

BATTLECORPS

THE SHADED LIGHT

Jason Schmetzer

***Near Greensburg
Cincinnati Administrative District
North America, Terra
4 October 3068***

The *Nexus* stumbled as it ducked into a stand of burning pines, dragging its useless left leg behind it. Gibson Prow ignored the heat alarms filling his cockpit and pushed his *Phoenix Hawk* into the flames in pursuit. The autumn had been exceptionally hot this year, and the dry trees had burst into flame at the merest caress of the *Phoenix Hawk*'s lasers. The column of dirty, gray-white smoke would be visible for kilometers.

"No one else around," Aden called. She and the other battlesuits of his infantry support stayed well clear of the flames. He didn't pay them to commit suicide.

"I've got him."

Even if it had been fresh, the Com Guard *Nexus* would have been hard-pressed to defeat Prow's advanced *Phoenix Hawk*. He'd taken it as payment from the manufacturer after he'd recovered a small item the CEO would rather not appear on the open market. The six-delta configuration of this venerable machine suited Prow just fine.

And the *Nexus* was anything but fresh.

Prow kept an eye on the *Phoenix Hawk*'s radiation alarm. He'd been tracking this unit from Kentucky; it had come out of the Texas quarantine zone. Why the Com Guards had used nukes to try and hold off the Word of Blake defenders Prow would never know; he was just a hired hunter. The toaster-worshippers didn't want to take the time to hunt down their wayward brethren. Prow didn't ask questions.

The *Nexus* stumbled out of a flaming copse and fired its one remaining laser. The stabbing light took the *Phoenix Hawk* high in the left chest, gouging the tough armor, but not threatening him. Prow brought his right arm up, letting the *Phoenix Hawk*'s advanced targeting computer paint the *Nexus*, and squeezed. The PPC's shimmering ion lance blasted through the tatters of the *Nexus*' armor. The light 'Mech fell to the smoldering forest floor like a marionette with cut strings.

"He's down," Prow announced.

"Great," Aden said. "Now drag him out here so we can crack him." The four Fa Shih battlesuits of his crew clustered around the opening his *Phoenix Hawk* had created when it shoved through the trees.

"Earning your salary this month?" Prow asked. He reached down with the *Phoenix Hawk*'s left arm and gripped a protruding section of chassis. The *Nexus* slid easily over the soft ground. It took him two minutes to get the Com Guard 'Mech clear of the fire.

The pilot was dead when Aden and the others cracked open his cockpit. He'd shot himself.



Prow was based in the ruins of Greensburg. An old AgroMech facility provided enough cover that the *Phoenix Hawk* could be repaired, and a nearby farmhouse provided shelter. The weather in October was cold and windy, and Greensburg sat right astride the crossroads of two minor highways. The broken overpass was the dominant land feature.

"They never used to be this crazy," Aden said. She sat in the common room, close enough to the fireplace to not have to keep her bare feet beneath the blanket. Prow sat in an antique wooden rocker, furthest from the fire. He got enough heat in the cockpit; he preferred the cold.

"I knew some nutcases after Tukayyid," Tori Pollard put in. She and her twin sister Teri were Prow's trackers. They were also ex-Com Guards, but they didn't advertise. "But they never shot themselves."

The door to the farmhouse opened just long enough for the slender form of Yin Nagano to enter. She was Prow's technician, in addition to a battlesuit pilot. "The *Nexus* is scrap," she announced. "And the scraps are hot."

"Stupid," Teri Pollard said. "Nuking the planet during a raid." Voice of Truth ran that story almost once a week, detailing how the attacking Com Guards had used nuclear weapons against Riga, and later, Houston.

Prow rocked in his chair, listening to the byplay. He wasn't a large man, but he filled the small chair. It was soothing to rock,

listening to the chair creak in counterpoint to the floorboards. He wasn't thinking about the dead Com Guard MechWarrior.

He was thinking of something else.

The door opened again, this time for longer. A tall man stepped inside, wrapped in the gray robes of a Word of Blake Militia adept. He pulled the door closed behind him and waited.

"The Demi's here, too," Yin said.

Demi-Precentor Dixon Leis controlled the Militia troops in and around Cincinnati. Greensburg fell under his responsibility. Prow glanced at the glass of water sitting untouched on the small end table next to him. The water danced in rings.

'Mechs on the move.

"Peace of Blake, friends," Leis said. He stepped away from the door and glanced around. It was clear he didn't appreciate the surroundings. Prow ignored his displeasure.

"I've come to congratulate you on your victory today," he said. "It's because of you that we're ridding blessed Terra of the vandals of the heretic Primus."

"You came all the way out here to tell us that?" Aden asked. She'd been busted out of the Roughriders for insubordination. Prow didn't usually rein her in, either. It was easier to see what people were about when they were distracted.

"Blake favors all of his servants," Leis said. He smiled at Aden, the condescending smile of a man addressing a misguided child. Prow rocked forward and stood.

"And so does Dixon Leis," he said. "We're moving in the morning, Demi-Precentor. You've brought technicians for my 'Mech?" It was part of the contract; Yin couldn't do all the work herself.

"Your torso armor is being repaired as we speak," Leis said. "Shall we discuss your movement tomorrow?"

"We're going north," Prow said.

"I think not."

Prow frowned. "The trail leads toward Rushville, Demi-Precentor." He looked to Teri Pollard. "Two 'Mechs and a few hovercraft, if the signs are correct?" She nodded.

Leis' mouth tightened down to a line. "You are not to approach Rushville, Mr. Prow." He crossed his arms and looked at each of the crew in turn. "The area north of Greensburg is the responsibility of the Word of Blake Militia."

Aden swore under her breath. "You're taking our salvage?"

"It's not a matter of salvage," Leis said. "Stay out of Rushville."

Prow considered arguing for a moment. "Fine. We'll track south and west, looking for stragglers." He closed his eyes for a moment and imagined a map of the area. "The path north leads through here. Maybe we can catch a few coming through the gap."

Leis smiled.



"I can't believe you let him do that," Aden said. "We needed that salvage, Prow."

Prow ignored her. The *Phoenix Hawk* was moving down a broken old highway, south from Greensburg. The four women of his crew hung from his 'Mech like parasites. He'd paid a great deal for the Capellan battle armor for one simple reason: magnetic clamps. The myomers of his *Phoenix Hawk* were just as capable of moving the battlesuits as the rest of the 'Mech.

Baggage was something that got left behind.

"You promised me a 'Mech," Tori Pollard said. "I could have used that *Grim Reaper* we were tracking." Her tone was stern but mocking. She never missed an opportunity to bait Aden.

"Anything?" he asked his tracker.

"Old tracks," Teri said. She rode on the *Phoenix Hawk's* chest, clamped at the calves and elbows, facing forward so she could watch the ground in front of them.

Prow sighed and pushed the throttle a notch higher. The broken ferrocrete – no, old-fashioned concrete, he realized – cracked beneath the *Phoenix Hawk's* weight. It was another forty minutes to the next town, a deserted borough called Columbus.

The missile fire came out of a gulley west of the highway. Yin Nagano called a warning just before the warheads struck. The Fa

Shih immediately dropped free and scattered. Prow twisted his torso toward the fire, sensors searching... nothing. He slammed his feet down on the pedals on either side of his console.

Forty-five tons of BattleMech erupted from the blasted pavement as the *Phoenix Hawk's* jump jets vented plasma. Alarms trilled to life as the sensors cleared the lip of the gulley, revealing the battered Com Guard *Battle Hawk* crouching out-of-sight.

"One *Battle Hawk*," he said. The targeting computer refused to settle, denying him the solid-gold ring of a lock on. Prow fired anyway, medium lasers from his left arm.

"Searching," Aden reported. He heard her panting. She and the others would be sprinting as fast as they could, firing their jump jets whenever feasible, trying to make themselves as tough a target as possible.

Com Guards rarely moved alone.

"Surrender," Prow called on the emergency frequency. "I'll guarantee your safety." The *Phoenix Hawk* fell from the sky, jets flaring just enough to feather the landing. He let the medium 'Mech crouch, PPC at the ready.

"Fat chance, zealot," the *Battle Hawk's* pilot said.

"I'm no zealot," Prow said. He started the *Phoenix Hawk* on a tangent, waiting for the *Battle Hawk* to emerge. Surely he wouldn't be stupid enough to let the heavier, faster, and more heavily armed enemy come to him?

"Contacts," Teri Pollard called. "Tracks!"

Red icons caretred new contacts on Prow's heads-up display. The vision strip compressed a three-sixty view into a band he could see in front of him. Red blinked at its edges; from behind him.

"A *Commando*," Yin called.

"A *Watchman*," Aden reported.

"Something with tracks," Teri Pollard said. "Not far."

"Kill them all!" Tori Pollard shouted. A sliver of light pricked at the air between Prow and the hidden *Battle Hawk*: Tori's small laser.

Prow's mind collapsed into a simple rhythm, one that he was intimately familiar with. Look, move, shoot. He exhaled slowly and

relaxed his hands for a moment. His eyes trolled his HUD, counting, watching, gauging.

"Move, God damn it!" Aden shouted.

Prow moved.

The massive thrusters on the *Phoenix Hawk's* back roared to life again, lifting the 'Mech off the ground and hurling it toward the defile where the *Battle Hawk* still crouched. Prow's sensors drank in information as the medium 'Mech dropped. A red wireframe sprang to life on the *Battle Hawk's* image: its left leg was seized. It couldn't climb out of the defile.

Angular red light stabbed into the pit as Prow hit the *Battle Hawk* with all four of his lasers. Guided by the targeting computer, the lasers overcame the instability of the jump and darted into the *Battle Hawk's* scarred torso armor. Three of them combined to rip through the light 'Mech's right side, destroying the extra-light engine's shielding and forcing a shutdown. Two of the *Battle Hawk's* replying medium pulse lasers missed, spending their verdant fury on the sky. The third pockmarked the armor over the *Phoenix Hawk's* left leg.

"Come collect this one," Prow said, crouching.

The double-strength heat sinks packed into the *Phoenix Hawk* labored to bleed off the incredible heat built up from his lasers and jump. The cooling vest wrapped around Prow's midsection switched to overdrive. It fairly pulsed with chilling coolant, keeping his midsection cool while the sweat evaporated from his arms and thighs.

"We're a little busy," Aden said.

Prow brought the *Phoenix Hawk* up just high enough to see over the lip of the berm. The Pollard sisters were playing hopscotch with the *Commando*, lasers flashing. The light Com Guard 'Mech replied with a spread of missiles, one of which tagged Teri's Fa Shih, smashing the battle armor to the ground. She was up almost immediately, sailing into the air on a jet of her own.

A cloud of smoke appeared at the apex of her jump. Prow could just make out the puffs of dust when the mines fell to earth.

"More mines," he murmured. "Great."

The *Commando's* MechWarrior must have missed the show. He chased Tori's battlesuit right into the minefield. The twenty-five ton 'Mech staggered when a mine tore its right foot off at the ankle.

Prow brought the *Phoenix Hawk* up straight. Aden and Yin sniped at the *Watchman* with their lasers. He snarled and drove the *Phoenix Hawk* uphill. His hands manipulated the yokes, bringing the heavy right arm to bear.

"Hey, asshole," he said. The *Watchman* paused, its head turning toward Prow.

"Stupid," Prow said, squeezing. The ER PPC snapped, driving a stream of hyperaccelerated ions into the *Watchman's* exposed right knee. The joint drank in the energy and exploded. Blue-white static electricity arced around the leg, but the limb held.

The *Watchman* fell.

"The *Battle Hawk*," Prow said. "Now."

All four battlesuits bounced toward the defile. Prow advanced on the fallen *Watchman*, one eye on the PPC recharge.

"Go ahead," the *Watchman's* pilot said. "Kill us, like you have all the others. Burn us in our 'Mechs." The medium Com Guard 'Mech stopped moving. "At least we'll go like MechWarriors."

A soft tone announced the PPC's readiness. Prow searched his HUD and found the *Commando* still foundering in the minefield. It had fallen again, exploding yet more mines. The MechWarrior was finding it difficult to stand with only one arm.

"I'm not going to kill you," Prow said. He shifted his aim, dropping the targeting computer's aiming point from the torso. Another sizzling PPC blast amputated the *Watchman's* leg at the knee.

"This guy's unconscious," Aden said from the *Battle Hawk's* corpse. "He's alive, though."

Prow nodded. "Get him out." He stepped the *Phoenix Hawk* closer to the crippled *Watchman*. "I am Gibson Prow. Surrender, and live."

"I've seen the Word's surrender," the *Watchman's* pilot spat. "No thanks."

"I'm no Blakist," Prow said. "I just work for them." He leveled the PPC at the *Watchman's* cockpit. "Think about it, then realize I could kill you now."

The *Commando* exploded. There was no ejection.



The two Com Guards were tied together on the floor, back to back. Aden stood off to one side, cradling her Rorynex. Yin sat at the small table, playing with a steak knife. The Pollards were on the loveseat.

Giggling.

"Where is the rest of your unit?" Prow asked. He was in the rocker, dressed in a simple blue surplus jumpsuit.

The larger of the two Com Guards was blond, strikingly blond given his dark complexion. He'd volunteered his name and rank, but nothing else.

"Parker, Hal. Adept-Epsilon." He rattled off a string of numbers and letters, but Prow had long since ignored the serial number. He'd been in the *Watchman*. The other man, Acolyte Oar, had awakened long enough to reveal his name and rank as well before falling as unconscious as his *Battle Hawk*.

"Why nukes?" Aden asked. Prow looked at her.

"Ask your masters," Parker said. Prow looked back at him, surprised. The Com Guard stared at him with unbridled hatred. "We dropped according to the Ares Conventions," he said. "Away from population centers."

"Houston isn't a population center?" Prow asked.

"Houston was a spaceport," Parker said. "It was the 394th's rally point. If we had to activate our GOTH plan, Houston was the destination." Parker slumped against his bonds. "Our Demi made it."

"Then why'd you nuke it?" Tori Pollard asked.

Parker turned his head toward her voice. He couldn't see her, but he spoke nonetheless. "My unit was on the outskirts. We tracked the inbounds. It was a Santa Ana fired from the Tenth Division

positions that took out Houston. Not us." He closed his eyes. "We didn't bring any nuclear rockets."

Prow leaned forward in the rocker. "Then where were you going?"

Parker didn't speak for a long moment, but then he sighed. "We were headed south—"

"South?" Prow said.

"South. We didn't want anything to do with that camp up near Rushville." His voice trembled when he said "camp." He looked at Prow, the anger gone for an instant. "If you're taking me there, you can just shoot me now. I'm not ending up like one of those zombies."

"What camp?" Yin asked.

"The ROM camp," Parker said. "Surely you've seen it. It's a couple square kilometers, all walled in. 'Mech patrols, and those bastards in that sneaky Purifier battle armor." He looked at each of the crew he could see. "You don't know?"

"Know what?"

Parker laughed. "That's right. Get on my good side." He chuckled again and looked away. His expression hardened, and Prow saw that it was back to name, rank, and serial number.

Aden caught his attention and jerked her head toward the door. "Let's see to the salvage, shall we?" He nodded and followed her out the door. The wind had come up again, whipping around the AgroMech shelter.

"I've heard about this," Aden said.

"Heard about what?"

"The camps." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a cigarette, lit it. She took a long pull, dragging the flame at least halfway down the length of the slender tube. "I heard the techs talking, a couple, three days ago."

Prow tucked his hands into his armpits. "And?"

"And why wouldn't Leis want us going up there, unless the stories are true?"

Prow sighed. "Parker doesn't sound like he's lying, does he?" Aden shook her head but didn't speak. "Something doesn't fit."

The door cracked enough for Yin to stick her black-haired head out. She looked between them for moment. "The other one just died," she said.

Prow closed his eyes. "Send the sisters out," he said.



It was almost morning when the Pollards returned. Prow was in his cockpit, watching his long-range scans closely. Inside the cabin, Aden and Yin were suited up. He signaled them to come out when he detected the Fa Shihs returning. They were all outside by the time the Pollards reached the farmhouse.

Tori Pollard rocked her helmet open and back, and gulped the cold air. She was paler than Prow had ever seen her. Teri stayed buttoned up.

"It's true," Tori said.

"Tell us," Prow said.

"Up the road," Tori said. She stopped and swallowed, squeezing her eyes shut. Prow noticed the clinging scent of vomit in the air. He shivered, wishing he'd brought more than a jacket down from the cockpit.

"It's a camp," Teri said. Her voiced was harsh, digitized, coming through her helmet. "There are half a dozen 'Mechs guarding it. We saw signs of regular infantry and battlesuits. Purifiers, probably."

"I didn't send you to scout the place for an attack," Prow said.

"It would be suicide," Tori said. Her face was composed, but the tone of her voice was fragile. "It's packed, Prow. The camp. We saw enough to know they've got hundreds of people packed in there." She stopped. "Tell him," she said to her sister.

"Graves," Tori's Fa Shih said. Prow looked at the armor, really looked at it. The avatars worked into the composites glared back at him. "Mass graves, Prow. Some of them still open."

"Jesus," Aden whispered.

"I don't think he's around," Yin said. Her eyes, already thin, were narrowed. "What have we gotten into?"

Prow was struck by terms of the contract he'd signed without really thinking, the terms that guaranteed him and his crew transport on Word of Blake hulls. Terra suddenly felt very small.

"We took these," Tori said, and dropped a cluster of scraps. Prow bent down and picked them up. They were patches from units across the Inner Sphere.

Com Guard. Lyran. A snarling dragon from the Combine, a regimental patch Prow didn't recognize. A Davion sunburst. A flash of red-on-black caught his attention. He dropped all the others.

Wolf's Dragoons.

"POWs," he whispered. "Christ, it's a concentration camp."

Aden shook. "No." She tried to wrap her arms around herself, but the Fa Shih's armor was too thick. "Reeducation."

"What?" The others looked at her.

"I heard it from a tech," she murmured. Her eyes were unfocused. "It's a reeducation camp." She jerked, looking each of them in the eye. "I didn't realize it until just now. That's what it must be."

Prow fingered the Dragoons insignia. "Tough school," he said.



They clustered in front of Parker. Prow stood in the center, two women on either side. In other circumstances he might have enjoyed it.

"Tell me about the camp," Prow said. "We've seen it." And they had. The Pollards' recorders had been running the entire time.

Parker frowned. "Then you know."

"Tell us anyway," Aden said. She was on Prow's left side. He heard the edge in her voice. She'd be the one most affected, he knew. Like him, she carried ghosts in her soul.

"I've never been inside," he said. "You don't come back out." He looked at the floor for a long time before he looked up. "We were going to try a rescue," he said. "But there were too many."

Prow's stomach hardened. "You fought them?" Parker nodded. "Shit," Prow hissed.

The women looked at him. "What?" Yin asked.

"They'll know what 'Mechs attacked the camp," Prow said. He straightened up and starting pacing. "If we turn Parker over, they'll know that we talked to him. They'll know we know about the camp."

Aden frowned. "So? As far as they know, we've never been north of Greensburg."

Prow held up the Dragoons patch. "Do you think a Dragoon would cave easily in a camp? Have you ever known a Dragoon to give in and die?" Visions flashed behind Prow's eyes. He blinked them away.

"You're worried about us," Teri Pollard said.

"Now that we know about the camp, we're a liability," Prow said. "Think about it. Have you heard even a rumor of captured soldiers on Terra?" He waited, but no one spoke. "Voice of Truth tells everyone that they all die to the last man. I know that's what they told us about the Dragoons. The Com Guards," he said, pointing at Parker, "are blowing themselves up. That's the party line."

"They're using nukes on us," Parker said.

"Do you think they'll hesitate to throw us in there, too?"

"What do we do?" Yin asked, after a moment.

"Get rid of him," Prow said, pointing at the captive.

"What?" Aden said. "Are you insane?" She pointed at the captive. "He's a bounty, Prow."

Prow slipped a knife from his boot. He advanced on the bound man, blade brandished. "Not anymore," he said.

"He's a liability."



Demi-Precentor Leis brought his own 'Mech this time. For a moment Prow wondered if the Blakist ROM was tracking him; Leis appeared with disturbing regularity after each engagement with

any Com Guard forces. They'd just finished erasing any sign of Parker's presence in the cabin when Tori Pollard bleeped the alarm on their gauntlet communicators. She had the guard, a quarter-klick up the highway toward the main interstate the Word used to travel cross-country.

Prow met the spare officer outside the cabin. Leis wore his gray robes out of the cockpit. The wind caught the loose ends, flapping them around the man like a banshee's cloak as he climbed down the recessed handholds built into the *Guillotine's* armor.

"Mr. Prow," Leis said as he dropped the last meter. "Peace of Blake upon you." He folded his hands inside his sleeves and bowed his head in greeting. The morning sunlight reflected from the smooth skin around his widow's peak.

Goosebumps quivered to life on Prow's forearms and the small of his back. He suppressed a shiver and bowed slightly toward the Word officer.

"No captives for you," Prow said. "All the MechWarriors died or killed themselves shortly after capture." He beckoned toward the house, but the Demi-Precentor demurred.

"Zealots," he said, "are often like that."

"We did manage to gather some information for you," Prow said. "Before the last of the pair died."

Leis frowned. "Pair? I was informed you took down three Com Guard BattleMechs yesterday." He offered nothing further, making Prow more curious than ever about the man's sources.

"One jock died in his cockpit," Prow said. "The other two shortly after we brought them here for interrogation."

Leis smiled a viper's smile. "Too hard on them, Mr. Prow?"

He turned slightly and looked back the way he'd come. "I passed the salvage vehicles on my way in. We've been waiting for 'Mechs of that unit to appear in the area. It was that division that used the unholy weapon on Houston."

Prow controlled his features.

"If only you'd managed to keep them alive a little longer," Leis said. "ROM can be *very* persuasive." His eyes narrowed. When he spoke again, his voice had an edge. "We have the facilities to keep them from expiring until *after* we've obtained the information we need."

"St. Louis," Prow said.

"I beg your pardon."

"The bulk of the remaining Com Guards in North America are holed up near St. Louis." Prow forced a knowing smile onto his face. "We had time enough."

Leis' face lit up. "Excellent!"

"I don't think you'll be able to go after them yourself," Prow continued. "According to our information, there are harassment forces infiltrating this area all the time. Their orders are to keep the focus of attention away from St. Louis."

"Did you get any estimates of strength?"

"Roughly a battalion of force," Prow said. "In small units, lance-sized or smaller." He glanced past the Demi-Precentor at his *Phoenix Hawk*. "We were just about to go hunting, if you'd care to join us."

Leis shook his head. "No, I must report this new information to my superiors. We must bring sufficient force to bear on the invaders before they can cause any more suffering." He turned and began the climb to his cockpit.

Aden stepped from the shadows behind the cabin as the *Guillotine* moved off. Prow didn't move until the 'Mech was out of sight.

"You lied to our contract-holder," Aden said.

"I did."

"St. Louis?"

"It's far away from here," Prow said. "Call Tori back, and then pack up anything you want to take. We're leaving." He looked around at the cabin, and the field. He sucked in a deep lungful of the clean air.

"Leaving?" Aden asked, after murmuring into her gauntlet.

Prow nodded. "West." He rubbed the knuckles of his left hand, staring down the path the *Guillotine* had taken.

Leis hadn't asked for the bodies. He hadn't asked about any other information they might have gleaned. He hadn't said a word about

the camp, despite knowing that those Com Guards had been up there.

"I need to see what happens," Prow said. "Now that I've poked the stick into the fire."



"Prow," Teri Pollard whispered. "Look at that."

The *Phoenix Hawk* had carried them as far west as the ruins of a city named Terre Haute. It had been ravaged by battle, fights won and lost in the last week or the last month. All the women were clamped onto the *Phoenix Hawk's* torso, one on each facing. Teri was on the *Hawk's* chest, clamped just above the paired medium laser apertures.

"That" was a crashed hovercraft. It was painted bone-white, but instead of the broadsword insignia of the Word of Blake it carried the dropping star of ComStar. Prow switched his display to thermal. The engine was still warm.

"Check it out," he said.

The Pollards clambered up the *Phoenix Hawk* until they were standing on its shoulders. As one they triggered their jump jets and arced through the air toward the hulked APC. Aden and Yin leapt clear and moved slowly forward, their lasers at the ready. If it was a trap, it was their job—and Prow's—to back the Pollards up.

"One still breathing," Tori said. "It was an infantry carrier. The rest are dead." There was a pause. "Not in a nice way, either. Radiation." The two Fa Shih appeared, carrying an emaciated man between them.

Prow looked around. There were several buildings still standing within sight, but nothing large enough to hide his *Phoenix Hawk*. He pointed with the 'Mech's left arm. "Over there."

In a previous century the building had been a microbrewery. They laid the injured soldier out on a table in the bar. Aden went over him for a few minutes after she'd clambered out of her armor.

"Radiation sickness," she pronounced. "Along with malnutrition, probably from the vomiting." She looked back at Prow and the others, clustered several meters back. "He won't be here long, Prow," she said.

Prow opened his mouth to speak. Before he could get a word out the twilight sky brightened to day in an instant. He had enough time to turn and feel a tremble in the ground before the glasses still on the bar shelves began to dance. The light faded slowly.

"What was that?" Yin asked.

"Stay inside," Prow said. He walked back out the broken doorway and looked up. The clouds were distended, bulging, lit with a light that shouldn't be there. He looked to the southwest.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," he whispered.



To the southwest there were no clouds left in the sky. A new cloud reached for the heavens, its cap already flattening as friction

and the pull of gravity tugged at its edges. The column glowed with an unholy light.

He was looking at St. Louis.



"This is no raid," Prow said. He was sitting in a corner booth, on the opposite side of the bar from the unconscious Com Guard. He held a square-bottomed bottle without a label; it tasted like whiskey, or at least it burned his throat when he swallowed.

"What do you mean?" Aden asked. The others were outside, scrounging what they could from the ruins. Yin thought she might be able to get the APC running again.

"You don't bring nuclear weapons on a raid," he said. "I was in Harlech for seven years; I never heard anyone say that would be a good idea." He knew he was staring at the same spot on the wall, but he didn't care. He was focused on a nail-head sticking out. "You don't use nukes on raiders, either."

"Where I come from, you don't use nukes at all," Aden said. She had a half-empty glass on the table in front of her, but she hadn't touched it. He'd heard her retching after she'd come back inside.

Prow frowned as a thought struck him. He set the bottle down and manipulated the dials on his gauntlet. A screech of static burst out. He looked at it, surprised. "EMP didn't get this far," he murmured. He fiddled with the dial until he got a voice.

"Again, we're getting reports from the glorious Word of Blake Militia that Com Guard terrorists have unleashed an atomic weapon the peaceful city of St. Louis. Voice of Truth will keep you updated with all the information we can gather as our valiant Militia hunts down those responsible for these heretical acts and brings them to Blake's justice."

Prow stabbed the speaker off. His finger slipped, knocking the bottle of the table. It shattered when it struck the floor. The shards glistened with whiskey, but the alcohol soon dried.

"Lies," he whispered. "Nukes. Zealots." He looked around, sighed, and snatched Aden's glass. He downed it in a single gulp and dropped it on the floor to break with the others.

"It's not even war," he murmured. He looked at Aden, matched her stare. "It's something else." He frowned, drawing words from memory. "It's a holy war for them," he said.

"It's *jihad*."

A long while later he looked again at Aden. "It's my fault," he said.

"What is?"

"St. Louis. I told him there were Com Guards there. He told his CO. He told someone else, and somebody tossed a nuke at them." He made an exploding cloud with his hands. "Two words from me. Poof. No more city."

Aden's face softened. She frowned in sympathy. It took Prow a moment to recognize the expression. He'd never seen her sympathetic before.

"If it wasn't you, it would have been someone else." She reached across the table and took his hand in hers. "You didn't make the toaster-worshippers annihilate a city."

Prow squeezed her hand. "That doesn't make it any easier."



They made a fire in the center of what must have been a dance floor. Aden arranged the injured man in a booth and draped a scrap of cloth over him. The roof leaked enough that the smoke had plenty of ways to escape.

"Our contract is over," Prow said after a long period of staring into the fire.

"Why?" Yin asked. Aden and the Pollards stared at her. "It's a fair question," she said.

"I don't enjoy being lied to," Prow said. He stared into the flames, watching a rotten piece of wood that might have once been a barstool smolder and begin to catch. "I don't like working for people who kill as many of their own people as they do the enemy." He shifted and looked back to where the Com Guard was sleeping. "I don't care to be party to *that*."

Yin shrugged. "Fair enough. I just wanted to hear the reasons." She looked at the other women and waited. No one said anything. "How?"

"Everything to and from Terra comes and goes on Word of Blake hulls," Aden said. "If we believe even half the Voice's reporting of the recent fighting, they've got the Sol System locked up tight."

"You mean we're stuck here," Teri Pollard said.

"So are the Com Guards," Prow said.

"You're not serious," Tori said.

"You just saw them nuke a city because we made up a report of Com Guard activity. What do you think they'll do to us if we start fighting against them?" Teri's voice shook.

"They can't just keep dropping nuclear weapons on every enemy sighting," Aden said. "We've been fighting Com Guards for months, and we've never seen a nuke until today."

"I'm not going to stand by while the Word of Blake kills anything and everything that disagrees with them," Prow said. He looked down and found the Dragoons patch in his hand again. He rubbed a thumb across the frayed fabric, feeling the threads loosen a bit more with each touch. Soon it would be unraveled, just a loose mass of red and black thread.

The women were silent for a few minutes. Finally Aden glanced around at each of them, then spoke. "How do we get in touch with them?"

Prow jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "We let Parker go, but we can use him," he said. "But first, we have to tie up a loose end. In the morning we're going back to Greensburg." He set the Dragoon's patch on the floor beside him.

"Someone has to speak for St. Louis."



Gibson Prow ignored the captive's quiet voice for a moment. He watched the glass of water on the table between them, noting the ripples bouncing from the edge of the cut glass. An orange LED on his left gauntlet began to blink surreptitiously. Prow blinked his eyes slowly and leaned forward.

"That's enough," he said.

The Com Guard stopped talking. He was a thin man, almost emaciated. He showed the characteristic signs of radiation poisoning, which meant he came up out of Texas. His hair was thinning much too rapidly for his age. He was sweating, the cold sweat that glistened on his pale, almost jaundiced flesh.

He was bound to the chair. The chair was screwed to the floor, heavy lag screws driven into the rough wood planking.

Prow stood and turned his back on the captured soldier. He felt the vibrations now, through the soles of his boots. A 'Mech was approaching, a big one. Prow pushed the door open and ignored the biting October wind. His *Phoenix Hawk* was barely twenty meters away. He lifted his gauntlet to his face.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"The Demi," Aden said. She was posted half a click back in the woods, on a hillock that let her see for a dozen kilometers in any direction. The ground around Greensburg was flat, too flat, Prow thought. The only cover was the copses of trees scattered along the old highway.

"Right on time," he said. The *Phoenix Hawk* was vibrating slightly, its forty-five tons quivering with contained energy. Prow mounted the chain ladder quickly. He was through the hatch and seated when the bulk of the Demi-Precentor's BattleMech broke through the last of the trees.

"Demi-Precentor Leis," Prow said. "I didn't expect to see you this far from Cincinnati."

The *Guillotine* stopped a hundred meters from the cabin and the *Phoenix Hawk*. Prow looked at his ECM screens, noting that the 'Mech's targeting scanners were active. Four green icons were spaced around the cabin on his sensors. He'd placed a battlesuit at each compass point while he talked to his captive. He couldn't be sure from which direction Leis would appear.

"You have one talking?" Leis asked.

"In the cabin, yes." Prow brought his neurohelmet down so he could listen through his helmet speakers. His five-point harness clicked as he cinched it tight.

"How'd you do it?" The *Guillotine* rotated at the waist until it was staring at Prow's *Phoenix Hawk*. "The ones we catch always try to kill themselves before they break."

Prow touched a stud on his communications console. The LED next to it flashed four times in acknowledgement. The four green icons on his tactical display began to move, closing on the cabin.

"He's dying," Prow said. "Radiation and malnutrition. The people around here are too scared to give him any food." He brought the *Phoenix Hawk's* right arm up and pointed past the *Guillotine's* shoulder. "I took his 'Mech down about half a klick that way." The Demi-Precentor was silent. Prow waited another heartbeat, then spoke. "I think if we give him some time, and a little food, he'll tell me where the rest of them are."

"What have you learned so far?"

"That there's most of a Level II in the area, hidden between Indianapolis and Louisville." He watched the *Guillotine* carefully. "That they're all 'Mechs, no infantry or combat vehicles." He waited.

"That they're planning to attack Cincinnati and capture a ship. They think there's a JumpShip coming in for them."

The *Guillotine* shifted back to look at the cabin. "When?" Leis asked.

Prow smiled. "Now." He pressed a different stud on his communications console. An ECM pod in the cabin starting screaming, painting hash across his display and filling his helmet speakers with static. After a second it cleared as the *Phoenix Hawk's* computer adjusted to the jamming. He twitched the already-raised right arm a tiny bit to the side and squeezed the trigger.

In the span of an eyeblink a coruscating arc of artificial lightning linked the *Phoenix Hawk's* right arm with the *Guillotine's* head. The PPC fire bathed the *Guillotine's* cockpit in hot ions. Prow heard a scream through the jamming as the *Guillotine* fell.

"He's down," Prow said. "Watch the road." He stalked the *Phoenix Hawk* to the downed 'Mech and planted its left foot on the *Guillotine's* chest. "And someone get the Com Guard up and into the APC."

Prow leaned the *Phoenix Hawk* over and brought the smoking barrel of the PPC to bear on the battered cockpit. The first shot had scoured the armor from the *Guillotine's* head assembly, and from what Prow could see had also blown out part the BattleMech's life support equipment and all of its sensors. The ferroglass screen

was cracked. Wisps of turgid yellow smoke wept from those cracks. Prow activated his external speakers.

"Leis." He used the *Phoenix Hawk's* foot to move the *Guillotine* a little. "Are you listening?"

The *Guillotine's* arm moved slightly and the laser mounted there fired, burning a patch of grass to ash and smoke. Prow shifted his left arm and melted an angry weal across the *Guillotine's* arm with his own laser.

"I'll take that as a yes. We know about St. Louis. We know about Houston and Riga." Prow dialed up his speakers until they were at their maximum gain. "And we're going to tell anyone who will listen."

A section of the *Guillotine's* faceplate shattered and flew out, propelled by a kick. Leis appeared, his uniform burned. He was covered in green coolant from his ruptured cooling vest, and he dropped his neurohelmet off the side the *Guillotine's* head. His left arm hung loose, out of socket.

"Blake curse you, heretic!" he said, brandishing the other fist. "You'll die for this, Prow. All of you, you and your harem. You can't escape Blake's justice, not anywhere. We'll hunt you down no matter where you go."

Prow controlled his breathing. His fingers tightened on the trigger, but he restrained himself. "You are not Blake, Leis," he whispered. His microphone dutifully transmitted the words, although much louder. "The devil can quote scripture, as my mother used to say."

He straightened the *Phoenix Hawk* up. The Com Guard APC appeared out of a copse of trees. Two Fa Shih battlesuits clung to the outside. Prow knew the others were inside, along with the injured Com Guard soldier.

"I will stand against you," Prow said, looking down at the battered and bleeding Demi-Precentor. "Here on Terra or wherever I find you and your damned, filthy lot." He stepped back from the fallen BattleMech and used its toe to draw a line in the earth. "Here is my line. It extends forever."

Aden leapt free of the APC and mounted the *Phoenix Hawk*. She perched her suit like a gargoyle on the 'Mech's shoulder and engaged her magnetic clamps.

Leis was speaking, but Prow was no longer listening. He turned the *Phoenix Hawk*'s head toward the sun. Even through the polarized ferroglass of the 'Mech's faceplate he felt warmth on his face. The light reflected from a bit of glass snared in the loose fibers of the Wolf's Dragoons patch taped to his console.

"We make our stand here," he whispered, touching the patch.