

HIGHLANDER CHRONICLES

Goliath out of the Box

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"Bloody hell. Smack me with a brick. Those slanty-eyed, yellow bellied sons of Capellans! They sold us out! They'll regret the day they sold out the Highlanders. Damn them to hell and back again!"

"Captain!"

Darren Callwell shouted to be heard over the angry outbursts. Those, and the whine of the

Suvorov's turbo-diesel as it knifed through eardrums, setting temples pounding. The rattling of bones as the tank clawed its way across the rough terrain in their headlong flight threatened to unhinge the old shoulder-socket injury.

Captain Heather Lewis sputtered on another moment with her litany of curses before turning blazing, malachite eyes down between her legs. "What?!"

An outsider might've found the scene intimate, with his face pressed practically between her legs, staring up at her in the turret's observation seat. Yet in the poorly-made, overheating vehicle, racing away from an enemy weapon they'd yet to face, the only intimacy in the picture was knowing they'd been royally screwed by their own side.

He stretched the shoulder, trying to ease the pain. "Before the ECM hit, the *Bonnie* got a message through. They've got thirty minutes before they estimate the Hegemony fighter screen will be in position to deny them lift off."

"Smack me," she said, crouching slightly to cut down on the need to yell. She tore off her headset—useless since the EMP shook them up—and tossed it down between her feet, missing Darren's face by centimeters. "That means we've got twenty."



Darren nodded. "Captain Bellup, always optimistic."

Heather removed her helmet for a moment. Scratched at her sweaty scalp. She swept several errant strands of brunet hair from of her hatchet-like face with its high cheek bones and too-slim chin, plopped the helmet back on, then reached to a thigh pocket and pulled out a plasticized, hand-sized map. Squatting in her seat, she held it up and tried to hold it steady as the Suvorov hit a particularly nasty patch of ground, throwing them around like pebbles rattling inside a toy can.

"Bloody hell."

"Exactly."

"We've got to get word back to the regiment. Thrice-damned Maskirovka sold us out."

"With our comms down and the new electronic countermeasures the Haffers got, we can't let the DropShip know what's happened."

An exchanged glance told volumes; they both knew she would've ordered the DropShip off world, sealing their deaths if need be, to get word back to the Second Kearny.

The Confederation could not be trusted.

"The Tigershrike," he finally said.

Her eyes searched his, anger flaring, but banked down to a burning need for revenge.

"We've been holding it back," she said.

"Exactly."

The stench of diesel momentarily enveloped them, the noxious black cloud setting off a coughing fit all around. Darren almost unhinged his jaw as he hawked a wad of phlegm to the side. One of these days the Confederation would make a decent tank.

"We'll need to block the Haffers from trying to stab past us at her."

"Exactly." The look they exchanged acknowledged the inevitable.

She nodded briskly, then yelled. "Driver, bring us to a stop." She then grasped a large and dirty red flag, stood up and began waving it, calling the armor column to a halt.

The moving herd of tanks and armored personnel carriers that made up the reinforced company of Second Kearny Highlanders slowly ground to a halt in a plume of dust and exhaust fumes. Her legs disappeared out of view as she ran to talk with the fastest tank in the column: the Tigershrike.

Course it was a League design. Go figure. Darren shook his head, pulling off his own helmet to perform emergency scratching, imagining the row between her and Lieutenant James. No way was he gonna run without having a say so. But nobody, *nobody*, gets a word in edgewise when the hatchet queen gets going. Course, that's why they'd follow her to hell and back again.

Why *he'd* follow her.

Two minutes vanished as he prepped the autocannon feeding mechanism and then tried to follow the wiring diagram and find the short in the comms; it would take three hours at a minimum to track down on the steamy pile, but he tried to keep occupied. The thud of a body moving across the top of the tank heralded his failure before he'd gotten far.

Green-clad, muscled legs slipped into view. He grabbed a quick swig of stale water, hardly noticing the diesel taste after so many hours.

"Driver, time to let the Haffers know they need their bloody monster machine to take on the Highlanders."

"Damn right, Captain," the driver shouted back, piling on the horses as he slewed the tank around.

Darren straddled back into position by the loading breech, which allowed him to just peer over the driver's shoulder and out of the thin forward observation slit. He could just make out the Tigershrike spewing detritus away from its airskirts as the hovercraft gunned on toward the DropShip, while a dozen tanks wheeled around in disciplined ranks; a chorus line performing a perfect pirouette, tracked-legs pumping in unison. He nodded, unsurprised but moved nonetheless by this show of discipline, of bravery. They all knew what awaited them and not a one blinked an eye from the responsibility.

Highlanders all.

"Let's make it happen, people."

"Yes sir," his own voice rang out with that of the driver.

The tanks, most of them heavies, still picked up good speed as they began to get rolling. A momentum built, which he'd seen smash through enemy after enemy in the campaigns fought beside the hatchet queen. He gritted teeth, not wanting to face the fear fluttering in his belly like a thrice-damned Masker sliding through grass.

Heather said something he missed.

"What, Captain?" he yelled, moving slightly to give his ears a straight shot to where she sat, her head slightly out of the hatch.

"The whole thing was a lie."

He paused for a moment then responded. "Aye, Captain. I think it was. The world's not ripe for the taking. It's ripe for a small merc force to be tossed into the grindstone of the Haffer's new weapon to see what happens. To see if the Cappies need fear this new weapon." He coughed, mouth drying out as the heat began to increase once more, the diesel engines pumping out heat for which their cooling jackets could not compensate, the roiling dust of a moving column of armor only adding to the dearth of moisture.

"Expendable assets."

"Aye, Captain. Very definition of a merc unit."

"Smack me, no!" she yelled, slinking down to bring those malachite weapons to bear. "You can't treat mercs like that. You can't treat Highlanders like that. Do that to us, and we'll smack back, no matter how long it might take. Long memories."

Her righteous anger sparked his and he nodded grimly. "Long memories."

Darren opened his mouth again to speak and no words came. They passed a knowing look, filled with the admiration of two who survived hell and brimstone together and would stand by the other's back as the reaver's blade swept down.

For the first time he could think of, her stark face lightened a moment as a brief smile graced lips unused to anything but an angry grimace.

Nothing more to say.

Darren turned back just in time to see a towering mammoth of glinting metal and savage protuberances top a rise almost a kilometer distant.

Any remaining moisture in his mouth leached away, the fluttering in his stomach moving to tank treads that ripped and tore.

"Gods," he said, without realizing he spoke, crossing himself. Roughly humanoid, the walking titan didn't have arms so much as twin barrels half the size of the entire Suvorov. No way to tell at this distance, but it looked easily twelve meters tall, maybe more.

There was no grace to the machine. It trundled forward at a gallop that had to break bones in the pilot's ass after a while. Its weaponry, while looking formidable, didn't exceed what they carried. Yet some indescribable horror seeped in, like a viral plague defeating hermetic seal after seal. Some deep-seated physiological reaction at seeing a giant of such proportions. A thousand children's faire tales rose within, of monsters and demons, of *Athach*. He tried to shrug the growing dread aside, but couldn't seem to find a way, as his breathing rattled hollowly in a clenched throat.

Another image, wrought at grandmama's knees, reared. The sainted David taking on Goliath, read from the pages of an ancient illustrated bible said to have come down to his family from ancient Terra, before the Haffers, before even the Alliance.

The distance between the new machine—couldn't even remember what they called the damn walking tanks—and the Highlander armor column closed as he wrestled with inner demons. He tried to console himself with how David beat Goliath, but he felt only emptiness and a yawning cliff. He'd not gone to church since granny died and if there was a God, he was busy elsewhere. He certainly wasn't looking down on this weapon Darren just *knew* would revolutionize warfare—the day of the tank was finished.

They were finished.

God would not turn an autocannon shell into a golden stone from a sling shot to strike at critical armor, sliding under the armored helmet and killing the pilot, allowing the Highlanders to cut off its head and hold it up high.

An azure beam of scintillating energy cut the air, blistering out from the machine to cut just to the right of their position. He flinched, unable to stop the reaction. He didn't see the result, but the detonation and wash of heat spoke volumes.

"On my mark," Captain yelled.

Though ashamed, her calm voice helped to wash away the gibbering terror threatening to tear out of his subconscious with

bloody fangs and slashing, burning claws. He immediately fell back onto patterns learned across two decades.

“Fire!”

Right fist clenched, as though swinging a sling, he triggered the autocannon. The bellow of screaming metal vomiting towards the mammoth construct made him glad for the helmet, despite the heat and itch.

An eternity of heat and sweat and fear boiled and erupted; a cauldron of blood and death stirred by the new avatar of walking metal, hacking, slashing and killing Highlanders at every turn.

Too exhausted to talk, ears ringing constantly from the hammering of the autocannon and the broken movements of the Suvorov, eyes bleary from the acrid smoke and stench of burning metal and flesh, tongue swollen until he breathed through a bloody strip of cloth quickly torn from a sleeve to stay alive, Darren continued to fight.

Because he watched the captain’s back and she watched his.

Because they all died the moment they set foot on this cursed world. But it didn’t matter, because that’s what Highlanders did. For centuries. Fought and died for nations that cared little how much blood seeped into foreign soils. But they had their own heritage. Their own history and legacy and they fought for themselves.

A horrendous noise shattered his eardrums and he was thrown to the side, knocking his head against the loading breach, cracking the helmet clean in two. He screamed as flesh tore away from his blistered forehead as it touched the almost glowing metal, while blood flowed from ears and nose, stars dancing a staccato across his vision.

Drifting outside himself, he realized he lay across Heather’s legs. He blinked slowly several times, before what he saw came into clear focus. The top portion of the turret no longer existed, torn completely away by a savage kick from the machine which blocked out the sun, its shadow, death come stalking.

He tried to call her name one last time before he realized he held only her bloody legs in his hands. Though despair tried to rise, anger smacked it down; his commander’s anger taken upon himself at the moment of their deaths.

He would never know if the DropShip made it off. If the Highlanders found out about the betrayal. Yet it didn't matter. As the foot smashed the last life out of the Highlanders on world, a single thought buoyed him.

They fought like Highlanders. He couldn't ask for anything more.

The End