be back to make sure of its first shot on the scout. If he didn't get himself out, they were both dead. He moved again, trying to push his chest through the tight opening.

The speakers in the small cabin crackled and a voice emerged from the background hum. "Burn 3. Burn 3. This is Hammer 1. We have lost data feed and require targeting information on landed bandits. Burn 3 acknowledge."

Still stuck in the hatch, Defoe panicked for a moment before remembering that when the scout took damage, the comm channels would switch onto the open speakers. The Pegasus could still receive from Regiment, but apparently no longer transmitted. He looked at the hole in the floor. Probably not a surprise. He started his wriggling again.

"Defoe, you bastard! You can't leave me here!"

He stopped again. He was almost out. He could feel it. Almost through the gap. But Hutchins apparently couldn't help himself. Run, his mind told him. Run, his body told him. Hutchins was dead. He was dead, too, if he didn't move.

And move now.

He moved.

He pulled back into the cabin and stepped gingerly around the partly open hatch. The hot, bitter fumes rising from the hole in the floor made him dizzy for a moment, but he held on and set his foot on the other side, pushing off on the door to get himself upright.

He wanted to avoid looking at the remains of Benny's command chair—and of Benny—but a sick, perverted urge overwhelmed him and he looked anyway. Just a set of legs, strings of clotted blood hanging over the edge of the chair seat, while the rest of the chair was simply gone, along with the upper half of Benny. Defoe felt his gorge rise but swallowed it back down.

Hutchins was little better. Arm gone above the elbow and Hutchins trying to hold the blood back with his sole remaining hand. His leg on Benny's side was covered in blood, apparently the recipient of spalling and fragments from the bolt that took Benny. Hutchins' face was pale and his eyes were rolled back in his head. He had stopped his screaming, but still he muttered, "You shit. You come get me."

No way. Hutchins could not move from that chair and no way he could get through the narrow opening in the hatch. The urge to run started to rise in Defoe again.

Before Defoe could turn, though, the rain let up enough to show a 'Mech not more than a few clicks down the valley, making its way toward the Pegasus' position.

On the console in front of Hutchins, a blue icon started to flash, a tiny square about a quarter of the way down from the top of the screen. It crept slowly toward the spidery X in the middle of the display, which represented the Pegasus. Weirdly, the same image appeared on the console in front of what little remained of Benny. The 'Mech was coming.

A reticule appeared from the edges of the display and shrank until it just fitted around the tiny blue icon, which then turned red. A mechanical voice said, over the cabin speakers, "Target locked. Missile battery ready to fire." One of the buttons on the arm of Hutchins' chair flashed rapidly white to red and back, then settled to a slow red flashing.

Defoe was not in the Line, but even he had had some rudimentary training on the weapons of the Borderers. Push the red flashing button and the Pegasus' battery would launch one salvo of missiles at the marked target.

Training also told him that the tiny missile battery on the Pegasus would not do much against a 'Mech. Not to mention the target was well outside the battery's range; hit must have damaged the targeting system as well.

Over the speaker, a voice said. "Burn 3. Burn 3. This is Hammer 1. We have baskets to give away. Need targeting updates. Respond."

Defoe reached toward the flashing button but Hutchins' hand knocked his away. He looked down at Hutchins' drawn face.

"Mission. Recon. Report. Target for air wing. Shoot and we might ... kill one, more behind. Need to report. Then shoot."

Defoe slapped the back of Hutchin's command chair. "No way. The entire transmitter section is a hole. I can't fix it."

He looked back. The hole was big enough. The components were all gone, but he had a full set of spares in the hardcart, which was untouched. But the backplane—the communications bus was gone, a fragment of the transmit section there, though the receiving section was clearly intact.

From the speakers, the voice droned on. "Burn 3. Hammer One. Report. Require targeting information."

There was plenty of information, the various displays showing all of the hostile 'Mechs, most converging on the United Outworlds Corps fighter production plant, nine kilometers away. And one still trudging toward the Pegasus, locked in on the central display.

And no way to tell anyone.

That old poem ran through his head, "For the want of a nail, the shoe was lost; for the want of the shoe, the horse was lost—"

For the want of a place to plug in, the battle was lost.

Bus. Communications bus. Transmit and receive both use the same antenna, which is tied to the same bus. Don't need to receive. Need to send.

No one had ever told him that this should work, but it should.

The remains of the panel could not be raised while the exit hatch was open, though, so he slapped at the access pad and nothing happened. He shoved on the heavy door and it barely budged.

He pushed again, harder, until he thought his back would break, but the thing barely moved. Way too slow.

He flipped down the jumpseat and sat in it, wedging his back against the panels behind him and his feet on the hatch. And pushed.

It gave, slowly, until it stopped with a click, now jammed neither all the way closed nor all the way open. No way he would be able to get out that way.

He stood up and looked out over the command chairs. He could probably climb out through the hole in the ferroglass, but Hutchins would never make it. And that took him closer to the 'Mech still coming up the valley.

He yanked at the floor panel, which held for a moment and then sprang open, almost clobbering him. The six receive modules, lined up and unmarked. All he had to do, supposedly, was to pull them and replace them with the six transmit modules. And the system should automatically feed the data from the sensors out to Regiment.

Though there was no way to know, once he pulled the receive modules.

He pulled one module after another, tossing them behind him onto the tiny patch of floor that neither the command chairs nor his own feet occupied.

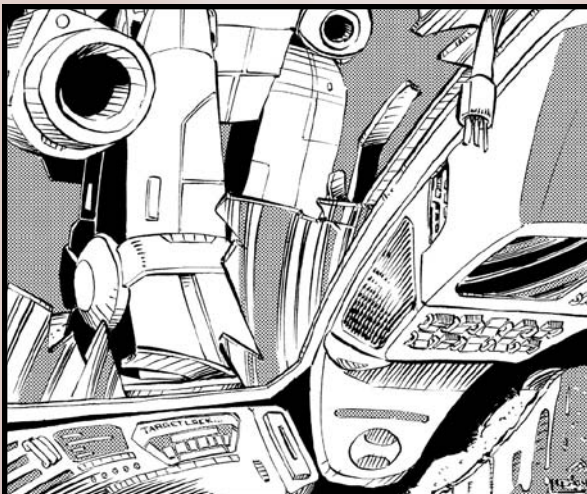
Now he could hear the roaring crunches of brush as the 'Mech crashed through them, the distant crack as a tree resisted for a moment before giving way to the metal beast.

Why doesn't it just fire?

He pulled the front panel of one of the boxes on his cart open. Wrong one. He fumbled with the catch on the other box and almost pulled it off its hinges once he got the latch to release. The six transmit modules were lined up, one next to the other. He pulled the first and guided it into the first complete slot.

The crashing in the trees got louder, and now Defoe thought he could feel the impact tremors as dozens of tons of metal stomped down, step by step.

One module after another, he shoved them into place, until the telltales next to the handles were lit on all six.



According to the theory, the Pegasus was now sending its latest data over to Regiment, forwarded then to the incoming fighters.

In theory.

In practice, though, that red light was still blinking. Defoe scrambled to his feet, the discarded

modules tangling his ankles, and reached for the arm console of Hutchins' command chair.

The 'Mech seemed to fill the entire viewing opening. Too close, a panicked voice said in his head. With half the ferroglass gone, the missile explosions will fill the cabin with blast.

The right arm of the 'Mech started to rise, covers snapping off small missiles in a launching pod.

Defoe slapped at the red flashing button praying the targeting system still worked, and the world filled again with sound and light and violent vibrations and the taste of blood and darkness and quiet.



When Defoe awoke, it was in hospital. The pale green walls and overly perfumed air (undercut with old decay and new antiseptic) were giveaways. Along with the bandaged arm hanging from a rack on his left side, its purple fingers sticking out of the end of the cast. Defoe wriggled them, to make sure they were his.

The fingers wriggled and his arm suddenly felt like it was on fire. They seemed to be his.

A young man's face hovered over him for a few moments, then a cool hand stuck a thermometer patch on his cheek and the face disappeared.

An eternity later, a different face appeared, the patch was peeled away, and another face replaced that one.

This last face hovered above a uniform tunic, with colonel's tabs on its collar. Chairman Fitzroy Candy. Defoe had seen him once before, at a full muster of the Alliance Borderers. Colonel of the whole damn Regiment.

His voice was low and gravelly, as if he needed to choke down something in his throat. "You did well, Protector. We smashed them flat. The Third Air Wing took out the lot, before they had a chance to damage the plant. We think it might have been a raid for engines. But, thanks to you, none of them got away, though we missed their DropShip.

"We couldn't find any markings on the scrap we recovered. Do you recall any markings on the one that hit you boys?"

Defoe made one attempt to shake his head and quickly gave that up as a bad idea. He tried to speak, to say, "No" but he couldn't get out more than a croak. A very inarticulate croak. He'd barely seen the one that had seemed right on top of him. He sure as hell was not looking for markings.

The colonel snapped a very quick smile. "No matter. You will be debriefed when you are better able to talk. In the meantime, you rest. Get well and we'll get you back in the Line."

Defoe tried to croak again. "Hutchins?" This sounded a little better than the last attempt. Still Candy only looked at him and Defoe tried to repeat himself. "Hutchins?"

The colonel grimaced and shook his head. "No. You were it. And you were pretty torn up yourself."

Defoe said. "I tried to run." When the colonel's face screwed up with confusion, he tried again, slower. "Run. Tried to."

The colonel leaned back and nodded. "You probably should have. I might have, in your place. When I was younger. But you didn't and we hurt these people badly. Twelve dead 'Mechs that we'll part out." He tapped Defoe's cast lightly. "Get well, soldier."

And his face disappeared.

Someone stuck a straw in his face and Defoe sucked feebly at it for a few seconds before giving it up. At the edge of exhaustion, he concentrated on breathing.

Had the colonel said "back in the Line?" And "protector?"

Defoe felt an itch on the back of his left hand, the one hanging in the cast in front of him. The itch grew worse.