

HARD LUCK CASE

By Steven Mohan, Jr.

***Fifth FedCom Regimental Command
Pealung, Fang, Tsitsang
Federated Commonwealth
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By a strange twist of fate, the last casualties of the FWLM's bloody attack on the Fifth FedCom fell a full week *after* the raid ended. The incident occurred as Subaltern Jeffrey Cantor was walking his *Jenner* past the 'Mech repair bay.

The *Jenner* was a light 'Mech, only thirty-five tons, and with its spindly legs and its low-slung, extended cockpit it looked like nothing so much as a mechanical chicken. Jeff didn't care. To him the *Jenner* was the most glorious BattleMech ever built.

And it was all his.

Jeff carefully stepped the *Jenner* through the open door that led into the biggest building on the base, the BattleMech Storage and Repair Facility. The building was immense, eighteen meters from its ferrocrete floors to its blast-reinforced ceiling. Giant sodium lamps cast a watery yellow light on everything: the giant alcoves inset in the building's walls and the 'Mechs they housed, the massive repair facility at the building's heart, even the yellow lines painted on the bare ferrocrete floor to mark the BattleMech Transit Aisle.

As he walked, he couldn't help but look at the proud 'Mechs painted navy blue and trimmed in gold. He spotted a *Phoenix Hawk* and a *Crusader* and—*there*.

His brother Robert talking to a tech as he stood next to his *Awesome*.

Hard to believe it was all real. *He* was a soldier in the Fifth FedCom.

The Black Rats.

Half of the seniors in Jeff's graduating class had applied for the chance to join the regiment a couple months before, after a tragic DropShip crash had killed a third of the unit's MechWarriors. Jeff was one of the lucky few to make the cut, no doubt partly because he was the kid brother of Captain Robert Cantor, but mostly, he was sure, because he was a helluva 'Mech pilot.

Then, barely six weeks after the crash, a Free Worlds League Military raid had savaged the Black Rats and some of the senior noncoms started whispering that the Fifth was a hard luck unit.

Jeff didn't believe any of that crap. There was good luck and there was bad luck and by definition the average person was likely to run into both in roughly equal measure. The best you could do was prepare for both. Superstition was a useless distraction.

Still, it wasn't difficult to understand why some soldiers believed in hard luck. Jeff's route back to his berth took him through the repair bay. Even a week after the raid the carnage was startling.

An overhead crane beeped as it carried away the crushed head of a *Hatchetman*. Actinic blue sparks dotted the battered frame of a *Wolverine* as techs welded armor plates back in place.

Jeff walked toward a crippled *Stalker*. The 'Mech was in horrible shape, its right leg little more than a mass of twisted and blackened metal. On one side of the *Stalker* a trio of techs had just cleared a jam and were unloading the 'Mech's autocannon shells. On the other side, a technician wielding an oxyacetylene torch cut apart the damaged right leg.

Jeff blinked. He didn't like to see live ammo handled so close to hot work, but it looked like the technician with the torch had followed all the proper procedures. He had roped off the area and a second tech with a fire extinguisher stood between him and the ammo. Satisfied that the tech knew his business, Jeff glanced forward.



At the precise moment Jeffrey Cantor was assuring himself of his safety the tech was cutting through the *Stalker*'s foot. It fell suddenly with a loud clang and the tech jumped back, bumping into his tanks. He'd replaced the green oxygen tank at the beginning of the job and had forgotten to reattach the safety chain. The oxygen and acetylene tanks, which were chained together, both fell, hitting the ferrocrete floor just hard enough to snap off the intermix valve and release the 2500 PSI gas within.

The pair of tanks suddenly became a deadly missile.

Normally a damaged tank would shoot across the room, perhaps decapitating a worker or two on its way to burying itself in the far wall. But the extra weight of the acetylene bottle kept the tanks down, so they skittered across the floor and passed through the transit aisle just as the *Jenner's* right foot came down.

It was a million-to-one shot. It never should've happened the way it did.



Jeff stepped down and heard a sudden, dull roar, felt his balance slip. His right foot twisted away from him just as he pulled his left foot up to take another step. His *Jenner* staggered forward and fell to its knees. With a superhuman effort Jeff kept his 'Mech from pitching forward on its face. He glanced down in time to see fire racing toward three pallets of live autocannon rounds. The heat instantly cooked off the autocannon shells. Suddenly the repair bay was taking fire. Jeff felt three quick impacts slamming into his torso—*whump, whump, whump!* He turned to assess the danger.

And lost what little hold he still had on his equilibrium.

The *Jenner* overbalanced and fell forward, its thirty-five tons slamming face first into the ferrocrete floor. Protected within his five-point safety harness, the fall did not kill Jeff. But it did knock him out cold.



The exploding shells turned the repair bay into a killing field. The techs unloading the ammo died first, ripped apart by two rounds designed to carve through 'Mech armor. The next round killed the tech with the fire extinguisher, slicing him neatly in half.

The seventh shell missed the head of the tech who'd forgotten to refasten the safety chain by less than a meter. As it whistled past him he dove for the floor and stayed down.

That wasn't enough to save him from what was coming next.

Shell number eight shot across the bay toward the tank farm.

The tank farm was a collection of bottles in upright racks. Most of them held inert gasses—helium for leak detection, nitrogen for purging, argon for welding shield gas—but some of them, like oxygen, acetylene, and the various weld gas mixtures, were not, and *all of them* were under pressure.

The shell smashed through the tank farm, setting off a series of secondary explosions that rippled through the bay.

The 'Mech bay started to burn.

The fire was so hot that, two days later, when forensics experts examined the scene, all that was left of the tech with the cutting torch was his shadow flash-burned into the ferrocrete.



Two minutes after blacking out, Jeff Cantor shook himself awake only to find he'd been transported to hell.

Still strapped into his five-point restraint, he hung at a strange angle, maybe forty-five degrees from what seemed to be down. His console was dark and nothing was visible outside his shattered canopy but gray ferrocrete.

He sucked in a deep, shuddery breath and coughed it out again. Perspiration stung his eyes and glued his shorts to his legs. Something had turned his cockpit into a blast furnace.

Jeff struggled to understand. Could it be a core breach?

He closed his eyes and swallowed.

No, he'd be dead already.

Shielding, then. Or—

He shook his head. Didn't matter. Had to get out.

It took him three tries to work the buckle of his safety harness with his slippery hands. The harness released and Jeff dropped to the deck.

For a moment he fought against the hatch, now almost directly overhead, but it was jammed shut. After long seconds of pushing and shoving and grunting he gave up and flung himself at his shattered canopy.

Blades of broken ferroglass sliced into his skin and then gravity smashed him down against the ferrocrete, *hard*.

Jeff felt none of it.

All he felt was the heat: a blazing, burning, scorching heat that savaged him like some cruel predator, clawing at his skin, tearing at his lungs, hungrily devouring all that he was. He turned and saw a wall of incandescent orange flame ten meters high rising up behind him.

All thought fled before that wall of luminescent death.

Jeff skittered away from it, crawling on hands and knees across the floor until he managed to stagger to his feet and run. *Run, run, run*. He fled the beast behind him with no other thought.

And ran headlong into a wall.

The end of the building. He lay there panting, his lungs scorched by superheated air, skin burned red by the fire's radiant heat, eyes stung by the oily, black smoke the beast exhaled. He was going to die.

Then a shape pushed its way through the fire. It looked human, but it couldn't be because it was *burning*. And who would brave this hell to save a dumb rookie? Maybe it was an angel. A fallen angel come for his soul.

The fire demon staggered toward Jeff. Despite his terror he did nothing, *could do* nothing, could not rise, could not speak, could do nothing but watch as his doom shambled toward him.

The creature reached out a burning arm and Jeff's breath caught in his chest. His eyes fixed on the demon's great hand, gloved in fire. Watched as the hand reached for a palm-sized metal button embedded in the wall a meter above Jeff's head.

Jeff just had time to notice that the button was painted bright yellow and marked with crimson letters that spelled "Fire Suppressant" before the demon slapped the button down.

The angry roar of the monstrous fire was suddenly overwhelmed by a great *whoosh* and then the world went black.

Halstead City, Halstead Station
Draconis Combine
5 August 3039

Leftenant Jeffrey Cantor sat in a rundown bar built against the pressure dome that marked the edge of Halstead City. The bar was a wretched little place populated by grizzled miners (all men, of course) sitting at rickety plastic tables. Its single attraction seemed to be the fact that it looked out on the planet's surface. Jeff thought this was a dubious virtue at best.

Fortunately the bar was dark enough that he didn't have to look at the clientele or the furniture. If he drank enough of the bottle of vodka sitting in front of him he wouldn't have to care about the view either.

He took another sip from his tumbler and shuddered.

Man, this stuff is liquid death, he thought. A corpse in a bottle, that's what it is. How could a guy hang a decent drunk on when you couldn't stand to --

"Jeffrey. What are you *doing*?"

The sharp voice pulled Jeff's gaze up and back, in the direction of the door. A dark shadow stood there, backlit by the fluorescent lighting of the passageway beyond. Jeff recognized Robert just by the hunch of his body, which was good, because he couldn't see his face.

Some of the miners muttered angrily into their drinks, but no one said anything quite loud enough to hear. And why would they? They wouldn't if they knew what was good for them, that was for damn sure. Especially after the old Fifth FedCom had kicked their butts back in May. That was the Fifth's specialty: cutting apart civilians piloting modified MiningMechs.

Jeff took another swallow.

He saw out of the corner of his eye that Robert had crossed over to his table.

"How much have you had?"

Not nearly enough, Jeff thought sourly. "Hey, want some, Cap'n? Izz real good."

Robert folded his arms. "Why are you always drinking?"

Jeff snorted. "Why *aren't* you always drinking?"

"You ignored the recall order," said Robert savagely.

Jeff rolled his eyes. "The *recall order*. I'm on furlough, papers filed with HQ. So don't bother me about no drill."

Robert leaned over and Jeff had to work real hard not to look at his face.

"This isn't a *drill*."

"*Look at it*," Jeff snapped, jabbing his glass at the long window. Halstead's M-class star was a dim patch of crimson fog set against a rotten yellow-green sky. Snow covered the ground, but it wasn't the honest white snow of Tsitsang, no, this crap was *gray*. "Have you really looked at it? Poisonous atmosphere. Light grav. Cold as hell. There's no way the Combine wants this rat hole back."

It was real quiet in the bar then. Guarantee all the miners heard *that*.

Robert's breath hissed out between his teeth. "Yeah, well, apparently no one told the DCMS," he said in a low, angry voice. "Because we detected JumpShips in-system twenty minutes ago. And they're not answering up."

That slowed Jeff down, but only a little. "So what. They're three days out." He brought the glass to his lips. "Still time for a little drink."

Robert knocked the glass out of his hand and it shattered on the floor. "*You Goddamn fool*. They jumped to a *pirate* point. They'll be here in five *hours*. Enough transports to move a couple combined-arms regiments." Robert grabbed Jeff by his uniform tunic and pulled him around in his chair so they were face-to-face. "*Got it?*"

And finally there was no way for Jeffrey Cantor to avoid looking at his brother's ruined face, the twisted rictus of his mouth, the mass of scar tissue that stretched from his left eye down to his neck, the twisted knob of flesh that once had been a nose. Jeff was instantly, horribly sober.

"Got it," he croaked. And then he climbed shakily to his feet and followed his brother out of the bar.

Outside Halstead City, Halstead Station

Draconis Combine

5 August 3039

Golden lights danced firefly quick in Halstead's night sky, aerospace fighters engaging incoming DropShips, desperately trying to fend off the invaders.

As Jeff watched, a firefly pulsed lightning bright before quickly fading.

Trying and failing.

Jeff stood in his *Centurion*, waiting for the DropShips to punch through the cordon of fighters and the order that would inevitably follow.

"I guess now we'll see," he whispered.

Apparently he hadn't whispered quietly enough to fool his voice-activated mike because his brother, who waited in his *Awesome* a couple clicks out on Jeff's left, answered up on their dedicated channel. "See what?"

Jeff sighed. He hadn't meant to bring this subject up with Robert, who as a captain had to say all the right things. Certainly not right before a battle.

"See what?" Robert insisted.

"Look, Robert, you have to know the Fifth FedCom is a hard luck case."

Jeff knew his brother would have to deny that charge, so he was surprised when Robert said, "It doesn't matter."

"*It doesn't matter*," Jeff echoed. "What doesn't matter?" he demanded, suddenly angry. "The DropShip crash that killed a third of the regiment? Or six weeks later when we were savaged by the FWLM. Maybe that doesn't matter. Or the—" Jeff stopped abruptly.

"Go ahead. Say it."

"Robert, I—"

"Say it."

Jeff licked his lips. "Or the repair bay fire."

"Yes," said Robert evenly. "None of that matters."

Jeff shook his head. "Robert, those aren't civilians in MiningMechs up there. Those are front-line DCMS troops."

"Yeah, so what? They're probably just Dieron Regulars. Nothing we can't handle."

"How do you know that? We didn't take this world. The Bar Hounds did. We had to have *mercs* clear the way for us. We've never been tested."

There was a long moment of disapproving silence. Finally Robert said, "Sometimes you have good luck, sometimes bad. But you take what war gives you. And do you know why? Because you're a *soldier*. You're a brilliant 'Mech pilot, Jeffrey, but if you can't understand that I can't use you...."

"Look," said Jeff hastily, "I didn't mean—"

"Stow it," Robert snapped.

"But—"

Jeff was cut off by a sharp voice on the command circuit. "DropShip has attained deceleration profile. Lima Zulu bears three one seven from rally point. All forward units engage."

"Second lance acknowledges," said Robert instantly, and then, over the lance's tactical circuit, "OK, boys and girls. You heard the man. Move out."

Jeff kicked his *Centurion* into a lope.

Twenty-two clicks. Damn. Right on top of the city. The Kuritans were planning to hit fast.

Unless the Fifth could break up the party.

The LZ was off to the nor'west, which meant the Kuritans were coming down in the Broken Lands, a scarred landscape shaped by impact craters and the titanic pressure of shifting ice.

Jeff didn't see how they would be able to get their DropShip down, but if they did they'd find plenty of chasms and gullies big enough to hide a 'Mech. The trick was to get there before the Kuritans could form a defensive perimeter. To pound the invasion

force as they were trying to debark, before they could bring their full firepower to bear.

As the ground got worse, Jeff slowed to a cautious walk, stepping around craters and over piles of shattered rock and ice. How were the Kuritans going to bring a DropShip down here?

He got his answer when he turned past a long escarpment and stepped onto a plain of rock easily a kilometer across. Someone had graded the rock, creating a smooth, level surface right in the middle of the Broken Lands.

A hidden LZ.

Jeff looked up and saw an immense ovoid dropping down on a pillar of flame. There was nothing to offer any scale, but Jeff pegged the DropShip at well over 100 meters high.

An *Excalibur*.

A fearsome vessel, heavily armed and big enough to deploy a complete combined-arms regiment.

Jeff walked his *Centurion* toward a hill tall enough to offer him some cover. He selected an encrypted HF circuit for long-range comms. "DropShip confirmed at projected Lima Zulu, probable *Excalibur*. Sierra-Four, out."

He didn't expect an answer and he didn't get one. Even an encrypted radio transmission could give away a unit's position and no one wanted to find themselves targeted by the big guns of a DropShip.

On the other hand, as a scout, Jeff was expendable.

Not that he was overly concerned. The CN9-A *Centurion* was a tough little 'Mech. Its right arm was a Luxor D-Series Autocannon and it sported a LRM-launcher in its chest, along with a pair of medium lasers that allowed him to fire forward or to the rear. No way could he take on a DropShip, but he'd give the debarking troops something to think about.

He prowled forward slowly. It took exquisite care to pilot a 'Mech on Halstead. The planet's gravity was only point six two standard, so his *Centurion*, which nominally weighed fifty tons, here weighed only thirty-one. Combine that with the problem of maneuvering over ice and snow, and an unwary pilot would soon lose his footing.

Fortunately the Fifth had been garrisoned on Halstead for three months, so Jeff had plenty of time to master the conditions. He ducked around a knife-edge escarpment and sucked in a startled breath.

Landing pods.

He jerked his 'Mech back and triggered his comms unit. "Observed three open landing pods. Enemy advance force is down. I say again, Enemy advance force is—"

A sizzling beam of ruby light impacted the cliff face a meter from his left arm, boiling off snow and carving a jagged black line through the rock.

Jeff hit his rear laser without aiming and then wheeled around in time to get the final proof that the Fifth was a hard luck unit. The *Hunchback* that had fired on him ducked behind a bluff before he could return fire, but not before he had noticed how it was painted: flat red with an ivory-colored Kurita dragon on its left shoulder.

This was not some force of Dieron Regulars.

They were facing the First Sword of Light.

The Broken Lands, Halstead Station

Draconis Combine

6 August 3039

Jeff hunted the Sword of Light *Hunchback* through a scarred landscape fashioned from fractured rock and treacherous ice. He'd wandered into a warren of passages that time and cold had carved out of the rocky hills of the Broken Lands.

He wasn't surprised the DCMS pilot was playing hide-and-seek. The *Hunchback* didn't have to beat Jeff. He merely had to delay him long enough for the DropShip to unload its deadly cargo.

Jeff turned a corner and found himself in a natural arena a kilometer across and twenty meters below the surrounding rock walls. Near the opening's center was a freestanding bluff, ten meters across and seven or eight high.

Big enough to hide a crouching 'Mech.

He eased around the bluff and found three more passages: at ten o'clock, twelve, and four. The passage he'd used to enter the arena was now at six o'clock behind the central bluff. Now where was that *Hunchback*?

Ordinarily a *Centurion* was well matched against an HBK-4G *Hunchback*. Both 'Mechs massed the same and because they both possessed identical 200 Nissan Fusion power plants they had roughly the same speed and maneuverability. And the *Centurion*'s weapons stood up well against the *Hunchback*'s massive Autocannon 20, two arm-mounted medium lasers, and single small laser.

But in this engagement time was against Jeff. Every minute that ticked by was another minute the Kuritans had to unload their DropShip. A point made especially clear when the rock wall just to his right exploded into a shower of rock and ice fragments.

Jeff stepped his *Centurion* quickly to the left and jerked his right arm up, answering the enemy fire with his own autocannon. He also let go with his chest-mounted laser. He caught a flash of red as a hover tank backed into the twelve o'clock passage.

Jeff thought the sizzling ruby light of his forward laser caught the tank in the turret just as it found cover, but he couldn't be sure.

What he could be sure of was that the tank was big—fifty, sixty tons if it was a kilo—and based on the damage it had done to the rock wall it was heavily armed.

Jeff keyed his comms unit. “Sierra-one, this is Sierra-four. Under attack, one mike tango,” said Jeff, using the code phrase for medium tank, “ID as Drillson. Request combat support, over.”

“Sierra-four, Sierra-one,” said Robert’s voice. “Currently unable to support you. Can you engage mike tango? Please advise, over.”

Jeff gritted his teeth. No telling what Robert and the rest of the lance were dealing with, but that didn’t make his task any easier. “Wilco, Sierra-one,” Jeff answered. “Be aware, mike tango is operating in support of medium bravo mike, probable *Hunchback*, over.”

“Acknowledged,” said Robert. “Hang in there, Jeff. We’ll get to you as soon as we can. This is Sierra-one, out.”

Jeff stepped his ‘Mech to the left, lining up another laser shot, only to have the tank blast him with its Cyclops Eye Laser. Armor boiled off his left arm. He quickly stepped back to the right and the tank ceased fire.

The passage gave the tank cover, but that was a knife that cut both ways. He couldn’t get the Drillson and the Drillson couldn’t get him. Stalemate. Worse, the *Hunchback* could show up at any moment and pour fire into his thinly armored back.

He glanced up at the rock wall the Drillson was using for cover. It was capped with a snow bank no doubt undergirded by strata of ice and stone.

Suddenly, Jeff had an idea.

He aimed his forward laser up and fired. The ruby beam of coherent light cut into the snow bank, flashing ice off into steam. The temperature started to climb in his cockpit. Yellow status lights flickered red on his main console.

Still he fired.

Mist wreathed the snow bank. He could no longer see what he was shooting at. But he heard the low, tortured sound of shifting ice.

That sound was suddenly overwhelmed by a shrill, whooping alarm. He didn’t have to look at the console to know what it was.

He was bathed in sweat. The horrible waste heat from his constant laser fire had turned his cockpit into an oven.

Still, he didn't stop. This had to be done now. If the *Hunchback* suddenly returned he might not get the chance to finish.

Jeff heard an angry rumble and secured the laser. The rumble became a roar as the entire top of the rock wall cascaded into the passage.

The tank commander must've realized what was happening almost at once, because he popped out of his passage.

Jeff was ready for that. He aimed his autocannon low and pulled into his triggers. A steady stream of angry steel poured into the most vulnerable part of the tank—its hover skirt.

Caught between fire and ice, the tank commander did the worst possible thing: he froze. He only hesitated for a few seconds, but it was long enough for Jeff to rip apart one of the Drillson's forward lift fans. Long enough for the avalanche to crush the tank's aft section and half-bury its turret.

A brilliant beam of crimson death flashed out from the Drillson. It missed Jeff's *Centurion* by a good hundred meters. Half-buried under ice and unable to hover or rotate its turret, the Drillson was now more like an emplaced artillery piece than a tank. Jeff hadn't destroyed it, but he had achieved a mission kill. Considering he was pressed for time, that was going to have to be good enough.

He took a step left.

And a stream of heavy fire ripped into Jeff's back. He stumbled forward, struggling to keep his feet while he glanced down at his rear monitor.

The *Hunchback* stepped out of the four o'clock passage.

Jeff targeted the 'Mech with his rear laser and watched as crimson fire splashed against the *Hunchback*'s chest, vaporizing armor.

He wheeled around, presenting his heavier armored front to the enemy 'Mech and lining up a missile shot. The LRM's were near their minimum range, making it a tricky shot, but when he placed his reticle over the *Hunchback*, a shrill tone filled his ears. He launched a volley of LRM's.

Smoke blossomed on the *Hunchback's* flat red chest and the other 'Mech staggered backward.

Jeff used the opportunity to slip around the central bluff. The Drillson took a shot at him as he crossed its line of fire, but did little damage. He ducked out from behind the bluff and traded autocannon fire with the *Hunchback*. Then he ducked back.

Jeff was reasonably pleased with the tactical situation. He'd disabled the tank and had gotten the one-on-one duel with the *Hunchback* that he'd wanted all along. He might get some tactical support from his lance, but even if he didn't he was sure he could take the other 'Mech.

The black scoring on the *Hunchback's* chest marred the pretty red paint job and told Jeff he'd damaged his opponent's armor. On the other hand, a quick glance at his wireframe schematic confirmed that most of the hits he'd taken had been to the back. Not a problem as long as he kept the *Hunchback* in front of him.

Jeff stepped out long enough to lance the other 'Mech with his forward laser, then stepped back behind the boulder, suffering only a few hits on his right arm as a penalty.

He would win a battle of attrition and if the *Hunchback* withdrew he could proceed to the LZ unopposed.

He took a step to the right to pepper his opponent with another round of autocannon fire when he felt impacts rippling across his back. The sudden impulse slammed him against the rock wall and telltales flickered red across his schematic.

Seemed like today was his day for getting attacked from behind.

His eyes darted down to the rear monitor.

Behind him on a bluff was a low-slung vehicle supporting an immense box-structure. *An LRM carrier.*

Where the hell had *that* come from? There wasn't enough O₂ in Halstead's poisonous atmosphere to feed the carrier's internal combustion engine.

The rapid-fire flash of orange flame from the carrier's box convinced Jeff that, ICE or no ICE, the vehicle really was an LRM Carrier. He had another flight of missiles inbound.

Jeff answered with his own volley of LRMs and then sprinted for the ten o'clock passage.

The ten was perfect. Its narrow opening would allow him to defend against the *Hunchback* and its high rock walls would shield him from the LRM's FireScan targeting system.

A series of explosions dogged his steps as he closed on his refuge. Only a hundred meters to go.

And then disaster struck.

Jeff's *Centurion* slipped.

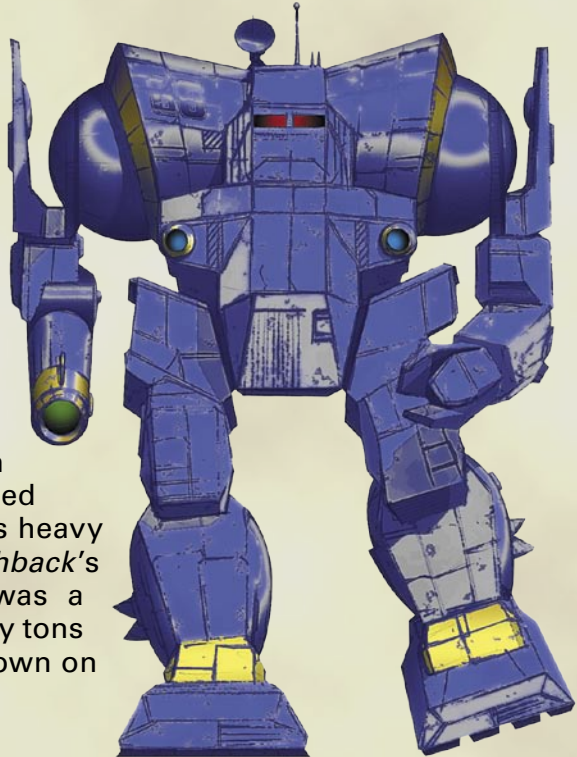
Low gravity made the ice considerably worse. Jeff knew this of course—he'd been stationed on Halstead for three months—but none of that stopped his *Centurion* from going down face first with a blow that snapped his jaw shut with an audible *clack*.

He managed to lever his 'Mech up with its right arm and look up.

At the *Hunchback* towering over him. Jeff stared straight into the black maw of the 'Mech's massive shoulder-mounted autocannon.

Suddenly explosions rippled across the *Hunchback*'s chest and red laser fire cut into the DCMS 'Mech. Jeff added his own laser to the mix, pouring fire into the *Hunchback*'s right knee joint. The DCMS 'Mech toppled over backwards.

An *Awesome* painted in the navy blue and gold of the Fifth FedCom stepped past Jeff's downed *Centurion* and brought its heavy foot down on the *Hunchback*'s damaged knee. There was a sickening crunch as eighty tons of assault 'Mech came down on the joint.



Then the *Awesome* reached over and braced the *Centurion* as Jeff pushed his 'Mech to its feet.

"Come on, little brother," said Robert. "We need to get out of here."

"Withdraw?" asked Jeff. "We have a clear route to the LZ."

"That's a negative," snapped Robert. "Our assault force has been repulsed. Major Trent has ordered a full retreat." With that Robert turned his *Awesome* toward the six o'clock passage to that led out of the maze.

Jeff watched in shock. *Retreat*? Not even a fighting withdrawal, but a *retreat*.

Then missiles began to rain down again and Jeff pushed his *Centurion* into a sprint as he followed his brother.

***Fifth FedCom Regimental Command
Halstead City, Halstead Station
Draconis Combine
6 August 3039***

Jeff pulled off the heavy neurohelmet that linked him to his 'Mech, disconnected his cooling vest, and pushed the hatch open. Watery yellow light filtered into his cockpit. The Halstead repair bay was smaller than the one he remembered on Tsitsang, but it was the same basic idea.

The pop and hiss of arc welders greeted him as he climbed down the ladder, mixing with the buzz of grinding and the dull roar of cutting torches. And the shouts of men. The bay was filled with the shouts of desperate, frightened men.

Jeff reached the bottom of the ladder and dropped to the ground.

Robert stood there leaning against the *Centurion's* leg, his arms crossed across his cooling vest. "Glad you're OK," he said.

Jeff steeled himself against the sight of his brother's ruined face. "What happened?"

Robert nodded at the nearest exit and started walking. "Let's get out of the techs' way. The general thinks the Combine will hit within the hour. Maybe they can do something for your *Centurion* before then, eh?"

"Sure." Jeff fell in step with his brother.

Like all MechWarriors during battle, Robert dressed in nothing but a cooling vest and a pair of shorts. Jeff could clearly see the patches of scar tissue stretched across his back.

"What happened?" he said again.

Robert sighed. "They got a battalion down in landing pods. Enough to slow us down. Then they used tanks to tow out their missile carriers."

"We walked right into a trap."

Robert nodded.

For a moment the two brothers walked in silence. Then Jeff said, "Why did you save me?"

Robert shrugged without turning to look at him. "You requested combat support."

Jeff grabbed his arm. "You know that's not what I mean."

Then Robert did turn. It was so hard to look at that face. Especially since Jeff remembered the handsome man Robert had once been. He'd had ash blonde hair that always curled at the ends no matter how short it was cut, a big nose their mother had described as full of character, and a mouth that always seemed to be hiding an irreverent smile.

Now tufts of hair covered his head in an unseemly patchwork, his nose was nothing but a fleshy knob, and his mouth was a twisted, gaping hole.

But his eyes were still the same. Dark. Strong.

Hard.

"What would Mom have said if I'd come home without you?"

Jeff shook his head. "Nothing human should've survived that fire. You shouldn't have even tried."

"There are some things a man has to do," Robert said stiffly.

"Even when there is no hope?"

"*Especially* when there is no hope."

Jeff turned away and they walked in silence for a few heartbeats. "I didn't believe in hard luck," he said. "Not until the freak accident on Tsitsang."

"There's no such thing as—" Robert began.

"The DropShip crash, the FWLM raid, the fire. What about all that, Robert? Only the Fifth could draw the First Sword of Light in a fight over a world that no one really wants. Even with the carrier I would've beaten that *Hunchback* except I slipped on the ice. *Me*. Slipped. What are the odds of that happening?"

Robert grabbed Jeff by the cooling vest. "There's not a *damn* thing you can do about luck. Don't you understand that? The only thing you can control is how you react." He shoved his little brother away. "Until you learn that you'll never be a soldier."

And then Jeff watched Robert stalk off.

Halstead City, Halstead Station

Draconis Combine

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Jeff stepped his *Centurion* out from behind a revetment built out of mangled ice and earth. He hit the charging mechanical samurai with his forward laser and a full volley of long range missiles before the enemy could close within his minimum missile range. The DCMS 'Mech staggered under the assault but stubbornly refused to go down.

Jeff fumbled with his computer, trying to ID the strange 'Mech. His computer answered up immediately. His attacker was a *Kintaro*. Damn, *another* Star League design. Where were they all coming from?

The *Kintaro* answered with the medium laser in its right arm and the short range missiles in its left.

The laser drew blood, vaporizing some of the armor that protected Jeff's torso, but the missiles impacted harmlessly against the revetment, launching a shower of dirt and ice into the air, but doing no other damage.

Jeff tracked the enemy 'Mech in, steadily worrying away the armor over its gyroscope with the Luxor D-Series autocannon built into his right arm.

Most of the *Kintaro's* answering fire harmlessly impacted Jeff's makeshift shield.

As long as the Fifth was defending they held a crucial advantage, but once the DCMS force crashed through the FedCom defenses that advantage would be nullified. Which was why the *Kintaro* was racing toward Jeff at its max speed of eighty-six kph.

And why he had to take it out before it got to him.

"Tank-six, this is Sierra-four. Engage incoming bravo mike *Kintaro* on my mark. Concentrate fire on the lower torso, over."

"Wilco, Sierra-four," answered the commander of the J. Edgar light hover tank to his right.

Jeff stepped left and shouted, "*Mark!*" Two beams of sizzling ruby light met at the *Kintaro's* torso, vaporizing armor.

The *Kintaro* charged through the laser fire and answered with its own lasers, slicing into the armor that covered Jeff's chest and his right arm.

The temperature spiked in Jeff's cockpit.

"Come on," he whispered. "Die, dammit."

A hundred meters out the *Kintaro* finally stumbled, lost its balance, and toppled to the ground, fracturing the permafrost with its immense weight.

"Good shootin', Tank-six," said Jeff. "You are released to attack incoming armor."

"Wilco, Sierra-four. Good luck." The J. Edgar was already lining up a missile shot at an incoming Drillson.

Jeff turned to his right. Robert's *Awesome* was engaged in an ugly duel with a *King Crab*, a low-slung assault 'Mech shaped like a crab sporting a pair of Autocannon 20s in place of claws. There was no way Jeff's *Centurion* would survive a toe-to-toe battle with a 100-ton 'Mech, but if he were careful and he were smart, he might be able to help.

Jeff raised his right arm and concentrated his fire on the giant's left knee. A steady stream of hot steel chipped away at the knee's armor, seeking the delicate mechanism within.

The *King Crab*'s pilot turned on Jeff and lowered the massive Autocannon 20s built into its arms. Jeff quickly stepped his *Centurion* behind the revetment.

But that wasn't going to save him this time.

The *King Crab* blew away what was left of the barrier of ice and dirt with one blast, leaving Jeff totally exposed.

Fortunately, Jeff's attack drew the monster's attention away from Robert for a few crucial seconds. The *Awesome* poured laser fire into the weakened left knee as Jeff ran for his life. The *King Crab* turned to follow Jeff's retreat, overbalanced on its damaged joint, and crashed to the ground.

Robert was immediately on top of the monster, bringing one massive foot down on an exposed autocannon and pouring laser fire into the beast's broad carapace.

Jeff turned to find another target and fired his lasers at the DCMS *Spider* engaging the FedCom *Javelin* to his right. The small 'Mech, beset by foes on two sides, skittered backward. Jeff hurried it along with a well-placed volley of LRMs.

The Fifth might be facing the First Sword of Light, but they were holding their own. It wouldn't take long before the attacking DCMS force ripped apart their fragile revetments just as the *King Crab* had destroyed his, but in the meantime the barriers gave the FedCom force a small but key advantage.

And even ignoring that, the allied units held the better ground. The Fifth was stretched out in a long line abreast with Roman's Bar Hounds guarding their right flank. Behind them was their supply cache, boxes of ammunitions, containers of spare parts, and medical supplies, all set out in a regular grid pattern. The cache would make it difficult for the First Sword of Light to flank them, harder still to manage an encirclement. All the Ivory Dragon could do was charge straight into the teeth of the Fifth's defenses.

Perhaps the Fifth's hard luck had finally broken. Robert had been right all along. A true warrior didn't bellyache about hard breaks. He scrapped and fought until the wheel turned.

As it had turned now.

Jeff lined up a kill shot on the panicked *Spider*.

He pulled into his triggers.

Just as something hit him in the back. Jeff's *Centurion* staggered forward, his gun-arm spraying fire wildly into the yellow-green sky and missing the *Spider* entirely.

Jeff glanced down at his rear monitor.

The thing that terrified him was not the flat red paint job of the endless parade of 'Mechs picking their way through the cache of boxes and containers behind them, it was the color of the rearing Kurita dragon on their shoulders.

A rich, lustrous brown.

"*Teak Dragon*," Jeff screamed over the unit channel. "*On our six*."

No, the Fifth's luck hadn't turned. Not at all.

As Jeff watched, 'Mechs that had been fighting the First Sword of Light a moment before turned to face the Seventh Sword of Light advancing on their rear.

"All units, this is General Slattery," said a deep voice over the command circuit. "You are ordered to hold your position."

As if on cue, the Seventh's 'Mechs opened up a hellacious volley of laser and autocannon fire, and the Ivory Dragon pressed its attack. The Fifth FedCom found itself trapped in an unholy killing field.

As Jeff watched, a FedCom *Marauder* staggered under the combined assault of ruby lasers from both front and back. The lasers burned through the 'Mech's navy blue paint and vaporized its armor. Then it fell, its great mass shattering the frozen earth.

A voice came over the command circuit. "All units, this is Major Trent. Withdraw to the DropShips."

"Belay that order," snapped General Slattery. "Hold Fifth, *hold*."

But it was clear the Fifth was not going to hold. As Jeff watched, the FedCom center started to collapse as 'Mech after 'Mech pulled out from behind their revetments and charged toward the left.

Toward the DropShips.

Jeff stood rooted to his position, pouring autocannon fire into an enemy *Mongoose* in front of him and hitting a *Jenner* with his rear laser. He was holding his own, barely, when he saw the J. Edgar to his immediate right, the one that helped him bag the *Kintaro*, break. But it didn't break left.

It broke right.

Jeff's gaze sought out the small tank's objective. The Bar Hounds hadn't broken under the fierce assault. Mere mercs were standing up to the punishment meted out by two Sword of Light regiments.

Loyal FedCom units like the J. Edgar were racing to brace the Bar Hounds.

As Jeff watched, a DCMS *Archer* stepped forward and brought its foot down on the light tank, caving in its turret.

"No," Jeff shouted. He surged toward the heavy 'Mech, pouring laser and autocannon fire into the Teak Dragon.

The *Archer* stepped back.

Jeff was unsure why until he saw Robert's *Awesome* coming up from behind, adding his own fire to Jeff's.

"What are you doing, Jeff?" Robert shouted. "*Pull out.*"

Jeff stared at the field of carnage laid out before him, broken and shattered 'Mechs painted the proud navy blue of the Fifth littering the battlefield. Then he looked over at the Bar Hounds and the remnants of the Fifth standing and fighting. He slowly shook his head. "I can't, Robert," he whispered. "I just can't."

"You'll be killed. You don't belong here."

And finally Jeff understood. He remembered Robert's words: *I can't use you and You'll never be a soldier.* "All this time I thought you wanted me to be a good soldier, but really you didn't want me to be a soldier at all."

"What should I tell mom if you die?" There was genuine anguish in Robert's voice.

"Tell her the only way to free yourself of hard luck is to face up to it."

"We can't hold, Jeff," Robert shouted. "*Don't be a fool.*"

Jeff licked dry lips. "There are some things a man has to do," he said. "You taught me that."

He charged to the right to join the Bar Hounds. Jeff watched in his rear monitor as Robert's *Awesome* stared after him. Then the great machine turned and lumbered the other way, en route to survival and shame.

All Jeff saw before him was glory.

Who could ask for better luck than that?

The End