

PALADIN

by Jason Schmetzer

Jojoken
Andurien
Free Worlds League
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Awareness came to Neal Haddon filled with pain and noise. He blinked sweat out of his eyes and saw the blurry flashes of warning lamps through his cracked neurohelmet visor. His hand bumped into the closed visor when he tried to wipe his face. He squinted hard, trying to clear his vision. He was in his cockpit.

He was on his back.

A steady beeping forced its way into his consciousness. Part of his mind ran through the various checklists he'd learned when he'd first received the *Thunderbolt*. That particular tone was the reactor startup warning; the fusion plant buried in the 'Mech's torso was ready to power up.

When had it shut down? And why was he on his back? When had he fallen? Something clicked in his mind.

"Mesillia!" he said. His hands clutched at the controls above him, long hours of practice letting him find the yokes without seeing them. He pressed the startup button without thinking about it. There was little else in Neal's mind except getting the *Thunderbolt* to its feet. He popped his visor and wiped at the pasty blood masking it. It smeared more than cleared, but he could see again. He clapped the visor closed again and twisted the air valve; the brief breach had been enough to let the fetid air of his cockpit into the helmet.

"Bravo Six to any Bravo," he said. "Report!" Static answered his radio call. Pain erupted in his face when he spoke, a stabbing pain in the left side of his mouth. Opening his helmet again, he spat a tooth out before swinging the visor shut.

"Any Bravo element," he repeated. "This is Six." Static.

The *Thunderbolt* shuddered like an addict as it responded to Neal's piloting. He rolled the sixty-five ton BattleMech to its feet and looked around. In the distance to the south, Jojoken was burning. Neal watched the sky flash as another Capellan artillery strike hit the city.

"Any Bravo element," he muttered. His mind was playing scenarios, painting him as the last of his company. The last of the

regiment. There were no more Second Defenders, not outside Bravo Company. Not anymore. "Any Bravo," he said, before a fit of coughing shook him. The pain in his chest and throat distracted him from his mouth.

"I can't be the last," he said.

To the north, Neal saw the fireworks display of the Liao lines. The Andurien forces were still pressing, still trying to push the Capellan invaders back. Another series of flashes smote the sky. Neal looked at Jojoken in his display.

The ground erupted barely a hundred meters behind him. They were firing at him.

"The radio, you idiot," he said. He stabbed the cutout and moved the *Thunderbolt* north. He'd learned about direction finding at the Academy. It was a stupid mistake. He noticed the shell craters around him and grunted. It must have been an artillery round that had downed him. The 'Mech struggled to get moving. Neal searched his displays until he found the wireframe damage schematic. More red lines blinked at him than green lines. His left side was almost completely denuded of armor, and he had actuator damage in his left arm and shoulder. His right knee flashed variable warnings at him, and the 'Mech trembled every third step or so.

He ignored it all.

Neal pushed the *Thunderbolt* harder, moving it around the iron-heavy outcroppings and deeper into the Thurmond Preserve. The Liaos were just on the other side of the forest.

Ignoring the heat in his cockpit, the pain in his mouth, and the screeching sound of a damaged actuator, Neal drove north.



Duke Allard chose to receive the Capellan embassy in his audience chamber. He seldom used the Great Hall, preferring instead to deal with his guests in the small office he kept just off of it. Mesillia had told Neal that her father preferred to be able to look his guests in the eye, something he couldn't do from the throne, ten meters away.

"I wonder if he'll have anything new to say," Mesillia whispered to Neal. "Now that Sadurni is fighting, perhaps they'll have something more reasonable to ask for than me."

Ten years ago Calvin Liao, mad Chancellor of the Capellan Confederation, had met Mesillia Allard. He had immediately fallen in love with her, or come as close to it as a man like Calvin Liao could. Mesillia's father, the Duke, had been as adamant then as he was now: never.

It had taken ten years, but the petulant child sitting on the Capellan throne had finally pulled the last straw. The Confederation had invaded Andurien. And now Sadurni. All in the name of a mental midget's infatuation.

Neal clamped his teeth together at the thought of Sadurni. The Second Defenders of Andurien were there. His regiment, his brothers. He should be there with them. His entire company had come to Andurien at Mesillia's summons.

"It's a war now," Neal said. "He can't call it courtship." He turned away from the court and gave her a small, private smile. "Besides, I'd have something to say about it, now." Not that the Duke would listen, but Mesillia would appreciate hearing it.

He turned back as the chamberlain announced the Liao representative. Neal frowned with the rest of the court when the man's titles were announced. There were no noble titles, no mandrinn or prefects.

"A colonel," Neal murmured. It wasn't common for a military officer to act as diplomatic envoy.

The small man marched forward from the archway, his steps measured evenly as his boot heels clapped against the polished marble floor. The olive green of his uniform clashed horribly with the surroundings, but the expression of supreme confidence on his face negated any possible social damage.

"Your Grace," the colonel said, "I am Colonel Dennis Liu, representative of His Excellency, Chancellor Calvin Liao." He paused for the inevitable susurrus of disdain from the court before looking at Mesillia. "I have come for your daughter." The noise from the assembled court was filled with shock at the bluntness.

Neal stepped between Mesillia and Liu. He kept one hand behind his back, fingers intertwined with Mesillia's, but his eyes met the Capellan's black eyes. He couldn't repress a shiver when Liu stared back without flinching.

"Go back to your Chancellor, Colonel," Duke Allard said after the Hall had quieted. "My answer remains the same: no."

Liu inclined his head. "I had assumed as much, Your Grace," he said. When he looked up, his eyes were hard. "My assault will begin within the hour. We will take your daughter."

Neal's hand groped at the empty holster on his side. Duke Allard didn't allow any weapons in his court, not even for his guards. It was a damnable idiocy, Neal thought, even as he considered what a mistake it would be to shoot the Capellan when he came under a flag of truce.

"When this Palace comes down around you," Colonel Liu said, looking back at Neal, "remember that I gave you opportunity to spare Jojoken pain."

Then, ignoring protocol, the Capellan officer stepped toward Neal and Mesillia. Neal stiffened again. The portly Duke shot to his feet. "I have given you my answer," he shouted.

"You wear the uniform of the Second Defenders of Andurien," Liu said to Neal. He reached out for the parcel an aide placed in his hands. "I give this to you, then." A small, predatory smile. "A gift from Sadurni." He dropped it on the floor and strode out of the hall.

One of the courtiers brought the package to Neal. He frowned at Mesillia as he opened the brown paper enclosing the soft bundle. He stopped when he saw the flash of green and purple. Anguish washed through his head, his heart. He dropped the bundle.

The battle flags of the Second Defenders of Andurien fell to the floor.



Neal had gone barely a kilometer forward when he found the first shattered 'Mech of his company. Lieutenant Arthur's *Ostroc* was draped across the boulders, one arm and one leg missing. There was no sign of Arthur's lance, but the lieutenant had remained here. Neal saw the shattered cockpit, the red-edged glass.

"I guess that settles that argument," he said, and giggled. Pain stabbed at his jaw and his chest as he laughed. He bit down hard,

grinding his teeth until it passed. He looked again at the destroyed 'Mech. Arthur had been his XO for two years. He deserved better.

Neal moved around the hulk and continued on, but walked more slowly now. The *Ostroc* had been destroyed by weapons fire, not artillery. Capellan forces had made contact with his company, which meant the artillery park's defenders would be alerted.

It had been a simple mission, one well-suited to the last company of the Second Defenders. Move north through the forest while the line forces engaged the Capellans and take out the artillery that was shattering Jojoken. They hadn't hit the Palace before Neal had left, but the city was taking a pounding. Bravo Company would silence those guns.

Neal shuddered when a fresh wave of coolant washed through his vest, chilling him. He brought the *Thunderbolt's* right arm up as he approached a clearing, readying the heavy laser. His sensors were clear, but the ground was thick with interference, and he damned the Duke for planting Mosiro rustwoods.

The 'Mech had taken only one step into the clearing before being struck by missile and cannon fire. Three Capellan 'Mechs emerged from the hash to be painted on Neal's tactical display. The warbook tagged them as two *Wasps* and a *Clint*. Alone, none of the 'Mechs would have been a challenge for Neal's heavy *Thunderbolt*, but together they threatened him.

Neal twisted his 'Mech to the left, out of the line of fire, and stabbed at his radio. "Bravo Six to any Bravos," he called, and read off his map coordinates. "Three Lousy 'Mechs, this location." He repeated the message while pushing the *Thunderbolt* through the heavy trees, then switched the transmitter off.

The *Wasps* chased him, one running forward to follow the trail Neal was breaking, the other launching itself overhead on flaring jump jets to try and find a way through the canopy. Neal pushed the *Thunderbolt* around the largest of the trees. His lips drew back in a harsh smile. By splitting up, the Capellans had made a mistake. He brought the *Thunderbolt* around the tree, waiting while the trailing *Wasp* closed. His 'Mech crouched down as Neal manipulated his controls, raising the *Thunderbolt's* right arm. He squeezed the triggers as the light Capellan 'Mech strode into view.

The harsh glaring wash of his large laser combined with a misile impact to tear the *Wasp's* right arm off at the shoulder, taking its primary weapon with it. His other short-range missile skipped

past the lighter 'Mech and blasted a rustwood to iron-colored toothpicks. The three medium lasers mounted in the *Thunderbolt's* chest gouged deep welts over the *Wasp's* torso armor. The battered 'Mech stumbled and fell at Neal's feet. He saw Arthur's *Ostroc* in his mind again, and brought the *Thunderbolt* out from behind the tree. It was a simple matter to raise the sixty-five ton 'Mech's right foot. Gravity did the rest.



The message calling Neal to Duke Allard's private sanctum was unexpected. He was with Mesillia in her rooms, angry at himself and at her. He should have been on Sadurni with his regiment. His company should have been there, not here with him while he courted a woman he'd never be allowed to marry.

"I don't care what my father wants," Mesillia said. "He'd want me to be happy, in any case."

"It doesn't matter anyway," Neal said. "This is a real war now, not just one of the Butcher of Kearny's tantrums." He fell onto a brown leather sofa and leaned forward until he was staring at his boots. "I wouldn't have time to marry anyway."

"I will not marry Calvin Liao," Mesillia said. "Besides, Father just got a report. He's just married that little snap of a girl, Ariana Calderon. I won't be second wife to a Periphery whore." She came and knelt before him, lifting his hands and enfolding them with her own. "I have a plan," she whispered.

Neal wondered what she had been talking about as he knocked on the heavy teak door of the Duke's sanctum. It opened immediately, giving him a breath of cold, sterile air. He counted at least four air purifiers going as he walked toward the massive mahogany desk. His nostrils began to itch immediately from the dry air. He swallowed a frown; the Duke's hypochondria must be flaring up. Precisely six paces from the desk Neal stopped and came to attention.

"Flag Captain Neal Haddon reporting to the Duke," he said. Duke Allard looked up from the small screen inset into his desktop and waved at Neal to stand easy.

"I have confirmed the Colonel's news," Duke Allard said. "Your regiment is gone."

The muscles in Neal's legs threatened to give out. He hadn't really doubted it, not when he was holding the Second's guidons, but it was still a shock to have it confirmed.

"The First Defenders are being slowly pushed back," the Duke continued. "General Bayerlein tells me that we can expect to hold out for two more weeks, less if Liao brings in more BattleMechs." The Duke sneered as he said it, his mouth forming a petulant moue of disgust. "Bloody 'Mechs."

"There are still divisions of the older troops, Your Grace," Neal said. He knew Duke Allard despised the new BattleMechs, despite having raised two regiments of them. The Camerons had changed the face of warfare on Styx. Neal didn't dream of entering combat in anything other than his 'Mech, but he'd grown up with them. The Duke and his generation were still afraid of them. "And my company of the Second," he hastened to add.

The Duke harrumphed and settled back in his chair. He folded his hands across his ample belly, just below the brilliant platinum badge of Andurien. "Your company is why I called you in here."

Neal straightened from his depressed slouch. "Sir. Your Defenders stand ready."

"In two weeks it won't matter," the Duke said. "Long before the damnable 'Mechs get here the Liao artillery will have pounded this Palace flat. Most of Jojoken will go with it as well." Another barrage thundered overhead to punctuate the Duke's point. "If we're to hold out long enough to settle this, we need to silence those guns." He looked at Neal full on for the first time, meeting his stare with his dark brown eyes. Mesillia's eyes, Neal realized.

"Bravo Strike will advance and destroy the Capellan artillery train."

Neal nodded once, sharply, his mind already planning his route of march. The Liaos were north of the Thurmond Preserve, firing their artillery from beyond the shelter of the forest. If he could slip his company through the forest, he might take the defenders unawares enough to allow his 'Mechs to destroy the big guns.

It would be costly. Even if they made it through the forest undetected, they'd have to concentrate on the cannons and not the defenders. The Liaos would have a long couple of minutes of free shooting.

"We can do it," Neal said, blinking his doubts away. It was what the Duke wanted done. It would keep Mesillia safe.

"If you can," the Duke said, looking away, "it might just buy us enough time."

"Your Grace?"

"To fight to a point where we can barter Mesillia away, instead of surrendering her."



Neal left the other Capellan *Wasp* buried beneath a fallen rust-wood and ignored the *Clint* after he burned it's right leg off. The forest thinned ahead of him. He saw weapons fire through the trees and knew he was getting close to the edge of the Preserve.

Two more shattered *Ostrocs* of Arthur's lance had fallen at the edge of the woods. Neal paused near one of them – Darling's, he thought – and studied the damage. The thinner armor over the 'Mech's torso was eaten away by heavy cannon fire. Only heavy armor or 'Mechs mounted that kind of weaponry. The defenders were more dangerous than intelligence reported.

"Bravo, this is Six," he said. "Report." The voice was scratchy through the heavy jamming static, but Neal understood him.

"We thought you were down!"

"Only for a moment, Nine. Report."

It took only a few moments for his third lance commander to tell him that half his company was gone. They were still half a kilometer from where the artillery was firing, but the defense was heavier than expected.

"There's something else, sir," Charlton said. "A new kind of 'Mech, something massive. It's got a huge cannon on it, and the damn thing flies, sir!"

Neal nodded, his mind still whirling with plans and casualties. "If it's a 'Mech, Nine, we can kill it."

"If you say so, Six. It took out most of Two Lance all by itself."

The jamming static in his helmet cleared for a moment. Neal watched his tactical display, waiting for the *Thunderbolt's* computer to put together a picture of the engagement zone. The screen pinged as the report compiled, a rough raster line painting new images across his map.

"Christ Jesus in Heaven," Neal whispered, the pain in his jaw forgotten. A dozen new contacts had appeared interspersed with the long guns. The Duke's best analysts had predicted only a lance of 'Mechs at the most; the smart money had been on heavy armor. Dangerous, but not too much for the Bravo 'Mechs to handle.

A full Capellan company of heavy and assault 'Mechs laagered with the artillery. Half were powered down with repair and reload vehicles crowded around them. As Neal watched, a tall assault 'Mech – the scanners counted eighty tons – twisted around and raised the massive muzzle that made up its right arm. Cannon flame belched from it, a massive stream of fire, more than anything Neal had seen outside a DropShip.

It was firing at him.



"You can't do this," Mesillia said. "I won't let you."

They were in her suite overlooking Jojoken. The large double-doors that led to the balcony were draped, but that wasn't unusual. Two kilometers was close enough to let the scandalvid holojournalists get a good angle. Mesillia despised the news media.

The drapes were slit apart just enough to let through a wisp of the crisp evening air deeply scented with the sharp rustic aroma of pine needles. Neal breathed through his nose, enjoying the sensation while his mind tried to come up with an original answer to her plea.

"It's my duty," was all he came up with. It was all he'd come up with for the past hour, and Mesillia hadn't taken it any better then, either.

"I am a royal of Andurien, Neal. I tell you what your duty is." She collapsed onto a leather loveseat set against the wall. Neal knew that someone sitting there could watch the sun rise south of Jojoken

in the morning, through the one-way ferroglass. "Someone else can do it."

"There is no one else, Sil." He moved away from the wall and sat beside her. "Bravo is all that's available. Everyone else is out there already, holding the line." He tried to put his arm around her but she shied away, standing and staring out the window he'd just abandoned. A deep breath filled his lungs as he leaned forward over his knees and cupped his hands between them.

"I didn't bring you here to fight," she said. "I brought you here to show my father that you're a good enough man to let me marry." She leaned against the wall, arms wrapped around herself. Distant thunder rumbled through the walls.

"Then you've failed," he said shortly. He closed his eyes and willed the feeling of completeness her words gave him away. His duty was clear, as was the Duke's likelihood of letting them marry.

"Maybe after you come back—" Mesillia started to say.

"If I come back the Duke will barter you to Liu to save Andurien." He said the words as quickly as he could, not opening his eyes until he was finished. She was staring at him, brows drawn together, frowning.

"He told me, Sil." He wiped his hands across his face and leaned back against the soft back of the loveseat. "He told me I needed to complete this mission so the First Defenders could hold out long enough for a good bargaining position. So when he had to trade you to Liu, it wouldn't be from a position of weakness."

"My father would never do that," she whispered, but her heart wasn't in it. She looked away from Neal and toward the floor. Her right hand rose until her fingers caressed the locket that hung just at the notch of her neck and collarbone. "I am not a pawn."

Neal watched her for a long moment before sighing. "We're both pawns, Sil."

She shook herself quickly and twisted her head to look at him. "We don't have to be, Neal." She stepped in front of him, going to her knees and taking his hands between both of hers.

"I can get us off Andurien."

Neal frowned. "What?"

"Off the planet, Neal. Out of the system. We can just go and be together, Neal and Mesillia, not the captain and the duchess."

"I can't do that."

It was her turn to frown. "Don't you love me?"

"Of course I love you."

"Then what's stopping us?"

"Our duty, that's what." Neal pulled his hand out of hers and stood, slipping past her and moving to the balcony. He swept the draped curtains aside and stepped outside, immersing himself in the cool, fragrant air. "I can't run away," he called over his shoulder. Not after Sadurni. Not again.

Mesillia stayed where she was, in front of the loveseat. "I've already made the arrangements, Neal. Tomorrow afternoon there's a DropShip lifting, a merchantman. I've got us two berths on her, no questions asked. We can get away from all of this and just be together."

Neal's hands balled into fists at his side. "I have a mission in ten hours, Sil. I have to go." He didn't move.

"Your regiment is dead, Neal. Let them go, and come with me."

He didn't look at her and she didn't try to stop him as he turned and left her rooms. He left the curtains over the balcony open.



Neal jammed the yokes to the left, trying to get out of the assault 'Mech's line of fire. The *Thunderbolt* turned, actuators screaming, slowly, so slowly. The hailstorm of cannon shells fell well short of his 'Mech, blasting huge furrows in the rocky terrain. Breath exploded out of him as he straightened the *Thunderbolt* out and moved parallel to the Liao lines, toward the remainder of his company. He canted the *Thunderbolt's* torso as far as it would go and loosed a barrage of long-range missiles at the assault 'Mech.

The damn thing jumped, forty meters into the air and straight back. It landed with a crashing thud ninety meters behind where it had been standing. Neal's own barrage fell short, spending their high-explosive warheads against rocks and an unlucky rustwood.

"I told you, Six," Lieutenant Charlton said. "That's the bugger that's been getting us."

"It's still a 'Mech, Nine," he said, but his mind was reeling. Little 'Mechs, faeries like the *Wasps* he'd crushed earlier, leapt through the air. Even the heavier *Clint* could leap. Assault 'Mechs did not leave the ground. It was a rule. What could lift that much mass off the ground, and land it, without crushing itself? He forced his voice to a normal pitch. "We can still kill it." From a distance.

"I've got a sightline on the artillery, Six," Charlton said. "Half a kilometer due north."

Neal paused his 'Mech out of sight of the press of Capellans and thought hard. He had less than two lances of 'Mechs to destroy two full companies – twenty-four, maybe thirty tubes – of fixed artillery. Normally it would be a cakewalk. The 'Mechs moved, and the long guns didn't. The fans in his cockpit clicked on as he mulled ideas, blowing the hot, rank air around him. It should have been easier than this.

But there were Capellans out there. 'Mechs, tanks, who knew what else. And whatever that assault 'Mech was, the victor of every engagement so far. Neal thought of Mesillia's balcony, and the blinds she kept over them. He thought of how they blocked her view of Jojoken, of how they hid her from her people. From her duty.

He had no blinds to hide behind.

"Six to all Bravos," he said. "Bravo Strike will charge, targeting only the artillery."

"There's a full company of Lousy 'Mechs out there, Captain!"

"We're not here for the 'Mechs. We're here for Jojoken. We're here for the Duke." He didn't say they were here for Mesillia, to show her what duty was. He didn't say it. "After the long guns are silent, fire on the big one. I want that 'Mech taken down before it does any more damage."

"That's suicide, Captain," Charlton said on a discreet channel. It was his duty now, with Arthur dead and no other officers in the company.

Neal toggled for the same channel. "We're living on borrowed time anyway." He switched back to the company channel and tightened his grips on the *Thunderbolt's* control yokes. "Our brothers

and sisters are dead on Sadurni," he said. "We are the last of the Second Defenders of Andurien. This is our land. This is our home."

"Defend Andurien."



The 'Mech bay beneath the Palace was nearly empty. Only the dozen machines of Neal's Bravo Company were left, the only unallocated forces left to the Duke of Andurien. Duke Allard had finally given them a mission, and Neal had just briefed his troopers in to what that mission entailed.

"That's suicide, Captain," Lieutenant Arthur said after they had dismissed the MechWarriors and the three company officers were gathered around the foot of Neal's *Thunderbolt*. "You know that."

Neal nodded. He didn't meet the two lieutenants' gazes, instead rubbing at a patch of corrosion on the *Thunderbolt's* armor plate. "It doesn't matter. The Duke has given us a mission and we have to carry it out." He did look up then, wearing a 'Mech company CO's face. "It's a good mission, too."

Charlton shrugged and kicked a loose screw. He dug his hands inside the open halves of his cooling vest, scratching. Arthur watched the screw roll across the floor and shook his head. "It's your fault, Neal."

"It's my fault we've got orders?"

"It's your fault we've got to go and kill ourselves. We should have stayed on Sadurni, where we might have made a difference. Instead we're here, in the bloody Palace! We're here, getting suicide missions from the Duke himself! And all for a woman!" Arthur stood his ground, back straight, chin out, daring Neal to argue with him.

"That's enough, Lieutenant." Neal liked to let his officers speak their mind – his first CO had done so, and it seemed a sensible practice, as long as it didn't affect morale or his authority. Arthur was getting close.

"It's not enough, Captain," Arthur said.

"It doesn't matter why we're here," Charlton put in. He reached an arm out, pleading, placing his hand between the two men. "We're here now, and we've got a mission."

Neal opened his mouth to respond, but a shout from across the bay stopped him. All three men turned and straightened up a little more. From the smallish corridor that led to the Palace proper came a small troupe of people. Mesillia Allard walked across the lubricant-stained floor, flanked on either side by her father's armmen – two guards in the Allard livery, wearing emblazoned green body armor and carrying assault rifles. The bay did open to the outside, after all. It could be infiltrated.

"Captain Haddon," she said, giving no emotion to the words.

"Your Grace," he answered, dropping to one knee. Whatever their opinions, both lieutenants did the same behind him. All three looked at the floor at Mesillia's feet.

"My father tells me your company goes to save us all, Captain." She beckoned them to their feet, where they stood at attention. From experience Neal knew that both Charlton and Arthur were staring just over Mesillia's shoulder. "I've come to wish you and your men luck." She looked up at his *Thunderbolt*, then around at the other Bravo BattleMechs. "Such incredible machines, aren't they? How can anything of Calvin Liao's stand against them?"

"The Chancellor maintains BattleMech regiments as well, Your Grace," Lieutenant Arthur said. "Two of them are out there now, probing at your father's First Defenders even as their artillery batters us."

Neal resisted the urge to glare at his subordinate. He instead watched Mesillia's face, watching for any change, any sign that she might begin to understand what they had to do, what she had to do. For the people of Andurien.

"I mourn your lost comrades, Lieutenant, on Sadurni. I mourn every soldier lost here on Andurien, and anywhere Calvin the Mad's troops force them to suffer. I understand from Captain Haddon here the service you're about to give." She looked past Neal to force Arthur to meet her stare. "I thank you, sir." She bowed her head, and then turned.

"Captain Haddon," she said over her shoulder, "please walk with me."

Neal took a moment to glare at Arthur before following her and her guards. She stopped at the entranceway to the Palace. A glance moved the two guards far enough away to give them some privacy.

"Thank you for that," Neal said, not letting her speak. "They needed that."

"I didn't come for them," she said, anger seeping into her voice. "I came for you."

"We've been over this, Sil," Neal said.

"I know I can't stop you," she said. "I've come to give you this, for when you come back." She held a silver holodisc out to him. "It's the name of the DropShip, Neal. I'll be on it, whether you come back or not." She waited until he took it out of her hand and then



threw herself against him. Behind them a whine and then a gentle thud announced the movement of one of his 'Mechs. Neal put his arms around Mesillia's narrow waist and pulled gently, stopping her for a moment.

"I love you, Mesillia Allard," he whispered. He didn't know if she heard him or not over the sound of the rest of his company beginning to move. He didn't hear a response before she shifted out of his grasp and fled up the corridor. The two guards followed without a look.

All the Bravo 'Mechs but two were in motion by the time Neal reached the foot of his *Thunderbolt*. Arthur waited there, cooling vest zipped and secured, missing only the bulky neurohelmet to make his appearance complete.

"I don't care about that," he said, leaning in close so that his snarled whisper could be heard. "When we come back, you and I will settle this like men."

Neal simply waited for Arthur to release his vest and walk away. He climbed the chain-link ladder to the *Thunderbolt's* cockpit without thought or feeling. He concentrated solely on the gentle grind of the holodisc against his chest, where he'd secreted it in his cooling vest.



There were four Capellan 'Mechs in range when the remnants of Bravo Strike broke from the forest. The rest moved toward the incursion almost at once. Neal's was the second 'Mech, his *Thunderbolt* pacing just behind Murray's *Ostroc*. The last 'Warrior from Two Lance led the charge, anxious to avenge his lancemates. The two heavy BattleMechs trampled the crumpled edges of the forest, fallen rustwoods and saplings alike. Behind them came the remainder of Bravo Strike, Franke's *Thunderbolt* and the four brand-new *Dervishes* of Three Lance. Duke Allard had purchased those 'Mechs only recently – the design had unveiled in 2520 – and Neal was counting on the Liaos dismissing the lightweight support 'Mechs.

"Nine, you and yours concentrate on the artillery. Bombard the positions. If you can't get the guns, get the crews. Get the caissons. Get the radar. The rest of us will cover you. Murray, Franke, if you get a shot at a tube, take it. Keep them off Three Lance."

Acknowledgments flickered through his com system as the Liao jamming fell across the field. A series of explosions sounded as Murray's 'Mech ripped through the antipersonnel minefields around the artillery park, but Neal ignored them. He directed his scanners to search for the big gunner 'Mech. The new one.

Unlike the Camerons, and the Anduriens who emulated them, the Liaos did not mass specific 'Mech types into component companies and lances. Each of Bravo's lances was made up of one specific 'Mech design – *Thunderbolts* for One, *Ostroc*s for Two, and *Dervishes* for Three. The Liao company was a hodgepodge of designs. The *Thunderbolt's* computer counted two more *Clints*, another *Wasp*, and two hulking *Mackies*. A host of other machines remained undefined behind the jamming, but the new design was sprinting forward, the maw of its right-arm cannon leveled at Murray's *Ostroc*. The machines that had been powered-down were blossoming on his IR scans. The support crews were sprinting for bunkers.

"Murray!" Neal shouted, but his warning was swallowed by the jamming static. Murray must have seen the Lousy 'Mech, though. He hitched the *Ostroc* to the right, twisting its torso and flashing the assault 'Mech with his large lasers. The heavy beams cut the armor over the Liao 'Mech's heart and right arm, and Neal felt a moment's hope. Maybe the cannon would jam.

The Lousy MechWarrior controlled the 'Mech's stumble and sighted on the Andurien *Ostroc*. The big cannon belched fire and hot steel. The stream of fire ate the arm off of Murray's 'Mech. The 'Warrior tried to keep the sixty-ton 'Mech on its feet but failed. The bulbous machine fell among the artillery guns it was charging, rolling across a long tube and crushing it.

Two wide-bodied assault 'Mechs charged up to support the leading Liao 'Mech. The *Thunderbolt's* computer tagged them as *Strikers*. They fired past Neal at Franke and Three Lance. Lightning flashed as they staggered Charlton's advance with PPC fire. The slender support 'Mechs slowed but kept coming.

Neal slowed the *Thunderbolt* from its charge to a steadier pace and brought his weapons up. The red targeting crosshair flashed across the Liao 'Mech's outline, teasing him with a flicker of gold as the computer fought inertia and jamming for a lock. He took a chance and blind-fired the short range missiles mounted in his chest. Both fat missiles corkscrewed past the big Liao machine and exploded behind it. One demolished a tent, and Neal tried to salve his anger with the hope he'd managed to destroy something

vital and not just a mess tent. He couldn't afford to waste shots, not with the Liao juggernaut bearing down on them.

The Liao machine raised its left arm toward Neal's 'Mech as eighty long-range missiles roared overhead from the *Dervishes*. The wash of their exhaust rocked Neal's sixty-five ton 'Mech and clouded his view. He could well imagine the tart and caustic stench of their propellant from long hours on the range. Neal checked the *Thunderbolt's* pace, trying to throw off the Liao 'Warrior's aim. He partly succeeded.

A quartet of husky short-range missiles erupted from the Liao 'Mech's chest as Three Lance's barrage fell behind it. Neal squinted against the glare as he clutched in his controls, stopping the *Thunderbolt* dead in the hopes the Liao pilot had been leading him.

The world in front of him exploded.

A compression wave washed over his 'Mech and tossed it on its back. The already-damaged left arm snapped off at the elbow, taking his machine guns with it. Neal shook his head as his neuro-helmet rapped him on the back of the head. New pain whispered through his skull. He bit his tongue. The left side of his cockpit exploded in sparks. He rocked himself to the right in his seat, eyes straining to see the secondary monitors on that side.

The four humanoid 'Mechs of Three Lance were still on their feet, still deployed in a rough diamond a hundred meters from the edge of the woods. As he watched each machine took two steps backward and raised both arms. Another wall of missiles tore from the boxy launchers on the *Dervishes'* shoulders. Charlton was a good troop. They'd fired on the farthest targets first, already beginning their withdrawal to a support position should the other Bravos survive the confrontation with the Liao 'Mechs. Neal smiled and spat blood through the broken faceplate of his helmet. Not that any of them were going to survive.

The big Liao 'Mech was on the ground as well, but it was already struggling to rise. Neal did the same, watching his monitors as he did so. He had to see how they were faring. Whatever they'd blown, there was a good chance it helped the Anduriens more than the Capellans. The scan screens were clearer, more detailed. The overpressure must have taken out the jammer.

The heavier Capellan 'Mechs had withstood the blast better than the Anduriens. The two *Strikers* were already flanking their leader. Behind them, the lighter Lousy 'Mechs were climbing to their feet

and charging forward. Missiles fell out of the sky from 'Mechs too far away for his computer to tag. Time to move.

"Murray, get out of there. Franke, cover him," Neal said as he brought the one-armed *Thunderbolt* to its feet. "Charlton, keep it up." He brought the right-arm mounted laser up as quickly as he could and stabbed another glowing weal across the Capellan 'Mech's upper torso, near the bulbous head.

Murray's *Ostroc* rose shakily to its feet and turned back toward the cover of the Preserve. Franke followed Neal's lead, painting the unknown Liao 'Mech with his laser and peppering it with missiles for good measure. The *Ostroc* took advantage of the distraction and stepped forward, out of the artillery pit it had fallen into.

Combined fire from the two *Mackies* and a lumbering *Striker* blew the thin back armor of the *Ostroc* to memory and nicked the short-range missile magazine. Murray never had a chance. A scream ripped through the channels as his neurohelmet fed electrical feedback into his brain. The upper section of the *Ostroc* disappeared in an earth-shattering explosion.

Neal screamed and brought his long-range missile launcher down. He squeezed the trigger as hard as he could, one eye watching the large laser recycle. All fifteen missiles missed the dodging Liao 'Mech. The *Thunderbolt* rocked from the loss of more than half a ton of armor over its heart as the Capellan lasers raked him, and the trailing *Clints* contributed a scratching of cannon fire. With his scanners clear he could finally identify the remaining lance of Capellan 'Mechs, and his chest tightened as the computer annotated each icon with an ID tag.

Four seventy-ton *Archers*. Big missile boats, bombardment 'Mechs well suited to sieges and defensive positions. Neal brought the trembling *Thunderbolt* under control just as the Capellan *Archers* disappeared beneath a shroud of missile exhaust. He thought of dodging, thought of maneuvering, but instead just closed his eyes. The laser recycler pinged its readiness at him. He remained still. Acrid smoke filled his cockpit, leaking into his helmet through the shattered faceplate. He tasted blood, smelled it drying on his console, on his skin. His entire head hurt, and he waited for the barrage to fall.

It fell on Three Lance.

One of the *Dervishes* went down without an arm. The others fired again, and Charlton's triumphant voice rang from Neal's hel-

met speakers. "That's all of them, by Jesus," he shouted. "Get out of there, Bravos!"

Neal opened his eyes. The Capellan artillery park was burning. Bent tubes grew out of each firing pit, and bodies and detritus were strewn everywhere. Fires dumped oily black smoke into the sky, flickering across the morning sunlight like shrouds. He checked the scanners again. No active artillery fire.

The Liao BattleMechs fell on his company like a storm crowds a wheat field.

The strange 'Mech led the charge, but the other Capellans did more damage. The *Mackies* and the *Strikers* concentrated their PPCs on Franke's mired *Thunderbolt*, crushing its chest and vaporizing the gyro embedded there. It fell to the ground, thrashing as Franke tried to fight gravity.

The *Archers* and the lighter Liao 'Mechs concentrated on Three Lance. Charlton and his troops struck back, concentrating their missile fire on one of the *Clints*. It collapsed, riddled with missile strikes and missing its right arm and head. The Liao assault destroyed two of the Andurien *Dervishes*, though. Sergeant Tomlin's reactor breached stroboscopically, painting every shadow on the field in stark black and white for an instant.

The victorious Liao BattleMech cratered the ground at Neal's feet with cannon fire, daring him to move. He waited, feeling in his gut what was coming. The woods were too far away.

"Andurien commander," a familiar, cultured voice said on a general frequency.

"Charlton, get in the woods," he said on the Bravo channel. "Get back to the Palace."

"But Six," Charlton said, "I can cover your retreat."

"That's an order, Nine." He moved the *Thunderbolt* forward, raising both of its arms – what remained of the left, anyway – over its head. Switching to the general frequency, he tried to keep the fatigue and pain wracking his body out of his voice.

"Colonel Liu," he said. "That's quite a BattleMech you've got there." His computer painted the unknown design as the transmission's source. He kept the *Thunderbolt* moving closer, away from his company. The one remaining Bravo icon on his screen moved away from him.

"A well-fought engagement," Liu said. "Is this really the same officer I gave those flags to yesterday?" With all that his 'Mech had been through in the last few hours, Neal was surprised the rampant crest of the Second Defenders had survived, but he bowed the *Thunderbolt* slightly from its waist.

"Flag Captain Neal Haddon, Colonel," he said. Charlton crossed the wireframe boundary into the preserve. Neal smiled again, ignoring the pain as his tongue rubbed against another loose tooth. "At your service."

The Liao colonel's 'Mech halted where it was, a hundred and fifty meters or so away. Through his ports Neal watched the thick black smoke waver between the two 'Mechs. A secondary infrared screen painted the assault 'Mech well enough, but Neal preferred his eyes. Charlton's icon disappeared from his scanner, swallowed by the masking rustwoods.

"Your troops are destroyed, Captain. Do you surrender?"

Neal thought of Mesillia. He released his left control yoke and touched the bulge in his cooling vest where her holodisc resided. It would take him hours to get back to the Palace even if he turned his 'Mech and started running. She would be safe so long as her DropShip got away.

So long as the Liaos were occupied.

"It won't matter in the end," Liu continued. "My Chancellor has more 'Mechs, more troops, to throw at this world. I will have Mesillia Allard from her father, and my 'Mechs and troops will leave Andurien. You cannot stop me."

Neal thought of Mesillia's hair, of the gentle softness of it. He thought of the way it smelled in the morning, the light cinnamon of her shampoo and the almost-unnoticeable musk of woman beneath it. He thought of the way her body felt against his, the warmth. He thought of her eyes.

"You're already stopped," he whispered, and moved.

Gravity helped him more than the Capellans, bringing the *Thunderbolt's* heavy right arm down in line with the Liao assault 'Mech. The big laser spat white-hot death at Liu's 'Mech, digging deeper into the scars over the big machine's heart. His torso-mounted lasers compounded the damage, digging deeper still. While his missiles missed wide, disappearing into the wasteland

behind the 'Mech, a bloom on his infrared display told him he'd dug a penetrating hit into the Liao machine's armor.

Liu's monstrous autocannon fired and fired, and the armor-piercing rain tore the *Thunderbolt's* right arm off at the shoulder. Neal jerked the machine to the left and spun, sprinting for the cover of the trees. He toggled the ammunition ejection controls as he ran, ignoring the Liao shots falling around him. Sparkling blue particle projection bursts flashed past like lightning. A single stream ate into the *Thunderbolt's* rear armor, pushing the sixty-five ton machine forward an extra step. Neal fought the controls and kept the 'Mech upright, still moving toward the woods.

"You haven't stopped me, Captain," Liu's voice announced. "If not today, then another day." Neal heard respect in the colonel's tone. Respect, and determination.

"You're welcome to try tomorrow," Neal spat, then flicked the system off.

He was barely thirty meters from the trees when the Capellan colonel's 'Mech fell out of the sky and blasted him. The cannon fire chewed through what little protection was left on the *Thunderbolt's* back and annihilated the delicate gyro that kept the heavy 'Mech balanced. Neal cursed as the sixty-five ton machine went from a war god to a newborn, staggering off-kilter and without coordination. His neurohelmet whined as it tried vainly to connect with something that was no longer there. It didn't matter. He was close enough. He reached over his head as the 'Mech fell, finding the yellow-and-black handles, and jerking. The *Thunderbolt's* head exploded as he ejected, and his 'Mech died without him.

The Liaos didn't pursue him into the Preserve. Neal stayed away from the tracks his 'Mechs had made coming toward the artillery park and moved slowly, content to wait at places where he could see the sky to the south. No more artillery flashed and screamed overhead. All he heard was the occasional distant rumble of battle, and the sounds of birds and trees sighing. And once, in the afternoon, he saw the golden flare of a DropShip tearing itself free of gravity.

He left his neurohelmet and cooling vest on a fallen log in the Preserve. When he walked out of the forest, he carried only a small survival kit and a single silver holodisc.